

# Morality, Ideology and Metaphorical Family Roles in Obama's Political Speeches

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## *Abstract*

This study explores the relation between politics and morality in the American political ideology from a Cognitive Linguistics perspective. The investigation is aimed at demonstrating the extent to which Obama's rhetoric during his first presidential election campaign is in line with Lakoff's (1996) predictions about political morality. In particular, it concentrates on a representative sample of Obama's 2008 election campaign speeches in order to identify the type of values he evoked and to describe how they can be related to Lakoff's description of nurturant parent morality. The study also accounts for a potential connection between the expression of moral values and the use of metaphorical language.

*Keywords:* Obama, political speech, strict father vs. nurturant parent morality.

## **1. Political morality through family metaphors**

As referred to in Arian and Shamir's study (1983), the origin of the Left vs. Right political dichotomy can be traced back to a specific event. In 1789, during the first French National Assembly, the nobles, who supported the king, sat to the right of the presiding officer while the representatives of the common people, who were supporters of the Revolution, sat to his left. Since then, certain political ideas and specific political theories have come to be associated with the Left and different, often-contrasting ones with the Right. In fact, socialism and communism have been connected to the Left of the political spectrum while laissez-faire capitalism has been related to the opposite pole. The terms Left and Right have also started being used to indicate political affiliation. Thus, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) identifies the Left with "any political party or group which advocates greater social and economic equality and

adopts progressive or reformist policies designed to achieve this” and describes the Right as “any party or political group favouring conservative views”.

The demarcation is apparently obvious and yet politics remains a complex and fluid reality that escapes simple binary oppositions (cf. Bobbio 1996). Within each of the two general political orientations, further differentiation is proven by the existence of far and extreme positions. In addition to this, many modern democracies are characterised by the presence of a moderate Centre that attracts forces and interests from either side and tends to blur the ideological boundary between Left and Right. A phenomenon that also speaks in favour of evolving political scenarios has been the emergence of the New Left and the New Right.

Set against this general background, the US political context appears relatively more straightforward. The United States have only two major political parties: the Democrats and the Republicans. Thus, the Left vs. Right opposition translates, basically, into an opposition between American progressives (“Blue” Americans as the supporters of the Democratic Party) and American conservatives (“Red” Americans as the supporters of the Republican Party). These parties have a duopoly, meaning that they share almost all the political power in the country (Dish 2002). This characteristic differentiates the American political system from the ones of other democratic countries.

Major differences between the two main American political parties have been described as ideological differences that psychologists, linguists and, more recently, social and behavioural scientists see as dependent on sets of values and beliefs that have a psychological basis. Concisely, Democrats and Republicans display contrasting attitudes towards inequality, social change and tradition and these appear to be rooted in their differing morality (McAdams et al. 2008).

Based on Lakoff’s investigation of the relation between politics and morality (1996), this study explores American political ideology from a Cognitive Linguistics perspective. In Lakoff’s view (1996), the progressive vs. conservative ideological leaning reflects adherence to a metaphorical cognitive model that is grounded in a specific view of the family. Lakoff starts from the assumption that people largely understand the concept of NATION via that of FAMILY. He

demonstrates the existence of the A NATION IS A FAMILY conceptual metaphor by referring to common expressions such as 'motherland', 'mother country', 'fatherland' and, in the American context, 'the founding Fathers' and 'the daughters of the American Revolution'. Furthermore, the family is the first social milieu in which, at an early age, we build our moral values by interacting with family members and, as Lakoff explains, our personal upbringing and education affect our political understanding later in life. Relying on this, Lakoff postulates the existence of two different types of family, which reflect people's own values and beliefs or, more broadly, their moral views: one type of family is guided by a strict father (SF), the other one by a nurturant parent (NP). The first type of family (SF) is captured by the image of a traditional, hierarchically structured, nuclear family, in which the father is the main authority and children are expected to obey his rules. Childrearing is rooted in the idea that children should become strong to be able to face the dangerous world and cope with difficulties on their own. By building character through self-discipline they will prosper and become successful in their lives. The other type of family (NP) reflects the vision of a family that is horizontally structured, in which parents share responsibilities and discuss issues openly with their children. Care, empathy, nurturance and protection are the basic principles for raising children, and the role of parents is that of helping children to develop their potential for achievement and enjoyment.

