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## Narrating the political self in a campaign for U.S. Congress

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### ABSTRACT

On the basis of data collected during a year-long study of a Congressional campaign in California in the mid-1990s, this article uses semantic, pragmatic, and narrative analysis to show how candidates for political office construct and defend the coherence of their actions, including their choice to run for office. First, semantic and pragmatic analysis is used to discuss two charges of lack of coherence against one candidate. Second, three discursive strategies used by candidates for building existential coherence are identified: (i) constructing a narrative of belonging; (ii) casting the present as a natural extension of the past; and (iii) exposing potential contradictions in order to show how to solve them. After examining the extent to which each strategy is common across candidates and situations, it is shown that candidates who frame themselves as “independent” tend to use these strategies more than those who choose to identify more closely with a party’s platform and ideology. (Political discourse, U.S. political campaigns, narrative analysis, conflict, coherence of the self)\*

### INTRODUCTION

At least since Aristotle and continuing through the Roman tradition represented by Cicero all the way to contemporary authors, the language of politics has been presented and studied in terms of its ability to persuade an audience (of peers, subjects, or superiors) to go along with the speaker’s view of the world and his or her proposals (Pernot 2000). In much of this literature, the successful political speaker is seen as a skillful manipulator who controls a variety of linguistic resources – from elaborate metaphors to paralinguistic features like volume, intonation, and rhythm – through which listeners can be convinced to accept a given decision or take a given course of action (including the action of voting for the speaker). A recent extension of this tradition is George Lakoff’s bestselling book *Don’t think of an elephant: Know your values and frame the debate* (2004), in which he provides a practical guide for progressives and liberals in the United States to counter the linguistic manipulations of conservatives. Lakoff uses his theory of metaphors as triggers for particular cognitive frames (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Lakoff & Turner 1989, Lakoff 1996) to illuminate the ways in which

what we call something makes a difference in our attitude toward it. One of his most recurring and by now famous examples is the Republicans' reframing of "tax cut" as "tax relief," a transformation that is said to trigger a conceptual frame in which taxes are an affliction of which people must be relieved and the person who can accomplish such relief is, by definition, a hero.

Within linguistic anthropology, the focus of research has been on the relations between political events and particular speech genres rather than on persuasion. Ethnographers of communication, among others, have documented how ambiguity, reported speech, and disclaimers of various kinds are used in stratified as well as in egalitarian societies to control the recognized power of words (e.g. Bloch 1975, Brenneis & Myers 1984, Duranti 1994, Hill & Irvine 1993, Keating 1998, Kuipers 1990).

The work presented in this article builds on these traditions and, at the same time, moves in new directions. It maintains the assumption, common among linguistic anthropologists, that the power of words must be understood vis-à-vis particular genres and situations. For this reason, for the purposes of this article I have decided to concentrate on one type of event: public debates during a political campaign for a seat in the U.S. Congress. At the same time, my interest in such events and the analysis presented here originated from a research method that privileged not events but persons. From the very beginning of my project, I decided to follow ONE candidate throughout the entire campaign. In addition to giving me useful insights on the decision-making process of political campaigns, the focus on one candidate made me more aware of the demands placed on individuals running for political office and the kinds of existential dilemmas that candidates are faced with. From the beginning of the campaign, I was struck by the pervasive use of personal narratives in public speeches. Later on, by analyzing the transcripts of the video recordings made, it became apparent that personal narratives played an important role in the construction of the particular type of social persona that I call here the "political self." Once I made this discovery, I saw the need to go beyond my earlier interest in the grammatical framing of events in political arenas (e.g., Duranti 1994) to include the role of narrative accounts in the construction of a political identity.

Discourse analysts have shown that speakers use narrative accounts to make sense of their own experiences and to evaluate them in moral terms (e.g. Linde 1993:81; Ochs & Capps 1996, 2001; Schiffrin 1996). In telling stories of personal experience, speakers must deal with two opposite constraints: the desire to provide an account that has an acceptable logic, and the desire to be authentic – that is, to stay as close as possible to one's own understanding of what it was like to be in a given event (Ochs 2004:278). In this article, I argue that this potential contrast is particularly acute in politics, where candidates must tell stories of their own actions that are solid enough to stand the scrutiny of others in terms of their logic and at the same time must project a type of commitment to voters that can sound authentic. As we shall see, some candidates go so far as to interpret

this challenge as a need to provide reasons for their own decision to run for office.

## DISCURSIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

The present study is based on an assumption that is common among contemporary discourse analysts: that individuals' perspectives on their own experiences – including their emotional stance and the awareness of this stance – are often articulated and worked out through talk. If politicians are no exception to this kind of DISCURSIVE CONSCIOUSNESS, we can hypothesize that what a candidate says throughout a political campaign might offer valuable insights into the dilemmas that characterize any effort to gain the support and approval of a large number of people, an endeavor that is at the core of political campaigns. Understanding a candidate's dilemmas should, in turn, help us understand a number of important cultural assumptions, including the expectations that candidates and voters have about the "ideal" candidate and what is needed to achieve such ideal status.

Studies in a variety of fields, including anthropology, philosophy, sociology, and psychology, have taught us that human beings are constantly engaged in the construction of self and in the evaluation and monitoring of that construction. We know that language, or rather discourse – the temporal unfolding of linguistic communication – plays a major role in this existential-pragmatic enterprise, enabling individual speakers to articulate their self-understanding through a shared medium and in contexts where others are able to concur, correct, object, or redirect the meaning of what is being said. Candidates worry about how to project and maintain an image of themselves as beings whose past, present, and future actions, beliefs, and evaluations follow some clear basic principles, none of which contradicts another. This type of EXISTENTIAL COHERENCE is often dependent upon, but on a different level from, the textual coherence (or cohesion) associated with the ways in which different parts of a text can be said to form a whole (e.g., Conte 1988, Halliday & Hasan 1976, Stubbs 1983, van Dijk 1977).<sup>1</sup> Existential coherence is, however, closely related to the coherence that speakers-as-narrators search for and construct (e.g., Linde 1993, Garro & Mattingly 2000, Ochs & Capps 2001, Polkinghorne 1991, Schiffrin 1996). As they narrate past experiences and accomplishments and project their future (as leaders, representatives, advocates, etc.) to their potential voters, political candidates closely monitor whether what they (and their opponents) say on one occasion may contradict what they (or their opponents) already said (or are likely to say) on another. They know that their statements are being evaluated by voters, opponents, and representatives of the media in terms of the kind of PERSON – in the anthropological sense first introduced by Mauss 1938 – that they may reveal. It is that reconstructed person that is then examined to establish whether a candidate is fit to adequately represent the interest of the voters.

As such, the construction of existential coherence seems to be both externally and internally motivated. On one hand, candidates are concerned with how to save face in front of an audience that evaluates their actions and words and might catch them in a contradiction. Candidates are thus constantly engaged in what Taylor 1991 called “radical reflexivity.” They ask themselves the pragmatic question: “Am I (through my words, the positions I take and the decisions that I make) the person I PROMISED to be?” On the other hand, they must also deal with their own sense of coherence. That is, they face the question: “Am I (through my words, the positions I take and the decisions that I make) the person I WANT to be?” It is precisely through their search for ways of presenting themselves as politically coherent beings that they display in public their own theory of what an ideal candidate should be.

The process of constructing coherence intersects with morality to the extent to which being coherent is presented as evidence for the truth of what a candidate says, and therefore of his or her value as a moral being.

#### DATA COLLECTION

From 13 November 1995 through 6 November 1996, I documented a political campaign for the U.S. House of Representatives in a portion of the Central Coast of California known (at the time) as the 22nd District (a territory that included the cities of Santa Barbara, Santa Maria, San Luis Obispo, and Paso Robles). The candidate whose campaign I documented was Walter Holden Capps, a professor of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), whose only previous experience in politics was a brief campaign (in 1993–1994) for the same seat, which he had lost by less than 1% of the votes to former California Assemblywoman Andrea Seastrand (Republican). Capps was considered by many to be an unusual candidate. He was well known at UCSB for his unorthodox and highly successful courses, including the one on the Vietnam War,<sup>2</sup> where he invited people with vastly different views of the war (e.g., war veterans, antiwar activists, politicians) to discuss their war or antiwar experience and think publicly about the roots of war, its implications, and what could be done to avoid it. A Lutheran, Capps was interested professionally and personally in a wide range of religious beliefs and practices, including Buddhism, monasticism, and Native American religion (Capps 1983, 1989; Hultkrantz & Capps 1976). He often spoke about the “human spirit” as a positive force that should be protected and respected.

From November 1995 to November 1996, I was with Walter Capps on the campaign trail for a total of 21 days. In addition to being with him in his hometown, Santa Barbara, I also traveled with him (and usually with his wife, Lois) to Paso Robles, Santa Maria, Guadalupe, Lompoc, San Luis Obispo, and Oceano. I always brought my video camera and used it to record as much as possible of Capps’s interactions at his home, in the car, and before, during, and after rallies

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TABLE 1. *Final results of November 6, 1996 election, California 22nd District (San Luis Obispo-Santa Barbara)* (Los Angeles Times, Nov. 7, 1996, Section A, p. 24).

