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Performing politics
From the town hall to the inauguration

Jennifer Sclafani

Political discourse and identity performance

Throughout the course of a campaign, political candidates make hundreds of public appearances, with the goal of connecting with voters, explaining their policy proposals and energising the public to engage in the political process. From town hall meetings to the inaugural ceremony, candidates and electees have multitudinous opportunities to engage directly with constituents, to answer voters’ questions and concerns, and to formally address the public about their visions, priorities and intended actions, if and when they are elected to office.

This chapter argues that all forms of public political (inter)action, from town hall question-answer interactions to inaugural addresses, constitute identity performances whose discursive structure can be fruitfully analysed using tools of interactional sociolinguistics. Much of the existing body of literature within linguistics examining political discourse has come from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), an approach that has traditionally focused on how ‘opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control [are] manifested in language’ (Wodak 1995, p. 204). CDA has made great strides in uncovering how language is used to uphold and reinforce relations of dominance and subordination, especially by ‘elite’ groups in institutions (e.g. Chilton 1996; Fairclough 2001; van Dijk 1993; Reisigl & Wodak 2001). More recently, scholars in this field have investigated the role of discursively constructed political subjectivities – or political selves, to borrow Duranti’s (2006) term – in accomplishing political action (e.g. Carta & Wodak 2015; Charteris-Black 2013; Chilton 2004; Chilton & Schäffner 2002; Wodak 2011). In order for political actions to be accepted (at least in democratic societies) by a majority as ‘necessary’, ‘justified’ or ‘logical’, they must be constructed as originating from political individuals that are deemed in some way ‘trustworthy’, ‘relatable’ and ‘authentic’ (Sclafani 2015; in press). So just how do political individuals manage to convince an electorate that they can be trusted in positions of authority? I suggest that we can answer this question by analysing political performances using tools of interactional sociolinguistics.

It has been argued, especially by scholars of American political communication, that the construction of an authentic political self is of utmost importance (e.g. Duranti 2006;
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Lempert & Silverstein 2012; Stewart 2012; Teven 2008), since both the US voting public and the mass media largely evaluate political candidates, not on the basis of their professional qualifications, voting records, or official positions on policy issues, but on the basis of self-presentation, and specifically on account of a number of qualities related to the candidate’s perceived personal identity. As Polsby et al. (2012) remark:

A candidate is helped by appearing trustworthy, reliable, knowledgeable, mature, empathetic, pious, even-tempered, kind but firm, devoted to family and country, and in every way normal and presentable. To this end, a great deal of campaign activity is devoted to the portrayal of the candidate as a likable person and typical American.

(Polsby et al. 2012, p. 158)

Given both voters’ attention to a candidate’s self-presentation and the related effort and money put into managing political figures’ public images (see, e.g. Hacker 2004), the linguistic basis of self-presentation merits more detailed attention than it has been accorded in the fields of political communication and rhetoric. I offer the perspective that public political discourse can be viewed as discursive performances of identity in which political actors strategically construct themselves as not only knowledgeable and experienced in the positions they currently hold or aim to hold, but that they are trustworthy, relatable and likeable individuals, and hence, worthy leaders.

I do this by first reviewing recent work in socio-cultural linguistics that has addressed political interaction in this way, focusing on work from the past decade on the American political context because of the unique status that personal identity plays in the American political sphere. Next, I review two particularly fruitful concepts central to discourse-analytic approaches to social identity – namely, framing and positioning – and demonstrate how these may be employed in the study of language and politics through case studies of two prominent women in contemporary American politics – US Senator Joni Ernst and former US Secretary of State and (at the time of writing) second-time presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton. Through a brief examination of the way these political figures position themselves and (re)frame interactions in contexts such as town hall meetings, debates, campaign advertisements and speeches, I highlight the fact that political identity is an interactional achievement, which is both strategically crafted as part of a political figure’s brand, but is also emergent and malleable in interactional contexts. I conclude by suggesting fruitful avenues for further study in this field.