According to Lakoff (1996), people who believe in SF morality look for political leaders metaphorically resembling strict fathers. Prototypical and idealised versions of political strict fathers suggest that these politicians are authoritarian figures, believing in order, obedience and hierarchy, ready to punish for lack of discipline and expecting their people to be independent and self-reliant.

In contrast to this, people who share an NP morality are supportive of politicians who metaphorically appear as nurturant parents. The prototypical and idealised image of a political nurturant parent coincides with that of a caring and empathic political leader, who believes in cooperation, is open to discussion, is willing to consider different opinions, and is sensitive and responsive to people's needs. As Lakoff (1996) points out, SF morality is typical of conservatives and can be seen in connection to the Republican Party ideology,

while NP morality is characteristic of liberals and progressives, and can be expected to fit the Democratic Party ideology.

The present study aims to demonstrate the extent to which Obama's rhetoric during his first presidential election campaign is in line with Lakoff's predictions about political morality. In particular, it concentrates on a representative sample of Obama's 2008 election campaign speeches in order to identify the type of values he evoked and to describe how they can be related to Lakoff's description of NP morality.

## **2. Obama's 2008 campaign speeches as a case study**

This study is based on a previous book-length investigation of Obama's rhetoric (Degani 2015). The analysis is carried out on 30 speeches that were delivered by then Senator Obama during his first run for the American presidency in 2008. The time span considered is from February to October 2008, and the speeches were selected according to different criteria, including consideration of all primary night speeches, coverage of different issues and coverage of different states. The size of the corpus is about 77,641 words.

The major aim of the present analysis is to find out whether Lakoff's predictions about political morality can be confirmed by an examination of Obama's political speeches. In other words, the crucible of the analysis is discovering whether Obama's verbal language qualifies him as an example of a metaphorical nurturant parent.

Lakoff elucidates his ideas about political morality by referring to two idealised cognitive models, the SF and the NP models, each of them based on a set of moral metaphors (1996, Chapters 5 and 6). In his view, these models can explain why conservatives and progressives think, talk and act differently. Lakoff also makes clear, especially in a later publication (2004), that moral values lie at the core of each of the two models and that Democratic politicians should appeal to NP values and frame their discourse according to them if they intend to win elections. From this, we can deduce that the identification of moral values, be they SF or NP, should guide any investigation of political morality that is inspired by Lakoff's models (1996).

From a methodological point of view, the difficult task of such

an analysis is devising an appropriate procedure to test the models. Since Lakoff explains his models through an array of two dozen metaphors and provides general indications on an expected SF and NP lexicon, some research aimed at testing his models focused either on moral metaphors or on lexical choices (cf. Cienki 2004, 2005; Ahrens and Yat Mei Lee 2009). The study presented here takes a different path, and relies on Lakoff's suggestions about moral values in order to conduct a semantic analysis aimed at revealing whether or not NP values occurred in Obama's speeches. A complicating factor for the analysis lies in the fact that while Lakoff insists on the relevance and centrality of values for understanding the models, he does not provide a fully-fledged description of these values. A general list of core SF and NP values thus had to be deduced from how Lakoff explains the specific character of the SF and NP models and from how he relates these models to a value system. Lakoff's explanations indicate that core SF values are: strength, authority, order, hierarchy, obedience, self-discipline, self-reliance, individual responsibility, and freedom. Conversely, core values that fit an NP worldview are: care, nurturance, cooperation, equality, community, fairness, opportunity, protection, social responsibility, and freedom. The identification of these core values was the starting point for the analysis. It was on the background of these general moral values that Obama's speeches were investigated.

Considering that the framing of an issue according to an ideology necessitates an argumentative space, the paragraph was taken as the textual unit of the semantic investigation. After close reading of the speeches, five different types of paragraphs were identified:

- 1) neutral paragraphs (where SF and NP values were not expressed);
- 2) NP paragraphs (where at least one NP value was expressed);
- 3) SF paragraphs (where at least one SF value was expressed);
- 4) contra SF paragraphs (containing at least one instance of criticism of an SF value);
- 5) contra SF + NP paragraph (characterised by the combined presence of at least one NP value and one instance of criticism of an SF value).