Candidate	Party affiliation	Number of votes	Percentage
Walter H. Capps	Democratic	102,915	49%
Andrea Seastrand	Republican	90,374	43%
Steven Wheeler	Independent	8,308	4%
Richard D. Porter	Reform Party	3,429	2%
David L. Bersohn	Libertarian	1,948	1%
Dawn Tomastick	Natural Law Party	1,569	1%

and public debates. Although after a certain point in the campaign I was denied access to the Capps-For-Congress headquarters, Walter and Lois Capps never asked me to turn the camcorder off or to erase any portion of what I had recorded. In addition to fieldnotes and printed material (from the headquarters or from the press), I recorded about 40 hours of videotape that document Capps interacting with a wide range of people, including his opponents. I also had a number of occasions to talk informally with many of the people involved in the campaign, including family members.

The campaign was a very close and dramatic political race. In March 1996, Walter Capps fainted and had to be hospitalized (the word “heart attack” was avoided by campaign staff and by the doctors). In May of the same year, while Walter and Lois Capps were driving home on Highway 154, they were injured in a head-on collision with a drunk driver. As a result of his injuries, Walter Capps was confined to a wheelchair and kept away from the campaign trail for several weeks. The sharp differences between Capps and incumbent Seastrand drew national attention. There were articles in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, and the race was featured on National Public Radio programs and on ABC’s *Nightline*. Capps’s campaign received the backing of important political figures in the then Democratic administration, including a visit and rally in Santa Barbara with Hillary Clinton on 12 September 1996, an even bigger rally with President Clinton on 1 November, and two visits by George Stephanopolous, whose personal assistant was Laura Capps, Walter’s younger daughter. At the end, Capps won the congressional seat – the first Democrat in 50 years to win this position in his district (see Table 1).

It was a happy ending for him and for my project, given that I had ended up with a rare documentation of a successful campaign. But sadly, less than a year later, as I was starting to analyze my transcripts and videotapes, Walter Capps died of a heart attack while trying to catch a cab at Dulles Airport in Washington, D.C.

Since then I have been trying to find a way to analyze my collection of videotapes and fieldnotes in a way that could do justice to two ambitious and poten-

tially contradictory goals: (i) a narrative of the extraordinary efforts and success of an unlikely candidate catapulted from a university campus to the world of national politics, and (ii) an analysis of such a story that could qualify as an account for members of my discipline, linguistic anthropology, and other students of political discourse. My first effort was an article (Duranti 2003) in which I document how Walter Capps's words and message during the first day of the campaign were designed for and, at the same time, affected by his interaction with the audience. In this article, I continue with a related issue: the public articulation of the inner and outer struggle for coherence in narrating the self. Listening to Capps on the campaign trail and later, while reviewing my fieldnotes and videotapes, I was often struck by the continuous efforts by Capps-the-candidate to reach out to his audience without having to compromise his sense of authenticity with respect to his other identities (e.g., Capps-the-scholar, Capps-the-family-person, Capps-the-teacher). Over time, I came to the realization that such efforts were part of a more general struggle, which all candidates for public office must face.

#### EXISTENTIAL COHERENCE AS A RECURRENT ISSUE FOR CANDIDATES

One of the recurring features of the talk recorded during the campaign was the mention of existential issues in Capps's speeches. This was particularly striking during the first day of the campaign, when Capps voiced his own doubts about leaving a profession he loved – being a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara – and entering the world of politics, where, instead of getting the job on the basis of professional qualifications, as he said, “you have to beat your opponent” (San Luis Obispo, 14 Nov. 1995). At first, I thought that this was a type of public self-reflection that only an academic would engage in. But as the campaign progressed, I learned that Capps's publicly articulated existential dilemmas were part of a larger discourse domain: the management of what I call here “existential coherence,” by which I mean a coherence of actions, thoughts, and words aimed at supporting a PERSON in the anthropological sense of a culturally identifiable type of social being (Geertz 1983, Mauss 1985). As I will show in the rest of this article, all candidates are accountable for this type of coherence, but the extent to which and the manner in which they attend to it varies considerably across individuals.

#### ACCUSATIONS OF LACK OF COHERENCE

Candidates' words are constantly inspected to see whether their accounts of past actions are accurate. Their ideas, plans, and promises are also scrutinized in search of potential contradictions or inconsistencies. Something a candidate said or did on one occasion can be framed as being at odds with what the same person – or, in some cases, his or her associates or staff – said (or did) on another. Examples

abound in contemporary politics. In some cases, the charge of lacking coherence can be extended to include accusations that a candidate or politician in office “lied” (Wilson 2001) or failed to keep a promise (Hill 2000). In the data collected, candidates made accusations of inconsistencies or contradictions by quoting from a variety of sources, including political campaign ads and statements made by their opponents during the ongoing debate or in the past. Here I will briefly analyze two such cases. The first involves the meaning of the term “independent.” The second centers on the meaning of “having been TO WASHINGTON.” As I will show, in both cases a careful analysis of the contexts in which the two expressions were used demonstrates that despite their potential ambiguity, the accused (in this case, Capps) had used them in ways that were not inconsistent with his actions. Capps, however, did not spend time countering the accusations. This suggests that candidates may avoid spending too much time on semantics even when they might be able to show that the accusations are misplaced or that the accusers are disingenuous. There are possible explanations for such a choice; for instance, candidates may wish to avoid sounding defensive or giving credit to opponents by taking their criticism too seriously. At the same time, such accusations build up the pressure that all candidates feel to maintain coherence in what they say and do.

*Case 1: “Independent”*

In the following excerpt from a public debate sponsored by the League of Women Voters in Santa Barbara, 7 October 1996, Independent candidate Steven Wheeler accuses Walter Capps of claiming to be “an independent” despite the fact that he is running as a Democrat.<sup>3</sup> This accusation gives Wheeler a chance to remind the audience that he instead is running “without party affiliation,” and that this was made possible thanks to the support of 13,000 people who signed a petition to put his name on the ballot.<sup>4</sup> (For transcription conventions, see Appendix A.)

(1) 7 October 1996; Santa Barbara; public debate sponsored by the League of Women Voters.

Wheeler: ... I'm running as an **independent** that means that I am running **without party affiliation**. now the last time uh- I checked it took thirteen thousand signatures to get on the ballot as an Independent that's what I went out and did—I got thirteen thousand signatures. it took me up and down. the Central Coast. I went to every city here and I had a chance to- talk to a lot of people and find out what their concerns about the issues were. (but) I just found out a couple of weeks ago, that I am not the only one who is running as an independent=my opponent here Walter Capps is taking out ads billing himself as a **non-partisan** kind of guy and he refers to himself twice as an **independent**. ... but- Walter, you know, I would suggest you check with your campaign the last time I hear you were running as a Democrat. uhm.

Audience: ((sparse chuckles, laughter))

Here the coherence issue centers on the meaning of “independent” and the pragmatic conditions for claiming that status. The term “independent” had indeed been used by Capps and his campaign office. For example, it is found in five ads produced in September of the same year (the month just before the de-



bate from which excerpt 1 is taken). All five ads concluded with the voiceover slogan “Walter Capps, independent, in touch and in the mainstream.”<sup>5</sup> One of the five ads also stated: “Walter Capps represents the independent nonpartisan spirit of our community.”

In the debate from which the previous excerpt is taken, Capps did not respond to Wheeler’s criticism.<sup>6</sup> But when we examine his speeches, his interviews with representatives of the media, and his conversations with members of his staff or family, we find evidence that his use of the term “independent” could be interpreted differently from Wheeler’s notion of “having no party affiliation.” In Capps’s usage, “independent” implies “not easily influenced by special interest groups or partisan politics.” For example, in response to a question by a Channel 12 reporter after his announcement speech in San Luis Obispo, on 14 November 1995, Capps describes himself as “an independent voice” in order to contrast himself with his characterization of the incumbent, Andrea Seastrand, whom he accuses of “taking orders” from the Republican Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich.

(2) 14 November 1995; San Luis Obispo.

- Reporter: So what’s going to make uh this time different from last time?  
 Capps: Oh. All kinds of things. First of all- (first of all), I’m a much better candidate. Last time was the first time I had run for office. [...] Second thing is that, this time we’re running against a person who has a (background/record of service) [...] What I have discovered, is that she is not responding, to the needs and interests of the people of the 22nd district. She is taking her orders [...] from the uh- Republican uhm Speaker of the House. [...] I think that what the people want is **an independent voice**. Somebody, who knows the people so well that that person can speak on behalf of them. [...]

