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## Democracy is Born in Conversation:

### Walter Capps' Campaign for the U.S. Congress

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[What follows is the original text of the Guggenheim proposal. A list of publications that resulted from this project is found at the bottom of this page] The proposed project is a study of the collective construction of a candidate's political agenda and political identity during a highly visible and nationally monitored campaign for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. On the basis of ethnographic methods (participant observation, informal interviews) and extensive video recordings of spontaneous interaction between a candidate and his supporters, advisers, family members, and opponents, I plan to write a book that examines the forces that shaped the candidate's daily public presentation of self and limited his attempts to control the political process he originated by his decision to run for office. This analysis will (i) contribute to a model of political discourse in contemporary U.S. and (ii) provide an understanding of the moral dilemmas caused by the decision to assume a new public identity.

Along with other anthropologists (e.g. Ochs 1982; Rosaldo 1983; Rosen 1985, 1995), I have been arguing in the last decade that speakers' control over the meaning of their words has been overestimated in contemporary pragmatic models (Searle 1965, 1983) and that in the real world of human interaction co-authorship is the norm rather than the exception (Duranti 1984, 1988). Speakers not only find themselves quoting (sometimes knowingly other times unknowingly) the words of others, they often also need the collaboration of others to complete their utterances and clarify their meanings. However, once we accept the position that meaning is not simply constructed in a person's mind but can only exist between speakers (Voloshinov 1973), we are left with a number of unresolved issues: how do individual speakers deal with the implications and consequences of collective meaning-making? To what extent can individuals resist the interpretation of their words imposed upon them by other, sometimes more powerful or communicatively more effective agents (e.g. the press)? Despite Edward Sapir's insistence on the importance of the individual in language use and language change, even linguistic anthropologists have done very little to systematically study individual performance and individual expression (Johnston & Bean 1997).

In order to address these issues, we need accurate and extensive recordings of spontaneous speech by the same individuals across situations. Despite the fact that the field of politics is one in which the comparison of people's statements across contexts is a constant source of discussion, the methods by which such comparisons have been made has been either flawed or limited. Politicians' language is typically identified with what they say in public settings (or what printed by their campaign office) and only occasionally do we get to read about a politician's informal remark (most likely when it is a blunder). Despite the fact that students of human interaction have repeatedly shown that speakers' recollections of what they say cannot be trusted, popular books by famous journalists like Bob Woodward (*The Agenda*, *The Choice*) are filled with parts of informal conversations between political characters and their advisers or family members reconstructed from participants' recollections or third parties' stories. Local reporters usually do not follow a candidate from one campaign stop to the next and therefore miss crucial nuances in a candidate's speech like for instance the difference between rehearsed speech and spontaneous exchanges. Those who write for national newspapers tend to write articles based on interviews or already printed material (e.g. by other reporters). With a few exceptions (Fenno 1996), even political scientists rarely spend time on the campaign trail and even more rarely do they work on the basis of accurate transcriptions of what politicians say to different audiences (it is now common to work on the written version of speeches on the Web rather than on the transcript of the actual speeches). Researchers and journalists very rarely have access to exchanges between the candidate and his closest advisers. Even in the popular documentary film *In the War Room*, which provides an unusual opportunity to see how Clinton's staff worked during his first campaign for President, we never see the candidate talking with his advisers. In contrast, the proposed study is based on the recordings of a wide range of spontaneous interactions involving the same candidate across public and private settings.

Between November 1995 and November 1996, I closely followed the political campaign of Walter Capps, an accomplished scholar and charismatic professor of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, whose course on the Vietnam War was featured on "60 Minutes" and attracted over 800 students each time it was offered. Capps ran as a Democrat for the U.S. Congress in the Santa Barbara-San Luis Obispo district, defeated a conservative Republican incumbent (Andrea Seastrand), and went on to serve in

Congress for nine months before suffering a fatal heart attack at the Dulles airport on his way to Capitol Hill. The unrestricted access Capps gave me to the on-stage and the off-stage moments of his campaign allowed me to video record almost 60 hours of tapes filled with his speeches, debates, interviews, and private conversations with family members and advisers. These data provide a rich and unique corpus for the study of a candidate's decision-making process, the progressive shaping of his political message, and the moral dilemmas faced in public and in private arenas.

