

THE DIALOGIC EMERGENCE OF 'TRUTH' IN POLITICS  
REPRODUCTION AND SUBVERSION OF THE 'WAR ON TERROR' DISCOURSE

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Truth claims in political discourse are implicated in a dialogic process whereby political actors "assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" prior discourse (Bakhtin 1986:89). While political actors themselves may view truth as an object to be discovered, I argue that discourse analysts are best served by viewing truth as an emergent property of this dialogic process. In this paper, I examine how intertextual connections are integral to both the reproduction and subversion of established truth claims (such as the claims that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction). My data draw from George W. Bush's speech on May 1, 2003 to declare the end of "major combat operations" in Iraq, the first presidential debate between John Kerry and George W. Bush in September 2004, and Joseph Lowery's speech during the Coretta Scott King funeral in February 2006. My analysis examines these data in light of the key phrase "weapons of mass destruction" that forms an intertextual series across these contexts, as well as the role of reported speech in connecting one discursive encounter with another (cf. Voloshinov 1973).

As Bakhtin (1981) notes, discourse "cannot fail to be oriented toward the 'already uttered,' the 'already known,' the 'common opinion' and so forth" (279). In any recontextualization of previous discourse, social actors draw upon pre-existing indexical associations between the intertext and prior contexts. One effect is that repetition may take "what is imitated (repeated) seriously, claiming and appropriating it without relativizing it" (Kristeva 1980:73). In this way, established truth claims are reaffirmed and gain further weight in public debate. Another effect is that repetition may introduce "a signification opposed to that of the other's word" (ibid). Political actors rely on this discursive move to challenge truth claims. Parody figures into such challenges by working to subvert understandings associated with previously uttered words and resignify their social meaning. For example, in his speech at the Coretta Scott King funeral in February 2006, Rev. Joseph Lowery reanimates a phrase ("weapons of mass destruction") linked with the larger "Bush war on terror narrative" (Hodges 2007). His reiteration of this phrase, along with the subsequent play on those words ("weapons of misdirection"), works to undermine truth claims put forth by the Bush administration and establish new social meanings for those words.

The analysis demonstrates that truth in political discourse should not merely be analyzed as the product of the individual style of a politician to persuade or deceive, but as the confluence of various texts and discourses. Meaning and interpretation are always a function of the "ways that the now-said reaches back to and somehow incorporates or resonates with the already-said and reaches ahead to, anticipates, and somehow incorporates the to-be-said" (Bauman 2005:145; cf. Bauman and Briggs 1990). A focus on intertextuality allows the analyst to connect language with the larger interpretive web in which it is embedded and highlight the performative acts (Austin 1962) that bring 'truth' into existence.

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