This example, together with the television spots, shows that there was an important semantic difference between Wheeler’s and Capps’s (and his campaign office’s) use of the term “independent.” The difference is semantic and syntactically marked. Wheeler uses “independent” as a noun, as in “AN independent,” whereas Capps and the people who participated in the preparation of his ads use it as an adjective, as in “independent, in touch and in the mainstream” (in the above-mentioned ad) or “an independent voice,” in Capps’s own words.<sup>7</sup> To be “an independent” (noun) in Wheeler’s terms, one needs to be NOT AFFILIATED with any of the existing certified political parties (e.g., Democratic Party, Republican Party, Green Party).<sup>8</sup> To be “independent” (adjective), in Capps’s meaning of the term, candidates need to demonstrate that they are not just following whatever their party does or tells them to do. In this respect, one could argue that this particular accusation of lack of coherence (for pretending to be “[an] independent”) is based on a semantic difference similar to the one hypothesized by Wilson 2001 and mentioned earlier. This type of analysis, however, should be considered only the first step in the attempt to understand the logic as well as the occurrence of such attacks on coherence. I will discuss what else we should con-

sider after introducing the next round of attacks on coherence, a round that involves Walter Capps and Andrea Seastrand.

*Case 2: Who has been to Washington?*

The second case of other-generated coherence struggles centers on the meaning of the phrase “having been to Washington.” In the context of the campaign, and more generally in American political discourse, “Washington” is a metonym for “the (federal) government,” which includes elected and nonelected officials. As illustrated in the following statement by a Democratic pollster, political candidates and their staff assumed in 1995–1996 that a considerable percentage of the voters held negative opinions of the federal government and more generally of politicians.

(3) 28 December 1995; staff meeting of the Capps-for-Congress campaign.

Pollster: [...] There is a: ... a strong disconnect ... between the average person and their elected official (in Washington). they um ... uhm think what happens in Washington is that ... you get elected ... you go there with their ideals ... and three months later you're corrupted by the process. Because um you are no longer isolated you don't talk with (your) average (people) on the street. The only people you see in Washington are the lobbyists ... who give you gifts ... and who write legislation for you and wh- who talk to you before you go on the floor to put your card in to vote. [...]

Some candidates exploited this negative attitude in creating a contrast between “the government” and “the people.” In the following excerpt, incumbent Seastrand speaks in support of tax cuts as an initiative that would benefit voters by allowing them greater control over a larger portion of their earnings. In this case, “Washington, D.C.” explicitly includes the Clinton administration as well as any other government “bureaucrats” who would have access to tax revenues for their salaries or programs.

(4) 15 August 1996; San Luis Obispo; public debate.

Seastrand: What we're trying to do is cut uh- uh- those government dollars from Washington D.C. and leave it in the pockets of those of us at home. And they're not gonna put it in their mattress. They're gonna do something with that money. Put it in the bank for a savings account. Save it for their children's college fund and maybe make some interest and let someone else from the local bank be able to borrow it for a home. Do all those things that we do with our dollars and uh- grow that economy. I'm a believer in the American spirit and I think we here at home know how best to use those dollars than **the bureaucrats and the Clinton administration in Washington D.C.**

A few minutes later, Capps uses his chance to answer a question from the audience to ridicule the inconsistency of those elected officials who criticize the very system of which they are part. Although this is expressed in generic terms – “the people who now serve in Washington” – the audience knows that Seastrand is the likely target of this criticism. In this classic example of what linguistic anthropologists call “veiled speech” (Brenneis 1978), Capps can be interpreted

as blaming Seastrand for lacking coherence: She criticizes politicians and bureaucrats without admitting that she is one of them.

(5) 15 August 1996; San Luis Obispo; public debate.

Walter: [...] uhm and you know it's- it's always kind of amazing to me that **the people who now serve in Washington** are the one's who are leading the anti-Washington charge.

Audience: ((sparse laughter))

Walter: I mean, the ones who- who are most against politicians and bureaucrats are **the politicians and the bureaucrats**. //I'm not-

Audience: ((more sparse laughter))

Walter: I'm not quite sure ... what that's saying about- about our society. [...]

Later in the same debate, Seastrand, in turn, criticizes Capps for misrepresenting himself as someone who has never been to Washington. If we take Seastrand's remarks to be motivated by the interpretation of Capps's earlier criticism of "the people who now serve in Washington" as a criticism aimed at her, we have here a case of what Morgan 1991 called "baited indirectness"<sup>9</sup>: Seastrand appears to "bite the bait" that is only IMPLICIT in Capps's generalized criticism. In (6), without referring to Capps's previous criticism of her statements – and yet using a discourse framing, *I'm amazed*, which echoes Capps's *it's always kind of amazing* in (5) – Seastrand focuses on his claim that he has never been to Washington and cites evidence that, on the contrary, he has been to Washington. I will first quote, in (6), Seastrand's criticism and then show, in (7), the passage of Capps's earlier talk where he appears to have made the claim in question.

(6) 15 August 1996; San Luis Obispo; public debate.

Seastrand: and, as far as my friend (uh- p-) Professor Walter Capps –hh uh- I'm amazed that you've stated on several occasions in this meeting that **you've never been to Washington**. I'm gonna have to go into my files and look at the *Santa Barbara News-Press*, because I think that they reported that **you even went into the Oval Office of the President himself**. Your- uh one of your family members has or works there with (such Ste-) George Stephanopoulos' office. and so uh I was given the impression on reading that article that **when you go to Washington, you meet the President**. So anyway it's interesting but it's an election time. [...]

Seastrand is here pointing out that Capps cannot claim that he has not been to Washington because, according to a newspaper, the *Santa Barbara News-Press*, he visited the President in the White House. This remark seems at first to rest on a literal interpretation of *having been to Washington*: the act of having physically been in the city of Washington, D.C. (implicit in the assertion that he went inside the White House to meet Clinton). But there is a subtler and potentially more damaging implication of her accusations: that Capps is only pretending to be an unknowing outsider. In fact, he can be shown to have strong connections to the White House and, by implication, to politicians in the Democratic Party, through his daughter Laura's position as George Stephanopoulos's personal assistant.

When we look at Capps's earlier statement, shown in (7) below, however, we see that an alternative reading is possible, in which he is claiming that he has *never been a bureaucrat in Washington*.

(7) 15 August 1996; San Luis Obispo; public debate.

Walter: What- what I'm trying to establish here is that the way we make these decisions in Washington ... reflect our values, not just our views about economy but our values about what we- what we prioritize in our society, ... see I really pain. Every time we talk about **bureaucrats in Washington** uh people tend to- to applaud. But it-it-it pains me deeply. **I've never been there. I don't know what it's like.** ((13:49)) I'm not sure it's going to work at all. I don't know what it's like. but I wish we had- confidence in our government. I wish we could- talk about government in positive terms uh and- and- and not simply blame every problem in this country. on the government. [...]

Capps is here trying to force the audience to rethink the connotation of *bureaucrats in Washington* and the implications of the pervasive negative stereotype commonly held about such people. It is in this context that he claims that he has *never been there* and that he does not *know what it's like*. It is only with this more restricted interpretation in mind – that he has never been *in that position* – that we can make sense of his subsequent remark, *I'm not sure it's going to work at all*. He seems to be referring to the possibility of being elected and having then to go to Washington as a bureaucrat.

In this case as well, we could argue that there are two different semantic interpretations of the same expression – *having been to Washington* – and it is only on the basis of such different interpretations that we can simultaneously make sense of the accuser's criticism and of the claims made by the accused. But, as I mentioned earlier, the semantic analysis should not exhaust our search for the conditions that make competing interpretations of this kind not unusual in political discourse. We must ask: Why are WE able to see such semantic differences when the participants themselves do not? And why aren't these misunderstandings resolved by the participants themselves, or by others for them? I can think of two main reasons. The first has to do with aspects of the social organization of the events in which these kinds of attacks and criticisms appear. The second has to do with the adversarial nature of the political process and, perhaps more deeply, with interactional mechanisms and cultural expectations of the kind described by Tannen 1998 as “the argument culture.”<sup>10</sup>

By “aspects of the social organization” of political debates I mean the organization of turn-taking and the roles that different speakers are given and assume in using the floor. The debates from which I drew my examples are typically structured by an EXCHANGE SYSTEM that differs radically from conversation (e.g., as defined in Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974), especially in terms of turn allocation and turn duration. In public debates, a speaker is given the floor for an extended period, sometimes for one or two minutes, without having to worry about other speakers intervening as they routinely do in the course of ordinary conversation. Moderators, who are in charge of managing the floor by allocating

turns, monitoring their duration, and guiding the audience into proper behavior, rarely comment or encourage candidates to further clarify a point or provide specific evidence for their claims. This means that the type of exchange system typical of public debates is not conducive to the kind of fine tuning that is found in conversation. One consequence of this system is that it allows participants to attack without having to define their accusations further, or, in turn, to ignore an accusation or criticism made by a previous speaker. If necessary, those under attack can justify their lack of response on a variety of grounds, including the limited time at their disposal and the need to use it to get across their “message” rather than using it to respond to criticism.