Approaches to political identity as performance

The concept of social identity as a performance or an interactional achievement is by no means new in socio-cultural linguistics (e.g. Ochs 1992; 1993) or social theory in general (e.g. Goffman 1959; Berger & Luckmann 1966). However, the various discursive strategies through which identity performances play out, as well as the complex layers of social meaning implicated in such performances, have enjoyed a great deal of attention over the past couple of decades. Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) framework for theorising discursive identity construction identifies key principles associated with the performed and performative nature of identity as opposed to a static, macro-level, analyst-determined category or set of demographic variables. Specifically, they highlight the idea that identity is emergent in interaction, and that both fleeting roles and enduring categories are indexed at multiple levels of discursive structure (see also Ochs 1992, 1993; Silverstein 2003). They also
emphasise that identities are always constructed in relation to a variety of other potential subject positions within the dialectic of structure and agency.

Sociolinguistic studies of political identity have drawn on these principles, illustrating how political subjectivities and stances are performed in a variety of public contexts. Within the variationist perspective, for example, Podesva et al. (2012) have investigated how phonological variables in US English, such as final /-d/ release and vowel qualities, pattern out in the public speeches of former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, demonstrating how these patterns construct her as a politically conservative, professional African American. Hall-Lew, Coppock & Starr (2010), however, have investigated the phonetic construction of political identity at the group level by demonstrating a correlation between political party affiliation and the various pronunciations of the second vowel in the word ‘Iraq’ among members of US Congress.

Given the important interactional function of narrative in positioning the self and others and the construction of socio-cultural worlds (e.g. Bruner 1987; Ochs & Capps 2001; Schiffrin 1996, 2006), narrative analysis has also been influential in the study of political identity construction. Duranti (2006) analyses narrative in US congressional debates, examining how candidates tell stories to construct a ‘political self’, in which they discursively manage two opposing constraints: the need to appear both logical and authentic. In his words, ‘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’ (p. 468). Duranti demonstrates that narrative serves not only in constructing surface-level textual coherence (i.e. cohesion), but in creating ‘existential coherence’ (p. 472), which involves candidates’ presentation of their current actions as natural extensions of the past, and exposing and resolving potential contradictions of character.

Shenhav (2009) also takes a narrative approach to the analysis of political speeches, examining narratives in closing statements of presidential debates. Shenhav argues that qualitative differences in the relative narrativity of closing statements can be correlated with demographic voting patterns as an indicator of ‘the power given by the people to the politicians’. This study takes the important step of considering the dialogueic effects of narrative in political discourse. Hodges (2011) takes a similar approach, examining how one hegemonic narrative of recent US history – that is, the story of the ‘War on Terror’ – was shaped and reshaped, circulated and resisted in presidential speeches and media discourse during the US war in Iraq, and how the narrative was received and entextualised in talk about post-9/11 politics among college students. Focusing on pragmatic features such as presupposition, entailment and poetic structures, Hodges demonstrates how narrative serves in the process of discursively constructing Al Qaeda and Iraq as linked antagonists, while portraying US military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq as causally and temporally linked events in the larger War on Terror.