In order to illustrate how the paragraph type classification was carried out, a representative example for each typology is provided below:

1) *Neutral paragraph*

Well, the polls are just closing in California and the votes are still being counted in cities and towns across the country. But there is one thing on this February night that we do not need the final results to know – our time has come, our movement is real, and change is coming to America. (Obama, 5 February 2008)

This paragraph is neutral because none of the core NP and SF values is either evoked or criticised. In this opening passage, Obama prepares the ground for the political contents that will follow in the body of the speech.

2) *NP paragraph*

Change is a health care plan that guarantees insurance to every American who wants it; brings down premiums for every family who needs it; that stops insurance companies from discriminating and denying coverage to those who need it most. (Obama, 20 May 2008)

Here, change, a leitmotif during Obama's 2008 campaign, is described in terms of health care. The paragraph qualifies as NP because change means taking care of people who do not have any health coverage. It means granting every citizen the right to get medical assistance.

3) *SF paragraph*

The people I've met in small towns and big cities across this country understand that government can't solve all our problems – and we don't expect it to. We believe in hard work. We believe in personal responsibility and self-reliance. (Obama, 6 May 2008)

This is an instance of SF paragraph because Obama refers to the SF values of individual responsibility and self-reliance by stressing the fact that government cannot solve all of people's problems.

4) *Contra SF paragraph*

Ronald Reagan called this trickle-down economics. George Bush called it the Ownership Society. But what it really means is that you're on your own. If your premiums or your tuition is rising faster than you can afford, you're on your own. If you're that Maytag worker who just lost his pension, tough luck. If you're a child born into poverty, you'll just have to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. (Obama, 14 April 2008)

Here Obama objects to the SF value of self-reliance by expressing his criticism of the so-called Bootstrap logic (the principle according to which ‘people are on their own’) that many Republicans support.

5) *Contra SF + NP paragraph*

Change is building an economy that rewards not just wealth, but the work and workers who created it. It’s understanding that the struggles facing working families can’t be solved by spending billions of dollars on more tax breaks for big corporations and wealthy CEOs, but by giving the middle-class a tax break, and investing in our crumbling infrastructure, and transforming how we use energy, and improving our schools, and renewing our commitment to science and innovation. (Obama, 3 June 2008)

In this mixed paragraph, Obama criticises the SF value of hierarchical social relations and sustains the NP values of care and protection. On the one hand, he objects to the idea that the wealthy deserve more than the poor deserve and therefore should pay fewer taxes. On the other, he advocates care for people who need a decent job and good education, care for the environment by means of investments in alternative energy sources, and protection through safer infrastructures.

A combination of qualitative with quantitative methodologies provided further insights for the analysis. Neutral paragraphs resulted as the most frequent ones in the corpus (49.7% of all paragraphs), followed by NP paragraphs (40.2%). While the high frequency of neutral paragraphs is dependent on the array of rhetorical and discursive functions they perform (Degani 2015, Chapter 5), the marked presence of NP paragraphs in the corpus was an important indication of Obama’s predilection to frame political issues in a way that is coherent with NP values. This trend was also confirmed by the occurrence of only one SF paragraph in the whole corpus (the one shown in (3)) and by Obama’s criticism of SF values as a way to reinforce opposing NP morality.

These findings were particularly meaningful in relation to the expected connection between political siding and political morality. They confirmed the link between Democratic orientation and nurturant morality.

The semantic analysis allowed for the identification of a large number of specific moral values that are in line with Lakoff’s (1996) description of a nurturant moral view. The multitude of NP values

was arranged according to eight general nurturant concepts, which can be seen as capturing the core of Obama's nurturant political message to the electorate. The detected general nurturant concepts are the following (ordered according to their relative frequency of occurrence in the corpus): 'care' (32.1%), 'we' (22.8%), 'social rights' (20.8%), 'fairness' (10.3%), 'opportunity' (6.9%), 'protection' (3.9%), 'responsibility' (1.3%), and 'freedom' (1.3%).