The second reason for the recurrence of the type of accusation illustrated above is that candidates are under considerable pressure to attack any opponent who might be seen as a serious threat to them. Subtle semantic differences can be ignored because the premium is on making the opponent look bad and unreasonable rather than good and reasonable. Even a criticism based on misinterpreting a semantic distinction that should be obvious to most people can be useful if it can raise doubts about the integrity of a dangerous opponent. Candidates are particularly vulnerable in those areas that might make them appealing to a group of voters that their opponents are trying to reach. These are SACRED AREAS that must be guarded at all costs. In Wheeler’s case, the sacred area is his identity as “an Independent.” Since this is what distinguishes him from the candidates of the two main parties, he cannot let someone else take it over, especially when that person is the candidate of one of the two major parties. Capps, on the other hand, adopts the term “independent” as a way of suggesting that he is not a Democratic Party ideologue. This was particularly important in a district that for 50 years had sent Republicans to Congress.

In the case of the cycle of exchanges between Capps and Seastrand, the stakes are equally high. The conflict expressed in excerpts (4)–(7) starts from an implicit paradox: that both candidates recognize that the identity of “politician” has negative connotations, and yet they are competing for that identity (I will return to this paradox later in the article). Capps indirectly accuses Seastrand of being a hypocrite for criticizing politicians while being one of them. Seastrand, in turn, indirectly accuses Capps of being disingenuous by wanting to sound like an outsider whereas in fact he is already well acquainted with major figures in the Democratic Party. The reference to Capps going to visit President Clinton is particularly important for Seastrand because it constitutes a potential counterattack to Capps’s frequent accusation that she takes her orders from Newt Gingrich.<sup>11</sup>

#### THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF EXISTENTIAL COHERENCE

Exchanges like the previous ones make candidates keenly aware of their vulnerability in the public arena. Candidates are, however, also concerned with display-

ing or articulating their own individual sense of coherence. They problematize their actions, comparing past, present, and future decisions or experiences in search of an overarching logic, a principle or series of principles that justifies their choice to run for office or to take a particular stand on an issue. When candidates engage in such discursive construction of their life choices, coherence is represented as CONTINUITY of actions, thoughts, and feelings. As Eric Erikson (1980:190) pointed out, a person's identity involves "an unconscious striving for a CONTINUITY OF PERSONAL CHARACTER" (emphasis in original). As we shall see, for these candidates existential coherence is indeed built on continuity of personal character, as defined through specific actions or routine activities (e.g., the ones associated with one's profession outside the political arena). Coherence is typically created in two ways: (i) by showing that things stay the same – one's beliefs have not really changed over time; or (ii) by showing that things change in ways that reconfirm the continuity of some other feature – one's beliefs have changed because there is a higher-order logic that justifies the change. Recognition of a temporal dimension in the construction of existential coherence is crucial for capturing the process through which the political self is formed. This includes the verbal acts that reveal, sometimes in more public contexts, sometimes in more private ones, the logic of a candidate's reasons for presenting a particular type of self. In my data, three discursive strategies emerged in the construction of existential coherence: (i) narratives of belonging, (ii) the present as a "natural extension" of the past, and (iii) exposing potential contradictions, which are then shown to be only apparent.

*Discourse strategy 1: Narrative of belonging*

The narrative of belonging is a subset of narratives of personal experience. In the narrative of belonging, a sequence of life events is presented in a linear fashion, implying "a single, closed, temporal, and causal path" (Ochs & Capps 2001:41), in order to show that a candidate has experienced events or has gone through states of mind that connect him or her emotionally and morally to the place and the people of the district. This strategy accomplishes this goal in a number of ways. First, it supports the view that, by having lived like others in the audience, the speaker-candidate is an "ordinary citizen," which is a positive value in contemporary American politics. Second, this type of narrative is also (at times explicitly) introduced to establish the likelihood that the candidate will be an ideal representative precisely because his or her potentially shared experiences recounted in the narrative define him or her as knowledgeable about what people in the district think and feel. In addition to the emphasis on shared "place" (e.g., "I have lived in the district for 20 years"), narratives of belonging introduce putatively universal or quasi-universal life experiences (e.g., being married, having children, sending children to school, seeing them grow, being exposed to traumatic events, taking care of one's parents or grandparents). These experiences help candidates connect to a large part of the audience. In particular, nar-

ratives of belonging work as coherence builders because they help candidates formulate a life history in which temporally and spatially separate events and experiences can be shown to have led toward the realization of a kind of person who values being part of a particular community (*Gemeinschaft*) as opposed to society at large.

I first became aware of narratives of belonging for political purposes while recording and then analyzing Walter Capps's speeches over the course of the first official day of his 1995–1996 campaign, 14 November 1995. The most striking and complete narrative of belonging is found in the first speech of that day, in Paso Robles. Capps delivered his speech to a small group of supporters and activists, most of them elderly or retired. He addressed them while standing in front of the entrance to the Paso Robles Public Library, without notes, podium, or microphone. Most of what he said, however, was based on a written text that he had finished preparing the night before.

The passage from his speech reproduced in (8) below took place after Capps made the announcement that he was running for office again, and that this time he would win. The narrative of belonging is meant to provide evidence of the fact that he and his wife Lois have been in the district for a long time and therefore know its people<sup>12</sup>:

(8) 14 Nov. 1995; Paso Robles; announcement speech to supporters.

Capps: [...] because uh, Lois and I ... have lived here, in fact the first time we came in here in- August of 1964, we stayed across the street. we- we came out from- from uh, Yale University, uh to teach uh at U.C. Santa Barbara. and we came down from Oregon. we stopped across the street, had a- ... had a- ... we were carrying a- trailer with uh, our belongings. we didn't have any children then =that was in nineteen-sixty-four. ... we've been here a:ll this time. ... we've lived here a:ll these years. we know the people. ... of the twenty-second district. ... you know- ... our children were born in the twenty-second district. they've all gone to school here. ... uh so what I'm suggesting is, ... not only suggesting I know this to be the case: that I represent ... majority. opinion. in the twenty-second district. I mean =I know what people in the twenty-second district believe in because- these are our people. ... you are- ... the people with whom we've lived our lives.

This particular narrative of belonging was introduced in the context of an “origin” narrative, which included the description of a trip from Oregon with a trailer full of belongings, perhaps an implicit reference to the famous “Oregon Trail” story that American children learn in elementary school. The narrative is also spatio-temporally grounded to the specific location where Capps is speaking through the reference to a place *across the street* and to the date of his arrival, 1964. He provides further evidence of belonging by mentioning that his children were born and went to school in the 22nd District. In addition to being proof of his confidence in public institutions (indicated by the fact that he sent his children to public schools), this part of the narrative could also be interpreted as defining Capps as an ordinary citizen (reinforced by his standing on the sidewalk, with no podium or microphone). He shares the experience of having lived in the same district while raising children with most of the people in the audi-

ence, who are about his age or older. This was an important component of Capps's broader narrative of his candidacy. Quoting Thomas Jefferson, Capps often presented himself as the typical citizen-politician, who goes to Congress for a limited period of time to fulfill a sense of civic duty and then returns to his community to live the rest of his life among the people he had represented in Washington. Despite a ten-month separation between the two speeches, the last line of the passage in (9) is almost identical to the last line of the passage in (8):

(9) 15 August 1996; San Luis Obispo; public debate.

- Capps: There's lot's of Thomas Jefferson in me. ... Thomas Jefferson believed ... that the person who represents the community in Congress ... should come from that community. Should be somebody from any walk of life. Could be a teacher. ... Could be a painter. Uh- a woman or a man. uh plumber or an attorney. Anyone. Would- would come. out of that community and serve for a- probably a brief period of time in Washington D.C.
- Moderator: Thirty seconds Walter.
- Capps: Okay. And then go back and live among **the people with whom you've lived your lives.**

An abbreviated version of the same narrative given in (8) was used by Capps on 14 November 1995, at two other stops on the same day, in San Luis Obispo and at Hancock College in Santa Maria, but not at the fourth stop, the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California. At UCSB, he began to talk about how long he and Lois had been married but then switched to an elaborate series of (only partly successful) jokes, all of which were meant to stress his personal connection to the university rather than to the district. Nine months later, a more abbreviated narrative of belonging appeared in Capps's opening statement at a public debate in Santa Maria and, one week later, he used a slightly more elaborate version in a San Luis Obispo debate. The two versions are reproduced below in (10) and (11) respectively:

(10) 9 August 1996; Santa Maria; public debate.

- Capps: **we have lived in this district for thirty two years. uh-we've raised ... our children here. I've- I've been a member of the faculty at University of California at Santa Barbara ...** uh- during that period of time. uh- I was also the director for the center for the study of democratic institutions. ... There's been some question about whether I've ever ... had to deal with the payroll. I was director of that. I've been department chair, ... [...]

(11) 15 August 1996; debate in San Luis Obispo.

- Capps: [...]**I've been on the faculty at the University of California at Santa Barbara for- about thirty years.** ... uh went to public schools. ... uh got my Ph.D. from Yale University =came out with my wife Lois who is here today. ... uhm ... **our children were born and raised in ... Santa Barbara ... in the 22nd district. They've gone on- they all went through uhm ... college in-uh- in California**=the oldest one went to Stanford. ... Just got her PhD from UCLA. ... the middle one went to- to UCSB and went to ... uh the University of Sydney. In Australia. The youngest one was an honor student at UC Berkeley and now works in the White House. [...]