Intertextual discourse analysis has been particularly illuminating in the study of political performance as it highlights connections across disparate speech events, speakers and discursive contexts, and helps us understand how political figures create existential coherence. Austermühl (2014) also uses intertextuality as a framework to analyse presidential discourse and American identity in the inaugural speeches of US presidents. He shows that linguistic features such as personal pronouns, generic conventions and themes, and direct quotation, establish and reaffirm an overarching presidential identity over time and across individual presidents, thus creating, in Ausermühl’s words, a historical ‘scaffold’ for a timeless national identity.
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While intertextual analyses have highlighted how political identities are consolidated over time, and between public and private contexts, other approaches have incorporated insights relating to face maintenance and linguistic politeness (Goffman 1967; Brown & Levinson 1987) in order to better understand how political actors manage their self-presentation locally, especially in interactional genres of political discourse, such as political interviews and debates. For example, Beck (1996) and Clayman (2001) have employed tools of conversation analysis to demonstrate that sequential aspects of talk and floor management in these genres have an important bearing on how political figures manage their identity construction. Clayman (2001) examines question-and-answer pairs in political interviews, illuminating interviewees’ tactics of question evasion as they ‘gain substantial “wiggle room” for pursuing their own agendas even under the most persistent interrogation’ (p. 439). Beck (1996), however, examines similar strategies in a vice-presidential debate, finding that different conversational floor-management tactics affect viewers’ impressions of candidates’ relative leadership potential.

Other studies have taken multimodal approaches to the analysis of political performances, considering how non-verbal communication, including gesture and posture, work in concert with linguistic strategies to construct political personae. Lempert (2011) (see also Lempert & Silverstein 2012) provides a nuanced analysis of former President Barack Obama’s ‘precision-grip’ gesture, showing how an information focus-marking gesture can contribute toward indexing the social act of making a ‘sharp’ or ‘effective’ point. Lempert argues that such indexical meanings furthermore accrete over time to construct the speaker’s personal qualities, thus contributing to the politician’s ‘brand’ as a sharp, effective speaker.

Another multimodal consideration of political performance is offered by Sheldon (2015), who examines the intersection of linguistic and embodied identity acts performed by Hillary Rodham Clinton in a town hall speech during her 2008 presidential campaign, in which she reacts to a heckler’s sexist remarks. Sheldon shows that despite the rehearsed and predictable nature of the town hall speech, there are, nonetheless, occasions for impromptu identity management, and that Clinton successfully capitalises on the disruption in order to reframe the unexpected event as an opportunity to call attention to, and disrupt, dominant ideologies that normalise misogyny in the US political sphere. Sheldon’s analysis also reveals how the unique participation format of the town hall speech – with audience members supporting her both in the audience and behind her on stage – reinforce the candidate’s self-presentation as a cool yet powerful persona. Given Clinton’s status as the most-recognised and most-accomplished woman in contemporary US politics, and the continued discussion over the role and perception of women in positions of power in US political life, I will continue this line of inquiry by examining another case in which Hillary Rodham Clinton had to manage her identity by reframing an interaction below (p. 403).

Interactional sociolinguistic frameworks: framing and positioning

There are clear links between the studies summarised thus far in terms of both their approaches in viewing political performances as interactional achievements and the assumptions they make about the relationship between (political) speaking figures and (voting) hearers. Interactional sociolinguistics, an approach to discourse analysis grounded in the work of John Gumperz (e.g. 1982) and Erving Goffman (e.g. 1959, 1974, 1981), highlights these themes through its focus on the situated nature of meaning-making and its view of language as a form of social action that has tangible effects on social identities and relations between speakers, hearers and contexts of talk. The study of language and politics
benefits from viewing public political interaction through the lens of interactional sociolinguistics because it grounds language in dialogic interaction, even when the data under investigation may seem relatively monologic on the surface (e.g. as in a scripted presidential address or a campaign advertisement). In other words, political discourse is always interactional in that language is used to persuade a voting public that a political actor’s actions and positions are justified. Politicians also use language to respond to feedback they have received from the public through media coverage and polling data. Because interactional sociolinguistics links language structures and their interactional functions to broader conceptual phenomena, such as knowledge schemas and cultural expectations (Tannen & Wallat 1993), this approach also allows us to bridge micro and macro levels of context in the study of language and society. In what follows, I explain and illustrate the utility of two interactional sociolinguistic concepts – framing and positioning – in the study of political discourse as identity performance.

