Language and politics First steps in preparing a new course

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This course looks at connections between language and politics, including topics such as power, group identity, the importance of language for an effective leader, and the representation of environmental issues in political discourse. We will also consider the politics of a nation having an official language, and the more subtly political issue of enshrining a particular variety of a language as the standard.

This is a one-time experimental course, so it is not a requirement for anyone, and it is not a prerequisite for anything.

Potential pitfalls

- "language and politics" has a wide range of potential meanings, so students may expect something that I think wouldn't fit
- different ideologies might get in the way of civil, constructive classroom discussion
- esp. younger students may not be interested in certain political issues
- some students may also resist getting as analytical as we need to be; they might feel that we are splitting hairs
- the political content needs to be integrated meaningfully with specific tools from linguistics
- it might be too demanding for students to learn all the linguistic elements that I would ideally like them to be able to include in their analyses of political communication
- the content of the course overlaps somewhat with ENG 220, Language and Society, which a few of the students have taken, so that part might seem repetitive to them

Who are the students?

- 9 women, 8 men;
 one or two (at least) are African American;
 7 seniors, 6 sophomores;
 at least 6 have previous coursework in linguistics (these 6 have taken a class with me);
 majors include Anthropology, Applied Science & Tech, Criminal Justice, English (at least 3 of these), International Studies, PR, and Speech Pathology;
 one student is the president of the local chapter (?) of Amnesty International and one person has a minor in Leadership Studies.
- Some background questions I plan to ask at the beginning of the semester
 - What would you say your level of political involvement is?
 - Is there something about political discourse that particularly irritates you or worries you?

- Where do you get your news? (i.e. which websites, TV networks, radio shows, or newspapers) (When the Soviet Union collapsed, I learned about it on Saturday Night Live, so don't feel bad if you don't have something completely impressive to say here. Sometimes we get too busy to keep up with everything.)
- o To what extent do you follow international news?
- One major component of the course will be to practice analyzing political discourse.
 Do you expect this skill to have a particular role in your professional life in the future?
 And in your role as a citizen? If so, how?
- Students could complete the Political Compass (http://www.politicalcompass.org/) questionnaire anonymously and then we could see a plot of the views of the class, something like this:

QuickTime™ and a decompressor are needed to see this picture.

There could be two benefits in this exercise: we can have a sense of who we are talking to in classroom discussions, and, for those who may not have thought about it before, answering the questions can make more explicit the kinds of specifics that political views consist of.

Inclusivity

- start the semester with the kind of ice-breaker that would allow us to get to know each other on a personal level
- by reading the chapters from George Lakoff's *Moral Politics* that explain the progressive and conservative world views, we can see how people we may have perceived as an illogical or maybe even evil "other" actually make sense and mean well, according to their own values

Goals (how I'd like students to be different by the end of the semester)

Having drafted this, I see that the goals for the first major theme (the language of politics) are primarily in the area of skills to acquire, while the goals for the second major theme (the politics of language) are primarily attitudinal. Set up like this, the course looks like it is going to consist of two very different sections. I'm concerned that the whole will not be coherent,

and that switching from one major section of the course to another will be awkward. Not sure what to do about it.

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topic	content	skills	affect/attitude
The language of politics: political communication	My wish list: frames, metaphor, implicature, presupposition, modality, stance, communication accommodation (this may be too much)	Be able to notice the following in political discourse, and analyze the discourse in terms of relevant linguistic characteristics (which are listed in the cell on the left): • how the discourse relates to values and cultural themes • distinguishing explicit statements (or promises) from hints or vague formulations • how speakers construct their social identity • how agency and responsibility show up, both in terms of ○ who is represented as responsible for e.g. negative actions in the past, or future solutions to problems ○ how a speaker claims power through the very act of using language, as with the Egyptian protesters This is not just about content analysis, and it's not just about words. How much corpus linguistics should we do?	Do not limit your analysis of discourse due to filtering through your own political views
The politics of language: the role of social politics in language choice and linguistic correctness	Facts and factions in the debate about English as an official language in the U.S. [What for Standard English?]	 explain and evaluate arguments on this topic articulate the repercussions (i.e. social injustice) 	See language as political; question the common view of English as a beneficial, neutral choice in the world and of standard English as a neutral choice that makes opportunity available to all equally in the U.S.

Vulnerabilities

- For students, it can feel threatening to question their views; the most obvious area where this might come up is political ideology, but it is also likely that students buy into mainstream linguistic ideology about the superiority of standard English in contrast to non-standard varieties (and maybe also the superiority of English in contrast to other languages), and having to question that can be hard.
- Similarly, for me it is uncomfortable to encounter conservative people who (it seems) think and speak according to rules that are completely different from mine. That makes me question what I thought was simply logical and natural.
- It will be important to establish a class culture in which we can make sincere attempts to explain ourselves in a constructive way, and in which people take the time and effort to listen and try to really understand. At the moment, I don't see how to go about using these vulnerabilities to **enhance** learning.

Content, activities, assignments

- The language of politics: for each of the following topic areas, I demonstrate the analysis ("how to"); students then practice in groups in class with another example ("deliberative practice"), and finally analyze a third example on their own as an assignment. I'll try to organize the topic areas from simplest to most complex; feedback on the first analysis they do on their own should help them with the following ones.
 - the language of democracy (government, media, people)
 - o media: give special attention to environmental issues as an example of political discourse to be analyzed
 - o people: Egyptian protesters' signs; U.S. progressives apologizing online to the world for G.W. Bush's re-election
 - guest speaker: Asher John plans to do his dissertation on political discourse in Pakistan; I will invite him to demonstrate an example of an English news story changing when translated into Urdu
 - the language of leadership (president): social identity will be one important aspect of this
 - the language of campaigning
 - o analyze ads, slogans, speeches, cartoons, and satire related to the Republican primary
 - o if candidates come to Muncie, maybe we could go see them as a class
- The politics of language
 - o as a starting point, get a sense of what the students' current attitudes are (again, at least 6 students have taken a course in which these issues are treated extensively)
 - \circ students read about initiatives to establish English as the official language of the U.S.

- o class discussion: compare information from readings with students' initial attitudes; explore reasons on both sides of the debate; discuss repercussions
- o students write a paper
- time permitting, the class discussion and paper could be organized around a case study
- o repeat the process for issues of standardization (the language variety of privileged people gets enshrined as the privileged one: this is a political issue)
- End-of-semester party at my house!

Diversity variables and cognitive authority - I don't have much here yet

- Do people from different backgrounds (socioeconomic status, religion...) vary in terms of how willing they are to criticize politicians and other authorities? I don't know what to expect here, but I can try to stay alert.
- I could invite students to prepare work in forms other than papers: they could draw cartoons, or make videos at xtranormal.com. Such products potentially have a wider audience, and that can be extrinsically rewarding.
- In a way, the subject matter of the course is a natural fit for all participants to claim some cognitive authority, as everyone can offer a legitimate and subjective interpretation of political discourse. However, everyone will should aspire to the standard of using appropriate linguistic tools to support those interpretations.