What remains of the original formulation given in (8) is that in both (10) and (11) Capps stresses his connection with the district through a reference to his children and his teaching at the University of California, Santa Barbara. In the first case (8 August 1996), the narrative concluded with information about having being the chair of the Department of Religious Studies at UCSB, which was cited as evidence of his administrative experience. In the second case (15 August 1996), Capps elaborated on information about where his three children went to college. This time his generalization that they all went to public school in the 22nd District could not be extended to say that they all went to public (state-funded) colleges. This might explain why Capps changed the generalization. In (11), he states that they went to college *in California* (with the partial exception of the middle one, Todd, who went to UCSB first and then to Australia). Although in (10) and (11) his connection to the district has been modified, a certain affective tone of the original narrative is preserved. This is achieved through bringing into the public domain such dimensions of personal experience as his children's upbringing and achievements. As he tells the audience where his children went to college, Capps's identity undergoes a momentary and yet dramatic shift: from political candidate to proud father boasting about his children's achievements, including the position that his younger daughter Laura had at the White House as Stephanopolous's personal assistant.

At first, I thought that the narrative of belonging was one of the rhetorical strategies that distinguished Capps from the other candidates. On further inspection, however, that hypothesis turned out to be wrong. During the public debate in Santa Maria organized by the Area Agency on Aging, on 8 August 1996, Independent Steven Wheeler produced an elaborate narrative of belonging.<sup>13</sup> When the time came to introduce himself, Wheeler stood up (the only candidate to do so) and delivered the speech that, as he later confided to me, he had been working on in the isolation of his study at home and without the benefit of political consultants or advisors.<sup>14</sup> As shown in excerpt (12) below, he linked sequentially different personal attributes and events to provide the audience with a glimpse of what would likely be interpreted by the audience as Wheeler's list of qualities that should qualify him as a serious candidate. Among them, the first two are (a) being a native Californian and (b) having lived in the district for an extended period (17 years). He indirectly reinforced his claim to be a "native" by informing the audience that he was a surfer and he was athletic (one can imagine other contexts or States of the Union where "being athletic" or being a surfer might not be judged to important qualities for someone running for a Congressional seat). Wheeler also mentions events and situations in which he came in contact with people in the district and showed compassion toward them (e.g., by assisting them at the gas station or outside grocery stores, or by helping people retrieve lost spouses at large gatherings). In turn, he presented the act of 13,000 registered voters signing petitions to put him on the ballot not as the

condition but as the reason (*because [they] signed a petition*) for his presence in the race for Congress.

- (12) 8 August 1996; Santa Maria; public debate. Independent candidate Steven Wheeler delivers the entire speech standing, alternating between quickly glancing down at his notes and looking up at the audience.

Wheeler: [...] Since most of you don't know me I'm gonna start by ... telling you about my personal and professional background. **I'm a native Californian and I've lived in this district for seventeen years.** I'm a certified public accountant. I owned and operated my own practice in Santa Barbara for the past fourteen years. ... **I've served on the board to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, ... the Santa Barbara J.C.'s, the Santa Barbara County Food Bank,** and the Environmental Defense Center. ... I'm married, my wife's name is Laura, and I have three children, Stephanie, Jared and Brian. ... **I've also been surfing since I was eleven. I've uh-been up and down the Central Coast lately** and uh- fortunately **the waves have been flat** so I've uh- been able to spend more time campaigning.

Audience: ((chuckles))

Wheeler: uhm I have a black belt in martial arts. ... I keep a journal. And **I've coached my son's s- soccer team over the last three years.**

I'm here because over thirteen thousand people signed a petition to put my name on the ballot. This was truly a rewarding experience and it brought me ... to every city in the 22nd district.

It provided me an opportunity to meet people from all walks of life, ... and it gave me an opportunity to engage in discussions with people, and to learn about what their concerns about the issues are in this country today. ...

During this process, ... I helped people put gas in their cars, ... I held their groceries, I held their shopping carts. I watched their children and their pets, and I even helped locate lost spouses ... in large crowds in special events. ... It w(a)s truly a rewarding experience. [...]

Like Capps in excerpts (7), (9) and (10), Wheeler is here justifying his candidacy by claiming his life connections to the geographical area and to its inhabitants. He does so by invoking public and private aspects of his life that present him as an "ordinary" person – he talks about his own practice, his wife and his children – who also cares about people outside his family. He has, in other words, a sense of civic duty.

Grammar plays an important role in the ways narratives of belonging unfold. The sense of connection to the place and its people is constructed in part through verb forms and with adverbial phrases that give a sense of continuity by building a bridge from the past into the present. To accomplish this, both Capps and Wheeler used simple present perfective (and more rarely present perfective progressive), usually in conjunction with temporal and spatial adverbial phrases. Following are some examples extracted from Capps's and Wheeler's narratives cited above:

- (13) Simple present perfective (+ time/space adverbial).  
 a. we have lived in this district *for thirty years*  
 b. we've raised our children *here*.  
 c. I've been a member of the University of California *at Santa Barbara*.<sup>15</sup>  
 d. I've been on the faculty at the University of California at Santa Barbara *for about thirty years*

- e. I've lived in this district *for seventeen years*
  - f. I've served on the board to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, ... the Santa Barbara J.C.'s, the Santa Barbara County Food Bank, and the Environmental Defense Center.
  - g. I've been up and down the Central Coast lately
  - h. the waves have been flat
  - i. I've coached my son's s- soccer team *over the last three years*.
- (14) Present perfective progressive (+space/time adverbial).
- a. I've also been surfing *since I was eleven*.

On close inspection, in the other candidates' speeches we do not find narratives of belonging of the type illustrated in (8), (10) and (11) for Capps and in (12) for Wheeler. For two of the other candidates we do not find any narratives of personal experience throughout an entire debate.

In the three debates I recorded and in one organized and hosted by TV station KEYT in the last month of the campaign, the incumbent, Andrea Seastrand, mentioned some aspects of her personal life that were linked to the discursive context and had potential emotional appeal (e.g., her husband's struggle with cancer, her feelings toward her two adopted children). She also mentioned being the granddaughter of Polish immigrants and briefly recounted getting together with "wonderful citizens" in the district to discuss Medicare, but she did not construct temporally ordered personal narratives that directly or indirectly proved her connections to the district over an extended period. Having won the support of the majority of the voters in the last election, she might have felt that she already had a relationship of belonging with the voters. But familiarity versus lack of familiarity with the voters cannot explain why Dick Porter, from the Reform Party, during his first appearance in San Luis Obispo, on 15 August 1996, did not give any information about his origins or connections with the district. Instead, he spent most of his introduction time talking about his party. When he did provide a brief biographical sketch, during his second debate, at the League of Women Voters on 7 October 1996, Porter presented the information in a grammatical form quite different from what I illustrated above for Capps's and Wheeler's narratives. One of the most striking features of his biographical narrative is the repeated use of verb-elliptical utterances for seven consecutive utterances. Whereas Capps and Wheeler repeatedly employed finite verb forms, including the perfective forms summarized in (13) and (14) above, Porter chose to recount those aspects of his biography that he judged relevant to his presentation of self in a "timeless" fashion. This type of grammatical framing was accompanied by a matter-of-fact tone that, rather than conveying pride or pleasure in the potential connections with the experience of audience members, suggested different goals, such as an attempt to compress as much information as possible into the shortest possible time. The list-like quality of his narrative made it appear that he was reading from a form. His mention of military service suggests a possible experiential source for the unusual grammar of his biographical information. Following is Porter's

narrative (I have used separate lines to approximate graphically the list-like character of his delivery):

(15) 7 October 1996; Santa Barbara, League of Women Voters; public debate.

Porter: Thank you.  
 uh I am Dick Porter,  
 uh native Californian, from San Simeon, North of here ((looks down as if reading))  
 u:h military service in the. U.S. Army West of here in the Pacific  
 uh education South of here Bachelor and Masters from. USC  
 and doctorate from. UCLA.  
 profession educator.  
 uh=over twenty years service in California public schools  
 currently self employed as an education consultant.  
 now I am mostly: ... student. of political systems and government. I'm running  
 for Congress. now as a candidate, ...  
 uh my primary concerns and concerns. uh of the Reform Party.  
 [...]

Another candidate, the Libertarian David Bersohn, used personal narratives with biographical information in both debates he attended. For example, he told the audience that he had lived in the area since 1987, but he spent more time telling them that he grew up elsewhere (in New York City) and went to school in other states than in elaborating on his connections with people in the district. His explicit connection between his background and the campaign was that his law degree should come in handy if he were to be elected.

(16) 9 August 1996; Santa Maria; public debate.