Framing and reframing in political interaction

Framing is a concept that has been widely applied in studies of individual and group identity construction and in the interpersonal negotiation of meaning. The notion of a ‘frame’, first put forth by Gregory Bateson (1972), was developed by Goffman (1974) in an attempt to explicate the nature of intersubjective engagement in social interaction. Frames are defined as the definition that individuals attribute to a situation – for example, ‘this is play’ or ‘this is work’. As such, frames play a central role in structuring interaction because they provide an interpretive scaffold on which speakers and hearers rely in order to produce and interpret meaning from linguistic, paralinguistic and non-verbal cues. Frames govern pragmatic interpretations of language use in the immediate interactional context, they guide participants’ expectations of what is to occur in the following talk and they retrospectively shape understandings of what has occurred in the preceding talk. For example, first-name introductions set the expectation that the following encounter is friendly, informal, or outside an institutional setting, while ending a conversation with the expression ‘that’s what she said!’ reframes a prior utterance (with a presumably innocent illocutionary force) as a sexual innuendo.

Framing is important for understanding political performances because much of what political figures do in their public performances is project, uphold and reinforce a sense of their political self in a certain social world full of problems that can be ameliorated by individuals in their roles as elected leaders. As such, they must draw on a variety of available resources within the particular socio-political field to construct their identities as credible leaders. I have shown elsewhere that US presidential candidates use their identities as mothers, fathers and grandfathers – that is, as effective leaders within their families – as a widely relatable leadership role that frames their projected role in leading the nation (Sclafani 2015). When such ‘transportable’ identities (Zimmerman 1998) are not available to candidates, or they could jeopardise the identity that they wish to project, candidates may borrow other available identities to construct an alternative type of leader, thus reframing the presidential self.

Framing and reframing have been analysed as key political communication strategies, most notably discussed by G Lakoff (2014 [2004]), as well as others analysing metaphors as conceptual framing devices in political and media discourse (e.g. Charteris-Black 2013; Chilton 1996; Santa Ana 2002). However, scholars of political discourse have largely focused on frames in the abstract cognitive sense and have ignored frames as an interactional
achievement that are open to negotiation. Sheldon’s (2015) analysis of Hillary Rodham Clinton’s town hall address, summarised earlier (p. 401), is an exception in this regard, as she describes in great detail how Clinton’s verbal and non-verbal reaction to a disruptive audience member reframes an unexpected move that could have potentially derailed her performance as an opportunity to openly address broader issues of sexism in the US political sphere.

The speech that Sheldon analyses is by no means an exceptional situation, although considering Clinton’s political trajectory and the ‘double bind’ for women in politics more generally (following R Lakoff 2004 [1975]; see also Jamieson 1995), the discursive balancing act that a figure such as Clinton must regularly perform may have an intensified semiotic potential. Given the prominence of Hillary Clinton in the US political sphere over the past two decades due to both her individual achievements and the intense public scrutiny she has received in her political and familial roles, I now turn to another episode in which Clinton was forced to interactively reframe a conversation and her gender-political identity. The context I examine is a 2008 nationally televised presidential primary debate in which Clinton was questioned by the debate co-moderator about her disputed ‘likability’.

Framing case study: Clinton’s ‘That hurts my feelings’

One of the most talked-about moments of the 2008 Democratic primary election cycle was the 5 January debate between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton at St Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire, aired on ABC, in which co-moderator Scott Spradling asked Clinton the following question:

(1) 2008 Democratic Primary Debate¹

Spradling: The University of New Hampshire Survey Center has been consistently trying to probe the minds of New Hampshire voters and get a sense of what they think about all of you. I’d be happy to report that the experience vs. change debate seems to be sinking it… My question to you is simply this: What can you say to the voters of New Hampshire on this stage tonight, who see your resume and like it, but are hesitating on the likability issue, where they seem to like Barack Obama more.

Clinton: Well that hurts my feelings. {Clinton closes eyes and grimaces ironically; laughter in audience}

Spradling: I’m sorry, Senator. {Continued laughter, scattered applause.} I’m sorry.