Each of these general NP concepts is applied to different domains that testify to the breadth of political concerns expressed by Obama during his 2008 election campaign. As a way of exemplification, the general category of 'care' comprises different forms of care that include 'care for the environment', 'support of nurturant professions (teaching)', 'care for children', 'care for workers', 'care for the old', and so on. Overall, the analysis shows that the same notions of care, nurturance and empathy that lie at the core of Lakoff's NP idealised cognitive model also inspired Obama's rhetoric for the US presidency.

### 3. Democratic values and metaphors

Metaphors play a crucial role in political discourse and leaders make use of them for different political intents. Politicians may use metaphors with the mere aim of simplifying complex political issues to an assumed unlearned audience (Miller 1979) or to establish a common ground with the voting public (Howe 1988), but they can also employ them to foreground certain interpretations of reality (Lakoff 1991) and thus manipulate the masses.

No politician can be expected to sound convincing and be persuasive without skilfully planning the usage of metaphors in public discourse. President Obama is no exception. Scholars have already commented upon his ability to construct a powerful political message through a well-conceived combination of metaphors and other rhetorical devices (cf., e.g., Charteris-Black 2011, Chapter 11).

The point here, therefore, is not to consider the range of metaphors that contributed to the effectiveness of Obama's campaign speeches and possibly paved the way for his eventual success. Instead, the analysis focuses on Obama's communication of a nurturant message, and considers the extent to which nurturant values were transmitted through metaphors.



The analysis of metaphors concentrates on value-laden paragraphs (all but neutral paragraphs) to disclose a potential relation between the expression of moral values and the use of metaphorical language. Stated differently, the investigation intends to test whether Obama relied upon metaphors to convey his nurturant message and, if so, which metaphors he used to talk about moral values.

Findings indicate meaningful tendencies. Instances of metaphors were found in all value-laden paragraphs, except for the only SF paragraph identified in the corpus. Considering NP paragraphs, 60% contain at least one conceptual metaphor. This confirms general expectations about the presence of metaphorical expressions in political discourse. The striking point, however, is that only about 44% of all the metaphors in the NP paragraphs are actually used to express a moral value. This means that when Obama talks about political morality, his language is not intrinsically metaphorical; he communicates his moral values using both literal and metaphorical language. In light of the emphasis given to metaphors by previous investigations of Lakoff's models (Cienki 2004, 2005), this appears to be an important finding. It shows that metaphors do not play a decisive role in the expression of values and indicates that testing Lakoff's models requires moving beyond the analysis of metaphorical language.

Even though binding links were not found between values and metaphors, it is still interesting to notice which values are conveyed through metaphors and which particular metaphors are relied upon to achieve that aim. The types of nurturant values that were observed to lend themselves more easily to metaphorical conceptualisations are the following: 'we' (as expressed in 'cooperation' and 'unity'), 'opportunity' (as in 'opportunity for children'), 'care' (as in 'caring for people', 'supporting nurturant professions'), and 'fairness' (as in 'fair taxation/distribution of money').

The major source domains in terms of which nurturant values are metaphorically expressed in the corpus are MOTION, ORIENTATION and CONSTRUCTION as shown in the representative examples below:

6) *Motion metaphor (journey)*

We may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to *move in the same direction – towards a better*

*future* for our children and our grandchildren. (Obama, 18 March 2008, my emphasis)

In this passage, the NP value of ‘care’ as ‘caring for future generations’ is transmitted through a journey metaphor. This type of metaphor is very common in political discourse and acquires great significance in the American context, where it evokes the multiple stories of immigration that have characterised the birth of the nation as well as the westward migration that has been celebrated in countless movies and novels. Another interesting aspect of the journey metaphors used by Obama is their typical orientation, which is either forward or upward. In both cases, the metaphor is used with the positive connotations of progress and improvement.