Bersohn: [...] So I really appreciate being included today. uhm- my name is David Bersohn and you can repeat that to get the name recognition out there. I don't have a multi-million dollar campaign chest so I have to plug for myself here. uhm- (.) I'm uh libertarian. **I'm 43 years old. I've lived in the area here since 1987. I currently live in Arroyo Grande.** ... I'm a homeowner. um- single. uh- I grew up at (??) upstate New York. Grew up in New York City. uhm- I went to college in Ohio, uh- a major in economics and uh- **I also have a law degree from Columbia University so I hope I'll be able to make my way through the thick of the thousand page bills that seem to have went through congress these days.**

Two months later, in the debate at the League of Women Voters in Santa Barbara, Bersohn mentions his arrival in California and the fact that he was living in a rural town in the district after an even more elaborate description of growing up in New York and going to Oberlin College and Columbia University.

(17) 7 October 1996; Santa Barbara; League of Women Voters; public debate.

Bersohn: Hi. My name is David Bersohn. I am the Libertarian Party candidate. I'll give you a short introduction to myself. uhm I grew up in New York City, first upstate New York. and downstate in the Bronx and Brooklyn. uhm ... I went to:- ... Oberlin College where I got a BA uh majored in economics ... after that I got a: doctorate in jurisprudence from Columbia University School of Law which I hope will- uh allow me to read my way through some of those thousands of page bills that emanate from Congress these days. uhm. **moved to California in 1987. I've lived in (rural) Arroyo Grande since 1991,** uh my primary occupation uh is- (that) as an artist. [...]

The data presented so far suggest that candidates varied considerably as to whether they used personal narrative in their public speeches and whether they used it to build what I call “narratives of belonging.” If, as I have been suggesting, the latter are part of a set of strategies to build existential coherence, differences across candidates could be at least in part related to their awareness of the coherence struggle – in this case, their need to show that they have come to the decision to run for political office as part of a series of experiences, which includes life events shared with people in the district. Do these narratives of belonging help establish a positive relationship with the audience? Have voters come to expect them in candidates’ public presentations? These are difficult questions to answer under any circumstances, and even more difficult in my case, given the small sample of candidates and events. But there is some evidence that voters responded more positively to Wheeler’s message than to Porter’s and Bersohn’s. In addition to the fact that, of the three, Wheeler received more votes on Election Day (as shown in Table 1), he was also more successful in terms of immediate feedback from the audience. His introductory speeches, despite the presence of large contingents of supporters for Seastrand and Capps, received generous applause at all three of the debates I recorded, whereas Porter’s and Bersohn’s introductory speeches did not fare so well. Porter’s introductory speeches on 15 August and 7 October 1996 were not followed by applause at all. Bersohn’s introductory speech was followed by applause in only one of the two debates in which he participated. All other candidates’ introductory speeches, including those of the Independent Wheeler and the one speech by the representative of the Natural Law Party, were followed by applause (see Appendix B).<sup>16</sup>

*Strategy 2: The present as a natural extension of the past*

Another strategy for constructing existential coherence through continuity is to make any present decision, including the decision to run for office, a “natural extension” of some past experience. An example of this strategy has been documented by the political scientist Richard Fenno, who, in describing Senator John Glenn’s view of his own political career, writes:

Glenn sees politics as a public service. For him, the decision to enter politics was a **natural extension** of what he had been doing all of his adult life – serving his country. Running for the Senate was the political equivalent of signing up for one more hitch in the marines. (Fenno 1996:23; emphasis added)

Fenno captures here the gist of a perspective on one’s political career choice that is also found in the data I collected, but only in Capps’s and Wheeler’s speeches. As shown in (18) below, Capps presented his decision to run for Congress as an extension of his teaching at UCSB, especially teaching his very large and popular course on the Vietnam War.

## NARRATING THE POLITICAL SELF

(18) 15 August 1996; San Luis Obispo; public debate.

Capps: [...] I got into the politics as a **kind of extension** of the ... teaching that I'd been doing. ... uh the- the courses that I teach. [...] I got into politics as an **extension** ... of the work that I've done on the- ... impact of the Vietnam War, the class that I teach ... that's been featured three times on [the television program] *Sixty Minutes*, ... I have- testified before congressional committees on three occasions.

As apparent from the last sentence in this excerpt, teaching experience was conceived and presented as ONE of the past experiences that better qualified Capps for the position he hoped to be elected to. Having testified before Congressional committees was another item in Capps's list to build his case.

In the case of Steven Wheeler, we find an example in his speeches where his "natural extension" narrative was pushed further back in time to include his ancestors. In (19), he frames his choice to run for the U.S. Congress as part of a "family destiny" of altruistic public service.

(19) 15 August 1996; San Luis Obispo; public debate.

Wheeler: [...] most of you don't know me uhm- ... and I believe that I am here ... as a part of a family destiny. And I'd like to tell you a little bit about **my** family. My grandfather ... formed a chapter of the United Mine Workers in the 1930s in Kentucky. He was thrown in jail ... several times in that process. uhm- he was uh written about in songs by George Davis the singing miner whose works are in the Smithsonian. ... My father served in three wars. He started out in World War Two ... as an enlisted man. He ended up as a chief warrant officer (for/four)- he had two tours of duty at Vietnam. and ... **I'm here because I feel it's time to do my public service ... to this community and to this country ... and this is how I've chosen to do it.**

Consistent with the notion of the struggle for existential coherence, in (19) we see Wheeler building himself up as someone whose personal characteristics include, but are not limited to, being a descendant of a line of (male) ancestors who do things not in their own interest but in the interest of their community (from the community of co-workers to that of the entire nation).

### *Strategy 3: Exposing and reconciling potential contradictions*

A third strategy in constructing existential coherence is to bring out and make explicit a potential contradiction in order to show that it is not a contradiction. By so doing, candidates may respond to a direct, indirect, or potential criticism by others. I will briefly discuss two such cases.

Sometimes candidates seemed satisfied simply to point out a potential contradiction and state that it was not a contradiction, offering no rationale for such a move. This was the case, for example, in the passage in excerpt (20) below, where Independent Steven Wheeler asserts that he sees no contradiction between being simultaneously pro-business and pro-environment. He then proceeds to list a series of other positions that voters might see as canceling each other out: (i) balancing the budget, (ii) maintaining a strong military, and (iii) not cutting social services (here represented by students, seniors, and *working people making large sacrifices*).

(20) 9 August 1996; Santa Maria; public debate.

Wheeler: [...] As a certified public accountant, what I bring to the table is a platform of fiscally conservative, yet socially moderate, and responsible positions on issues. ... **I believe that the terms pro business and pro environment do not need to be mutually exclusive terms not only in this district but in this country.** ((looks down)) ... ((looks up)) I believe that we can balance the budget, ... maintain a strong military, ... without requiring our seniors, our students, and our working people to make large sacrifices. We can do this simply by eliminating, wasteful, pork barrel.

A candidate may also choose to bring out a potential contradiction in order to offer a solution. This was the case when Capps addressed what he perceived as a potential paradox of his candidacy: reconciling his positive view of academic life with many voters' negative views of politics. By asking voters for their support, Capps felt that he might have been seen as implying that he was looking for a change of career. He wanted to be a congressman instead of a university professor. Capps, however, knew that such a goal could be seen as problematic because in contemporary American public discourse being a "politician" has a negative connotation (see ex. 21 below). But Capps was also aware that being a professor, in turn, could be seen in a negative light in the political context because it came with the connotation of being detached from mainstream America and the life of ordinary citizens – as captured in the phrase "being ivory tower." His solution was to operate on several discursive and argumentative levels at the same time. While praising the academic profession and himself as a member – partly in order to boost his record and partly to prove that he was not ashamed or tired of it – he presented himself as a "reluctant candidate," a nonprofessional politician (and also, as we saw before, an "independent" thinker), who would go to Washington to do his civic duty as part of a vocation. The first time this integrated model of the self is found in the data collected is on 14 November 1995, in Capps's speech at the third stop of the first day of campaigning, at Hancock College near Santa Maria, in front of a mixed audience which included the instructor and the students in a political science class, political supporters, and representatives of the local media.

(21) 14 November 1995; Santa Maria; inside a classroom at Hancock College.

Capps: Why would somebody who is enjoying a career- you know- I still write books. I still do research. I still teach. Why would somebody who's doing that, ... want to run for public office? The reason is very very simple. ... In that I think it isn't simply enough to study, ... the process. There comes a time in a person's life, when, by opportunity, by privilege, by vocation, by request from others, ... it's time ... to ... assume the responsibility of- of representative leadership. Because this is exactly the way that Thomas Jefferson talked about it. . . [ ... ]. So rather than saying, ... and rather than talking about **politicians- which is a negative thing**. And I guess if I'm now a politician I'll have to admit to that. I'd like to say **elected citizen**. An elected citizen ... responding ... to a kind of vocational call. **And I can also tell you that I- I wasn't thrilled to be doing this in the beginning because I so much enjoy what I am doing.**

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The same attempt to recognize the contrast between academic life and politics without putting down either one of them is found ten months later in the campaign. This excerpt reproduces the part of a speech that is immediately prior to the segment in excerpt (18):

(22) 15 August 1996; San Luis Obispo; public debate.