Clinton: But I’ll try to go on. {Laughter.} He’s very likable. I- I agree with that. I don’t think I’m that bad.

Obama: You’re likable enough, Hillary. No doubt [about it.

Clinton: [Thank you, I appreciate that. {Bobbling head humorously} You know, I think this is one of the most serious decisions that the voters of New Hampshire have ever had to make. And I really believe that the most important question is, who is ready to be president on day one?…you know, in 2000 we, unfortunately, ended up with a president who people said they wanted to have a beer with… So I am offering 35 years of experience making change and the results to show for it… But I think if you want to know what change each of us will bring about, look at what we’ve done.

(5 January Obama & Clinton debate, New Hampshire, ABC 2008)

In this excerpt, Spradling’s question regarding Clinton’s likability constitutes an abrupt topic/focus transition from his previous statement about the debate theme of ‘experience
versus change’. The only cohesive device tying his question regarding Clinton’s likability to his previous statement is his reference to her ‘resume’ (which highlights her more extensive experience in national politics than her opponent), which Spradling posits that New Hampshire voters ‘like’. This assertion, which is embedded in a non-restrictive clause, sets up a contrast with his next assertion – that voters ‘seem to like Obama more’. This question challenges Clinton’s presentation of self – specifically threatening what is referred to in theories of linguistic politeness as her ‘positive face’ (Brown & Levinson 1987) – by calling into question an aspect of her identity that cannot be refuted by any of her professional credentials that qualify her for the presidency. This question is perhaps the most illustrative example of the double bind for women in politics: Clinton, despite her extensive experience in the male-dominated political arena, and perhaps because of it, is cast as ‘unlikable’ precisely because, according to dominant ideologies of gender and leadership, femininity and political power mix like oil and water.

Clinton’s response to this question is reminiscent of her reaction in the event that Sheldon analyses. Rather than visibly ‘losing her cool’ in the face of thinly masked sexism, she responds by reframing the conversation, enacting a play frame in response to an ostensibly serious question. By answering with ‘Well that hurts my feelings’, Clinton plays into the subtext of the question, which highlights one side of the double bind – that is, a powerful woman isn’t likeable because powerful isn’t ‘feminine’ – by bringing into relief the other side of the double bind: to present the self as likably feminine, it is necessary to display powerlessness.

And what would a powerless woman do in the face of such an accusation? She would bow down. And Clinton pretends to do just this: her verbal response – ‘Well that hurts my feelings’ – conjures up the stereotypical, powerless woman who lacks emotional control (Lutz 1994). Her embodied response, however – the ironic grimace cued by the closed, dismissive eyes – indicates that her feelings are in fact not hurt at all, and that she is just playing the script that has been set up by the moderator’s question for the amusement of the audience. The laughter and applause in the co-present audience that follow signal to the viewer of the televised event that the ironic keying and frame shift has been understood.

Clinton then continues in the play frame, stating ‘but I’ll try to go on’ (i.e. as if her feelings were so hurt that she might have otherwise quit right then). She then performs a series of moves that could be considered a threat to her own face: she acknowledges the moderator’s claim that Obama is ‘likable’ (a calculated ‘very’, but not ‘more’) and makes a self-deprecating remark, ‘I don’t think I’m that bad’ – which sets Obama up to pay her a compliment. Obama indeed takes this serve, responding ‘You’re likeable enough, Hillary’ (also calculated!), for which she thanks him, still displaying her footing within a play frame through the embodied cues of smiling and head bobbling.

The frame shifts abruptly when Clinton declares, ‘You know, I think this is one of the most serious decisions that the voters of New Hampshire have ever had to make’. Her explicit reference to this ‘serious decision’ brings the previous non-serious exchange to a close and marks her following talk as a return to the matrix frame of the debate. She then contrasts the two topics embedded in the moderator’s questions – the ‘experience vs. change’ issue and the ‘likable character’ issue – by comparing the electorate’s previous presidential choice as an ‘unfortunate’ one based on character, contrasting it with her own identity as a candidate whose experience illustrates change.