On the basis of detailed transcriptions of the video tapes, ethnographic fieldnotes, and clips from local and national newspapers, I plan to write a book centered around the different ways in which Capps' discourse was shaped by the type of audience he was addressing. Capps lived the contextual constraints of the public sphere with some distress and often articulated his moral dilemmas in his speeches. He used a lecturing style that invited listeners to reflect on his own predicament: how to be a competent and committed politician without renouncing or damaging his other identities -- Capps the popular teacher, the accomplished scholar, the religious and spiritual man, the head of his extended family.

After reviewing the visual and ethnographic material I collected, I established four thematic foci that will be used as the basis for my analysis:

a) Coherence of self: how does a candidate try to maintain coherence in his public and private personae in the face of such a new and extremely demanding activity as campaigning for public office? In the case of Walter Capps, this issue is lived as a struggle that he often articulated in public, when he talked to his audience about his own motivations, doubts and reservations about running for political office. The videotapes of public debates also provide important glimpses on how the same coherence theme was being articulated by the other candidates in the district.

b) Contextual variation: how do different contexts and, in particular, different audiences, bring out different aspects of a candidate's persona, including moral and religious beliefs, compassion, sense of humor, linguistic ideology? The comparison of different versions of the "same speech" provide a map of a candidate's thinking, his ability to establish a rapport with the audience or resist points of view he didn't share. It also shows that reporters who based their articles on one appearance misinterpreted planned speech for spontaneous speech and missed the irony or humor of a statement that was repeated throughout the day.

c) Intertextuality: Where do forms and contents of political speeches come from? Capps' speeches can be traced to different sources including slogans used by Republicans (e.g. in the "Contract with America") and his own academic writing and teaching. For example, the recording of one of his classes (the last lecture of his very popular course on the Vietnam War) provides us with a rich source of material for comparing his academic lecturing style with his political speaking style.

d) Master narrative: Is there a model of public speaking in political campaigns? Is there a master narrative that all candidates are trying to produce regardless of their political agenda? Capps' participation in public debates with other candidates in the district allows us to compare some of his rhetorical strategies with those of his opponents. The data show that all candidates seem concerned with a small number of key issues (e.g. trust and competence) and all candidates construct a narrative of their "call" to public office, regardless of their political beliefs.

The book will be organized as a story starting on the night before Capps' announcement that he was going to run for office (Nov. 13, 1995) and ending on the day after the election (Nov. 6, 1996) with an interview with the director of a local Spanish radio station where Capps had spoken. Each chapter either introduces or further develops one of the key theoretical issues that inform the narrative.

Walter Capps used to say that "politics is born in conversation" as a way of suggesting that he welcomed dialogue with supporters and opponents. I am using the same phrase to suggest that if we want to understand how a political identity is formed and how the meaning of a candidate's message is constructed, we need to look at the conversations a candidate has with different audiences throughout an entire campaign. Rather than an internal and invisible moral conflict, a candidate's struggle with different identities, allegiances, and beliefs is often played out there on the visible and audible stage of everyday life. The documentation of such a struggle offers us a unique opportunity to understand the process of politicization in contemporary U.S.

Publications that discuss material collected for this project:

- A. Duranti (2003). [The Voice of the Audience in Contemporary American Political Discourse](#). In *GURT 2001: Linguistics, Language, and the Real World: Discourse and Beyond*, ed. by Deborah Tannen. and James E. Alatis. Georgetown University Press, pp. 114-34.
- A. Duranti (2004). Il fare del linguaggio. *Quaderni del ramo d'oro* 6, pp. 149-166.
- A. Duranti. 2006. [Narrating the Political Self in a Campaign for the U.S. Congress](#). *Language in Society* 35(4): 467-97.
- A. Duranti (2007) *Etnopragmatica. La forza nel parlare* (chapters 5 and 7). Roma: Carocci Editore.