Capps: [...] I've been accused of being ... ivory tower. ... uhm which I think is insulting to: the entire teaching profession but- ... I- I don't think I'm very ivory tower. ... Although in some ways I wish I were. ... Because there's a- that's a great tradition as well- to be able to take a look at- at what's going on in society and make sense of it. ... But I got into politics as an extension ... of the work that I've done on the ... impact of the Vietnam War, [...]

As illustrated in (9), for Capps, the potential conflict between academia and politics could be reconciled by adopting what he characterized as Jefferson's conceptualization of the politician-citizen. In fact, the image of the ordinary citizen who goes to serve in Congress as a civic duty and then returns to the community from which he came was useful for Capps precisely because it allowed him to reconcile his multiple identities, providing a script that would help him construct the existential coherence that he was aiming at. But Jefferson was not his only model, in part because Capps was concerned with the spiritual side of his persona, the same side that attracted him to religious studies. This search for other models is made explicit in an exchange with a local reporter on 5 May 1996, while George Stephanopolous was in town to support Capps at a fund-raising event. In response to the reporter's question about what Stephanopolous brought to his campaign, Capps mentioned their common background in the study of theology and the fact that Stephanopolous's father and uncle were Orthodox priests. To honor that connection, Capps proudly announced that he decided to do something unusual in politics and quote in his speech a Greek theologian, John Chrysostom, *who talked about the compatibility of our beliefs and our politics*.

(23) 5 May 1996; Santa Barbara; outside a private home where a fund-raising event hosting George Stephanopolous is taking place.

Reporter: alright. and what does someone like-uh-George bring to your campaign?

Capps: mhm. uhm-

Reporter: you have him here and-

Capps: Well uhm you know these-I didn't even know him. I didn't know him until two years ago. but ... George- uh George is a student of theology. I don't know if you knew.

Reporter: no, I didn't.

Capps: But his father was an Orthodox priest. A Greek Orthodox priest. his uncle is an Orthodox priest. he studied theology at Oxford. And he knew me-I don't know how-before he got into this politics thing. and I knew that he had this interest in religion so tonight when I get to talk, I'm gonna do a thing that no politician has ever done. I'm gonna start off by quoting John Chrysostom [...]

Capps: A fifth century Greek Orthodox theologian who talked about **the compatibility of our beliefs and our politics**. And that's where George and I- we bond. [...]



In his concern for this particular type of existential coherence – what he calls, in (23), *the compatibility of our beliefs and our politics* – Capps was probably unique; we might even speculate that it was such a concern that made him appealing to at least some of the voters. At the same time, his articulation of his doubts and possible solutions, just like his articulation of the reasons he gave to explain why people should vote for him, provide a glimpse into what other candidates may think and feel but not express in ways that are accessible in the public record.

#### CONCLUSION

Through an examination of the talk produced during a campaign for the U.S. Congress, I have argued that some of the candidates' rhetorical strategies can be understood in terms of their common concern for creating and sustaining a sense of what I call "existential coherence." Because of the concern with issues of truth and consistency in political campaigns, the construction of existential coherence becomes an important aspect of the discursive construction of a candidate as a moral person in the Kantian sense of someone who should be the "object of respect" (Kant 1785).

I have here proposed that we think of existential coherence as something that can be questioned by others (e.g., one's opponents) and that can also explain candidates' presentation and framing of particular moments of their life history as manifesting a particular logic. In resorting to discourse strategies like the "narrative of belonging" and "the present as a natural extension of the past," candidates seemed to respond to a perceived need to justify a number of decisions, including (i) the decision to run for office, (ii) the decision to run in a particular district, and (iii) the decision to take stances that might appear contradictory. The data collected also show that candidates modified their discursive strategies over time and across types of situations. Democratic candidate Walter Capps, for example, used more elaborate narratives of personal experience when addressing his supporters at the beginning of his campaign than later on, when he began to participate in public debates with his opponents and in front of a mixed audience. In contrast, Reform Party candidate Dick Porter did not include any information about his biography or life experience in the first debate he participated in or in the two-minute statement he delivered on KEYT (see Appendix B). During his second debate, however, he introduced the telegraphic bio-sketch I reproduce in (15).

Repeatedly, throughout this article, the data I presented demonstrate a similarity in discursive strategies between two candidates: the Democrat Capps and the Independent Wheeler. They were the only candidates who produced what I called "narratives of belonging," and they were also the only ones who engaged in the other two discursive strategies – the "present as a natural extension of the past" and "exposing and reconciling potential contradictions" in their positions or choices. This common cluster of features begins to make sense if we return to

the earlier discussion of the term “independent.” Both Wheeler and Capps claimed to be “independent,” even though, as we saw, each emphasized a slightly different meaning of the term. Wheeler wanted to be seen as an alternative to the two major parties, and Capps wanted to be seen as a Democrat who could think on his own and was not taking orders from anyone else in the Democratic Party. All of the other candidates, albeit in different ways and to different extents, were more concerned with presenting their politics in terms of the general goals and ideologies of their respective parties.

Whereas the stress on personal history and independence made sense in the case of Wheeler, who was running as a previously unknown candidate and in opposition to the Democrats and Republicans, who represented in his view “politics as usual” (as he said at the end of his introduction during the debate on 8 August 1996), the same stance was less obvious in the case of Capps, who was running as a Democrat and was backed by the Democratic leadership, including Bill and Hillary Clinton.

On closer analysis, however, it becomes apparent that in order to win, Capps had to reach out to people who in previous years voted for the Republican candidate (Michael Huffington), given that no Democrat had won an election in the district in 50 years. In addition, the campaign was taking place only a year after the Republicans, under the banner of Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America,” had gained control of the U.S. House of Representatives. This meant that during the fall of 1995 all the way through the summer of 1996, Democrats continued to doubt whether President Clinton was going to be reelected. The advice of Democratic strategists to Capps was then to avoid close association with Clinton. This advice resonated with Capps’s own convictions and personal history. He did not want to lose his academic identity, which included a successful career in the pursuit of original pedagogical ideas (as in his famous and highly successful course on the Vietnam War) and a number of complex research topics. He was proud to be the author or editor of 13 books on a range of subjects, including the Vietnam War (Capps 1982, 1990), Native American religion, the “new religious right” (Capps 1990), and Thomas Merton and the monastic impulse (Capps 1976, 1983, 1989).

It could be argued that Capps was self-reflective in his speeches at least in part because of his academic background. This assumption would make it difficult to use his rhetorical strategies as a representative example of what other, nonacademic candidates do. There are, however, two reasons to reject the academic background as the sole or principal explanation of Capps’s rhetorical strategies. First, as I demonstrated in this article, Capps was not alone in some of his rhetorical choices: the Independent candidate Steven Wheeler used some of the very same discursive strategies used by Capps. Second, in examining my data, I found variation in rhetorical strategies across individuals and across situations. Even Capps modified his strategies over time and to accommodate different audiences. Both sets of findings suggest that, in addition to being confronted with

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unique individuals under unique circumstances, there are TYPES of candidates, which are in part defined by TYPES of rhetorical strategies. I did not expect to find the rhetorical strategies that I described and, as far as I know, they have not been described before. They are, therefore, a potentially important addition to the documentation of how human actors involved in competitive tasks such as political races use particular linguistic resources to construct the kind of person that they want the voters to know and believe in.

APPENDIX A  
TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

The excerpts presented in this article are transcribed according to a modified version of the conventions originally established by Gail Jefferson for the analysis of conversation (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974:731–34).

<b>Capps:</b>	name of speaker is separated from the rest by a colon (:) and one or more spaces.
<u>anybody</u>	underlining represents emphasis or contrastive stress.
<b>NÓ!!</b>	capital letters indicate high volume.
<u>job=I mean</u>	equal sign (=) stands for “latching,” i.e. no hearable interval between two turns or between two utterances by the same speakers.
<b>independent</b>	boldface is used to highlight portions of the talk that are being discussed in the surrounding part of the article.
becau::se	colon (:) stands for lengthening of sound.
last time,	a comma indicates that the phrase ends with a rising intonation, e.g. the intonation found when speakers are projecting further talk or more items in a list.
I do.	a period stands for a falling intonation that suggests the possible end of a turn.
go //next	point in a party’s turn where overlap by next speaker(s) starts.
(first of all)	talk between parentheses indicates an uncertain but reasonable guess at what might have been said.
( ?? )	question marks between parentheses indicate that a portion of talk could not be heard accurately and no guess was possible.
...	untimed pause.
((laughter))	double parentheses frame contextual information about the talk that follows.
[...]	a portion of the transcript was left out.