This example of interactional reframing works to Clinton’s benefit, as it did in the town hall meeting analysed by Sheldon, by providing her the opportunity to confront and ridicule implicitly sexist challenges to her character and her compatibility, particularly as a woman, with arguably the most powerful leadership position in the world.
Positioning political identity

Positioning theory, which hails from the field of discursive psychology, is another framework that has been widely applied in discourse-analytic approaches to identity performance. First articulated by Davies and Harré (1990) and developed in Harré and van Langenhove (1999), positioning is presented as a ‘mutually determining triad’ connecting subject positions with ‘relatively determinate speech acts’ and broader ‘story-lines,’ within which, subject positions can be understood as discursively negotiating coherent selves and others. Originally conceived of as dialogically grounded in conversation, positioning theory enables an analysis of how micro-level interactional identities relate to broader ideologies and cultural archetypes (e.g. Bamberg 1997; De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012).

Positioning has been particularly useful in the study of narrative and interaction. Bamberg’s extension (1997; see also Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008) elaborates on how positions emerge at three structural levels in the analysis of narratives: (1) within the story-world of the narrative; (2) in the interactional context of narration, and (3) in relation to the individual’s own identity as it extends beyond the narrative, in relation to dominant discourses and ideologies, which reflexively lend coherence to the lower-level story-world and interactional contexts. As such, positioning analysis also offers a solution to the dialectic between micro-level and macro-level styles of discourse analysis. As De Fina (2013) argues, ‘positioning analysis… offers a middle ground between approaches to identity that keep a very narrow focus on the here and now of interactions (such as Conversation-Analysis-influenced studies) and orientations that focus much more on wide social processes such as the circulation of ideologies and the exercise of control over social and cultural roles’ (p. 43).

Positioning theory provides a useful scaffolding for the analysis of political identity since any politician’s performance can be seen as an attempt to actively position themselves as a certain type of person in relation to a particular audience, and at the same time, as a response to the way they have been positioned by others, including both individuals (e.g. other candidates) and collectives (e.g. the media). In effect, any political performance creates subject positions (both self and other) through speech acts, and not forgetting the third point in the positioning triad, also constructs a larger ‘story-line’ or social world against which these positions can be read. Taking into account these three levels, candidates may construct themselves and others: (1) within the stories they tell; and (2) to counteract and resist previous acts of positioning done to them. At level (3), political performances reinforce particular story-lines about the nation as a whole, while potentially suppressing or erasing alternative narratives that have surfaced, or may surface, in public discourse.

Positioning case study: Ernst’s ‘Give me a shot’

In order to illustrate how positioning might be applied to the analysis of political performance, I provide a case study of junior US Senator Joni Ernst, the first woman to represent the state of Iowa in the US Congress and the first female veteran in the US Senate. Less than a month after assuming office in January 2015, Ernst was showcased as a major new voice within the Republican Party when she provided the Republican rebuttal to the 2015 Presidential State of the Union Address. Here, I develop an argument made by McCrimlisk (ND) in her narrative analysis of Ernst’s senatorial campaign advertisements by illustrating how positioning theory sheds light on how Ernst strategically employs narrative subjectivities to position herself in relation to both her immediate audience as well as dominant ideologies of gender and leadership.
McCrimlisk’s study shows how the use of both first and third-person narration in Ernst’s campaign advertisements enable her to ‘construct an image linked to both traditionally male-associated traits and traditionally female-associated traits without sacrificing her existential coherence’ (citing Duranti 2006). McCrimlisk illustrates that the two narrators in Ernst’s advertisements – Ernst herself and an unknown male voice – are able to emphasise different aspects of Ernst’s personal identity in order to negotiate the double bind that female candidates (and especially those with extensive military experience and leadership credentials) face when trying to project a strong, yet relatable, identity to voters.