7) *Orientational metaphor*

We believe that we *rise or fall as one nation* – as one people. (Obama, 4 March 2008, my emphasis)

The most recurrent way of presenting the value of ‘we’ as ‘unity’ is based on the primary conceptual metaphors GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN, which are encapsulated in the clause “we rise and fall as one nation” and its variant “we rise and fall together”. The use of the metaphorical expressions *rising* and *falling* in connection to the value of ‘unity’ to communicate that the whole nation is either good or bad is not new to American election campaigns. Indeed, Obama’s utterance “we believe that we rise or fall as one nation, as one people” very closely resembles Franklin Roosevelt’s words in his second inaugural address: “in our seeking for economic and political progress as a nation, *we all go up, or else we all go down, as one people*” (20 January 1937).

8) *Construction metaphor*

We can come together and *build an America* that gives every child, everywhere the opportunity to live their dreams. (Obama, 5 February 2008, my emphasis)

In this excerpt, the value of ‘we’ as ‘cooperation’ is metaphorically rendered though the idea of constructing the nation together, which contributes to giving concreteness to the electoral message and renders the concept of cooperation more factual. In this

case, America is the metaphorical building. However, the idea of a metaphorical building is neither exclusive to this value nor to this concept. Obama's metaphorical worldview consists of many abstract entities that are to be built and many others that need to be fixed. Metaphorical objects that Obama suggests should be (re) constructed include, among others, the economy, the green energy sector, diplomatic partnerships, the middle class and the capacity to deal with nuclear, biological and cyber threats.

Given the fact that Obama's political morality has been classified as nurturant, an intriguing result concerns the use of "military" metaphors to invoke NP values. Unexpectedly, Obama also relies upon a lexicon of metaphorical strength, the quintessential SF value, in order to emphasise his nurturant message. This strategy, which combines NP contents with a SF lexicon, can be gleaned from examples (9) and (10).

9) Change is giving every child a world-class education by *recruiting an army of new teachers* with better pay and more support. (Obama, 20 May 2008, my emphasis)

In the passage above, the value of 'care' as 'supporting nurturant professions' is metaphorically encapsulated in the phrase *recruiting an army of new teachers*, which Obama uses recurrently in his speeches. According to the metaphor, teachers are soldiers and the government is in charge of recruiting them for the battle to provide children with better education. What is important to emphasise here is the fact that a central NP value is communicated using a metaphor that alludes to military force. The usual association of the term *army* with tours of duty in far away countries is overturned and the result is powerful. It is as if saying that the type of army America is in need of does a different job: not killing and destroying but cultivating people's potentials. The message is as resounding as its wording.

10) Instead of fighting this war, we could be *fighting to rebuild our roads and bridges*. (Obama, 20 March 2008, my emphasis)

Here, the value of 'investing in public infrastructure' is transmitted through the metaphorical expression *fighting*. The concept of fight is by default associated to SF morality, where it features as

a fight of the individual against everyone else, a fight for personal achievement. This concept is not excluded from an NP worldview, but it receives a different framing and appears as a struggle aimed at social advancement. Significantly, the term *fight* occurs frequently in Obama's electoral narrative and contributes greatly to depicting the politician as the ideal nurturer who is strong in his capacities to help and support other people.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study intended to test Lakoff's (1996) predictions about American political morality. In Lakoff's view, Republican politicians conform to SF ideology, while Democrats are supportive of an NP worldview. As a Democrat, Obama was expected to express himself in a way that is consistent with NP values.

The analysis has confirmed this expectation. Throughout his first election campaign for the US presidency, Obama consistently framed his discourse in a way that is in line with Lakoff's description of NP morality. This qualifies the politician as an example of a metaphorical nurturant parent. The analysed speeches have shown that many NP values are woven into the fabric of Obama's electoral narrative. Furthermore, Obama's support of an NP logic is communicated through his criticism of SF values.

Since Lakoff's explanation of the SF and NP idealised cognitive models is based on a number of moral metaphors, another aspect that was worth investigating was the relation between moral values and metaphoricity. This study has demonstrated that the expression of moral values is not intrinsically metaphorical. In Obama's speeches, NP values are conveyed both literally and metaphorically.

Lastly, the analysis has also alluded to the fact that Obama's nurturant message is combined sometimes with a lexicon of strength and the use of military metaphors. This can be seen as a skilful political strategy aimed at attracting the sympathies of swing voters, who are an essential part of the electorate for both Democrats and Republicans.

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