APPENDIX B  
POLITICAL DEBATES MENTIONED IN THE ARTICLE, WITH LIST  
OF CANDIDATES AND THEIR POLITICAL AFFILIATION

<i>Date, Place and Host</i>	<i>Candidates who participated</i>
August 8, 1996, Santa Maria, organized by the Area Agency on Aging (as video recorded by A. Duranti)	1) David L. Bersohn (Libertarian) 2) Walter H. Capps (Democrat) 3) Andrea Seastrand (Republican) 4) Steven Wheeler (Independent)
August 15, 1996, San Luis Obispo, organized by the AARP (as video recorded by A. Duranti)	1) Walter H. Capps (Democrat) 2) Richard D. Porter (Reform Party) 3) Andrea Seastrand (Republican) 4) Steven Wheeler (Independent)

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October 7, 1996, Santa Barbara,  
organized by the League of Women  
Voters (as video recorded by  
A. Duranti)

- 1) David L. Bersohn (Libertarian)
- 2) Walter H. Capps (Democrat)
- 3) Mr. Hospidar (Natural Law Party,  
standing in for candidate Dawn Tomastick)
- 4) Richard D. Porter (Reform Party)
- 5) Andrea Seastrand (Republican)
- 6) Steven Wheeler (Independent)

October 21, 1996, KEYT  
(broadcast version)

- 1) Walter H. Capps (Democrat)
- 2) Andrea Seastrand (Republican)  
Following the one hour debate between  
Capps and Seastrand, there were 2 minute  
statements by three other candidates:
- 3) Steven Wheeler (Independent)
- 4) David L. Bersohn (Libertarian Party)
- 5) Richard D. Porter (Reform Party)

### NOTES

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A number of people made the project on which this article is based possible and a rewarding experience. First and foremost, I am deeply indebted to the late Walter Capps and to his wife Lois Capps – now Rep. Lois Capps (D-California) – and to their extended family for letting me enter their home and giving me access to their lives as they experienced an extraordinary series of events. I am also very grateful to Walter’s brother, Doug Capps, who was Walter’s campaign manager in 1996 and has continued over the years to be my liaison with the rest of the Capps family. Others members of the Capps-for-Congress campaign staff I could rely on for information include Bryant Wieneke, always most generous with his time, Steve Boyd, Thu Fong, and Lindsey Capps. After Walter Capps’s death, I benefited from conversations with Capps’s colleague and friend Richard Hecht, professor and former chair of the Department of Religious Studies at UCSB. I am also grateful to the 1995–1996 Independent candidate Steven Wheeler, who, in June 1998, consented to meet with me and to being interviewed. This project was born out of conversations with Walter Capps’s daughter Lisa while she was a graduate student at UCLA. She remained a strong supporter of my efforts to capture her father’s adventure in politics after she accepted a position in psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and even during the last year of her life, as she struggled with cancer. This article is dedicated to her memory.

<sup>1</sup> Several discourse analysts have made distinctions within what I am here generically calling “textual coherence.” For example, Widdowson 1979 distinguishes between textual cohesion (between sentences) and textual coherence (between speech acts); in a related but distinct fashion, Conte (1988:29) distinguishes between what she calls “consistency,” that is, the absence of contradictions, and coherence as the property of a series of utterances that are recognized as forming a whole. Bakhtin discusses the crucial role of the genre as a unit that provides guidance for performance and for interpretation of particular utterances through the process he calls “finalization” (*zavershenie*) –

a concept related to the notion of semantic and pragmatic coherence (Medvedev & Bakhtin 1985). See also Hanks 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Capps's course was called "The Impact of the Vietnam War" and regularly enrolled 750 to 900 students. Capps also taught another very popular undergraduate course, "The Voice of the Stranger," which at times enrolled more than 900 students (Richard Hecht, personal communication). The Vietnam course was also featured on the television program *60 Minutes*.

<sup>3</sup> In the United States, candidates for political office who do not want to run in a list of one of the existing parties (Democratic Party, Republican Party, Reform Party, Green Party, etc.) have the option of signing up with the "Independent Party," which allows them to run on their own personal platform.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. federal rules require a small number of signatures by registered voters to allow someone to be on the ballot. However, a number of signatures in the thousands helps candidates pay off part or all of the fee that they need to pay when they register to run for election.

<sup>5</sup> In writing about these particular TV spots, Bryant Wieneke, who worked on the 1995–1996 Capps campaign from the very start, suggested that the phrase "independent, in touch, and in the mainstream" had been written by Democratic strategist Bill Carrick and was not something that Capps himself would have used: "The scripts [for the TV spots] came in from a highly competent, highly experienced professional by the name of Bill Carrick, and Doug [Capps], Cathy [Duvall] and Travis [Green] digested them. In my opinion, they were very well done. They were completely positive and would stay that way for the duration of the campaign. Walter did not even mention Seasstrand which was definitely a positive. The only part that made me cringe was the sound-bite at the end, when the announcer characterized Walter as 'independent, in touch, and in the mainstream.' That part could have been in any candidate's spot around the country; it just did not sound like something Walter would say about himself" (Wieneke 2000:133). Although the entire phrase does not seem like something that Capps would have said or something that I recorded, Capps did use the term "independent" in talking about the candidate he wanted to be, as shown in ex. (2). More generally, the quote above raises the issue of the grounds on which to attribute authorship for what is said by and about a candidate for political office. It is difficult at times to distinguish between situations in which a speech (or script) writer inserted a term or phrase that he or she heard the candidate use, and situations in which a candidate might adopt a term or phrase originally written for him or about him by someone else.

<sup>6</sup> This avoidance of direct confrontation with Wheeler was quite consistent throughout the campaign. I came to see it as part of a conscious decision made by Capps to minimize the potential impact of Wheeler's candidacy by avoiding making him into an interlocutor, someone whose opinions mattered.

<sup>7</sup> In the first case, *independent* is a predicate adjective, and in the second case it is a modifier of a noun. I thank Keith Murphy for first pointing this out to me after a talk I gave at UCLA based on this material.

<sup>8</sup> This means that in Wheeler's definition, "an independent" cannot be affiliated with the American Independent Party, which is a certified political party. This was confusing to some people, as shown by the fact that in the debate in Santa Barbara at the League of Women Voters on 7 October 1996, the moderator erroneously introduced Wheeler as "of the Independent Party."

<sup>9</sup> Morgan (1991:429) defines "baited indirectness" as any case in which "a speaker says something general which is taken by the audience to be specific or addressed to someone in particular because of contextual evidence."

<sup>10</sup> "With politics as with law, our system is inherently adversarial in its structure, but in recent years a kind of antagonistic inflation has set in whereby opposition has become more extreme, and the adversarial nature of the system is being routinely abused" (Tannen 1998:96).

<sup>11</sup> Both cases point toward an "anti-politics" attitude in contemporary American politics that has similarities with what in British politics has been called "the Third Way," that is, the avoidance of explicit affiliation with the "Old Left" and the "New Right" (see Weltman & Billig 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Here is the segment immediately preceding the excerpt in (8):

Capps: ((smiles, look away)) and I'm- how do- how do I know that? How do I know we're gonna win?  
 ???: ((laughter)) hehehe!  
 Capps: well, you know, I can see it in your faces. (I mean)

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Audience: ((laughter))

Capps: that I- and I- and I mean that totally because- because uh, Lois and I... have lived here, [...]

<sup>13</sup>An almost verbatim version of the same narrative also occupies a large portion of Wheeler's two-minute statement at the end of the televised debate between Walter Capps and Andrea Seastrand done at the KEYT headquarters on 21 October 1996.

<sup>14</sup>From interview with Steven Wheeler, on June 25, 1998:

Duranti: [...] how did you prepare for that speech, how did you- ...

Wheeler: I:- uhm I: did it uh here. at the house. I believe. uh. and. ... I just (uh) ... uhm you know got on the computer and- an:: uh thought about what I wanted to say and- and uh what seemed to be ... relevant in terms of- ... of my campaign and what I thought that I had to offer, // you know to:

Duranti: right

Wheeler: uhm to the voters of the district // uhm

Duranti: hu-hu

Wheeler: a:nd it seems like it was important to:: uhm talk uh about my background a little bit.

Duranti: mh-mh.

Wheeler: and-uh ... [...] I didn't really have anyone advising me in terms of what to say or what not to say.

<sup>15</sup>Although the spatial adverbial phrase *at Santa Barbara* is part of the standard way of distinguishing among different campus of the University of California, I believe that in this case it also works as a spatial qualifier, given that Santa Barbara is the main urban center in the 22nd District.

<sup>16</sup>In the context of the present discussion, the applause received by the representative of the Natural Law Party needs explanation, given that he read a statement about the general philosophy and program of the Natural Law Party without any personal narrative or any obvious attempt to connect to the people of the district through narratives of personal experience. It is perhaps relevant, however, that his statement ended with a general concern for the value of "coherence throughout society."

Debate at the League of Women Voters, Santa Barbara, 7 October 1996.

Hospidar: [...] We stand. for government. in accordance with natural law. which is the infinite organizing power of nature. ... we should solve problems at their basis by bringing individual lives in our national policy into greater harmony with the natural law through proven educational programs. ... through- natural preventive health care renewable energy. sustainable agriculture and other forward looking prevention oriented programs. and we wish to reverse the current epidemics of individual and social stress by establishing groups professionally engaged in creating coherence throughout society. Scientific research has demonstrated the effects of these programs.

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