Here, I focus on one third-person narrated campaign advertisement entitled ‘Give me a shot’, which is published on Ernst’s campaign website and YouTube channel. The spoken text and a description of the accompanying visual imagery of the 30-second advertisement, which aired throughout Iowa during the 2014 election cycle, is provided in the following transcript.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Spoken Text</th>
<th>Imagery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male Narrator</td>
<td>She’s not your typical candidate.</td>
<td>{lower body view} Person pulls up to closed white garage door on a motorcycle, wearing jeans and leather bomber jacket.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Conservative Joni Ernst. Mom. Farm girl. And a Lieutenant Colonel who carries more than just lipstick in her purse.</td>
<td>Joni Ernst will take aim at wasteful spending.</td>
<td>{close-up of handgun} Ernst loads handgun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Joni’s gonna unload.</td>
<td>And once she sets her sights on Obamacare, {6 shots fired}</td>
<td>{from front} Ernst aims handgun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Joni doesn’t miss much.</td>
<td>Oh, and one more thing:</td>
<td>{Close-up of target} Target advances toward camera; reveals 15 holes, all in bulls-eye range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ernst</td>
<td>Give me a shot. I’m Joni Ernst and I approve this message.</td>
<td>{Profile of Ernst, direct gaze into camera}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Ernst 2014)

This advertisement, which received heightened media attention (e.g. Sullivan 2014; Wysocki 2014) because of the ‘gun-happy’ image it presents of Ernst, is a particularly illustrative example of positioning as an analytical tool because, like the examples of Clinton described above, it seeks to navigate the double bind of traditional femininity and political leadership – this time, not through the candidate’s interactional reframing but via third-person narrative.

In order to see how this is accomplished, let us first break down the analysis of this advertisement into the three positioning levels, beginning with story-world positions. In this advertisement, Ernst is presented linguistically in an oppositional manner, as ‘not your typical candidate’, followed by a list of identity categories: ‘conservative’, ‘mom’, ‘farm girl’, and ‘a lieutenant colonel who carries more than just lipstick in her purse’ (i.e. she also carries a handgun). This text reconfigures aspects of Ernst’s personal identity that may seem inconsistent
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according to dominant ideologies of gender and leadership as a political advantage, rendering Ernst as independent, iconoclastic, and authentic (i.e. as a ‘maverick’, a salient identity category within the Republican Party, especially following the 2008 presidential campaign of John McCain). As such, this first-level positioning also contributes to third-level positioning by constructing Ernst as a particular type of Republican, and one that is consistent with party leaders of the recent past, such as former presidential candidate John McCain. Such positioning of individual candidates along a broader trajectory of the nation’s political history, as has been analysed elsewhere (Austermühl 2014; Sclafani 2015), contributes not only to the existential coherence of the political individual, but also the larger political party.

Let us now consider the interactional level, at which the unidentified male narrator provides the description of Ernst to the viewing audience. At this level, Ernst is not only constructed as an authentic character, but as one that has been authenticated by a third party (Bucholtz & Hall 2005), and importantly, by a voice that is associated with traditional male-linked ideologies of power. As McCrimlisk has argued, the use of the third-person narrator in this ad allows Ernst to portray a ‘tough’ image of herself through the voice of another, which contrasts sharply with linguistic strategies employed in her first-person narrated campaign advertisements. This strategy accomplishes political identity work that Ernst could not perform on her own, circumventing the double bind of presenting herself as both feminine and powerful. The third-person narration in this interactional context also allows the advertisement to anticipate and address viewers’ potential scepticism by explicitly acknowledging these potential contradictions through oppositional language and syntactic negation (‘not your typical candidate,’ ‘who carries more than just lipstick,’ ‘doesn’t miss much’), a hallmark intertextual strategy of advertising discourse (Fairclough 1995, 2001).

These second-level positioning strategies also contribute to the third level of positioning, in which individual identities are made recognisable as broader archetypes and individual stories are recognised in relation to dominant cultural narratives. Specifically, the intertextual strategy of using negation to describe what Ernst is not encourages viewers to consider how Ernst stands out as a unique individual within the history of her political party. Given that women as national leaders within the US Republican Party have been few and far between, the average American voter viewing Ernst’s campaign advertisement is likely to draw a comparison between Ernst and former Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, which the negation and comparative syntax used in this advertisement seems to address. By introducing the candidate first as ‘conservative,’ ‘mom,’ and ‘farm girl,’ the similarities between Ernst and former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin are highlighted. However, when the advertisement continues to say that Ernst ‘carries more than just lipstick in her purse,’ the distinction between Ernst and Palin is clear. The specific lexical choice of lipstick as a metonym for traditional powerless femininity here may be a direct intertextual reference to one of the most famous ‘Palinisms’ during the 2008 election season, in which Palin told a joke at a campaign event about lipstick being the one differentiating factor between aggressive ‘hockey moms’ (including herself) and pit bulls.

In essence, the broader identity work being accomplished in this advertisement involves constructing Ernst as a powerful, conservative, female leader who embodies a Republican ‘type’ deemed valuable by dominant party ideologies, but distant enough from a recent instantiation of that type who was widely illegitimated in public discourse. This brief analysis of Ernst’s campaign advertisement illustrates the utility of the three-tiered positioning framework for examining political discourse as identity performances and demonstrates how interactional sociolinguistics provides a dialogical perspective on what has been considered a relatively monologic genre of public discourse.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that all forms of political interaction, from interactive town hall meetings to monologic inaugural addresses, can be viewed as identity performances. I have summarised recent studies in sociolinguistics and CDA that have examined various linguistic and embodied features of political performances, and I have proposed that the interactional sociolinguistic frameworks of framing and positioning offer useful insight into how political identities are co-constructed interactively in public discourse. I have illustrated these perspectives with brief analyses of how two prominent women in contemporary American politics have navigated the double bind of presenting themselves as strong leaders while attending to potential conflicts imposed by hegemonic gender ideologies. I demonstrated that while Clinton extemporaneously co-opted the stereotype of the defenceless woman to ironically reframe a serious political debate as a matter of ‘hurt feelings’ in order to bring to the surface the latent sexism present in her interlocutor’s speech, Ernst employed a third-person male narrator in her campaign advertisement to authenticate her maverick identity while it simultaneously distanced her from earlier, less successful female candidates from her party on the national political scene.

While I have chosen to examine the performance of political identities that have been rendered problematic because of conflicting dominant ideologies of gender and leadership, it should be emphasised that frame analysis and positioning theory are much more widely applicable to the study of political identity construction, as all political performances involve a double bind of some sort. Any successful political actor must present himself or herself as trustworthy of holding the leadership position in question, while also coming off as relatable to a wide swath of voters, so presenting an authentically consistent, yet mutable and context-dependent, persona is essential. Political actors must also navigate how their political identities as leaders are both coherent with a broader group identity (i.e. of the party, of the state and of the nation), but are also distinguishable as emanating from an individual subject position. The discursive resolution of contradictions such as these – same yet different, old but new, individual but part of a collective – are the stuff of which political rhetoric is made, and detailed attention to the linguistic devices for performing, justifying and transforming tenable political identities in the face of these oppositions should be a central objective in the study of language and politics.

Notes

1 Ellipses indicate stretches of speech omitted for the sake of brevity. The full official transcript of the debate can be found here: www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=76224.

2 It should be noted that the sense of ‘positioning’ discussed here is distinct from the concept of ‘subject position’ in the tradition of Althusser and Foucault in that it focuses on the emergence of identities in conversational interaction rather than the ideological workings of state apparatuses.

3 At the time of writing, the video is available here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3mG9fNOZp4.

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