

The voice of the audience in contemporary American political discourse¹

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In the past two decades, terms such as “co-construction,” “intersubjectivity,” and “negotiation of meaning” have become very popular in discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. The basic assumption has been that it is always the case that a person’s words are not simply the expression of privately owned ideas and individually controlled thoughts; they also are a by-product of interactions and contextual conditions that must be documented for any researcher to be able to say how a given stretch of talk came to be the way it is and how it is interpreted by its recipients. Some of the best cases of co-construction have been documented by conversation analysts, who also coined the term “recipient design” to convey the idea that speakers’ formulation of referents and events must always take the addressee into consideration. Because of this requirement, talk also can be used to get a sense of speakers’ own understanding of their audience’s knowledge (e.g., Schegloff 1972; Goodwin 1979, 1981).

To date, however, there has been very limited documentation of spontaneous events in which the same speaker addresses different audiences with roughly the same communicative goals (e.g., to tell the same story, make the same promise, give the same advice, tell the same joke). Whereas analysis of variation-on-a-theme is common in musicology and ethnomusicology, whereby different performances of the same song or the same harmonic structure are routinely compared (e.g., Lord 1960; Berliner 1994), analysts of talk rarely have the data, let alone the interest, to analyze how the same narrative or speech act changes over time and space (for some exceptions, see Bauman 1986; Tannen and Wallat 1986; and Philips 1992 for spontaneous discourse and Chafe 1980 for a semi-experimental situation). Given the pervasiveness and importance of repetition within the same conversation (Tannen 1987, 1989) and the belief—at least among some linguists—that much of what appears spontaneous invention in language use in fact might be repetition of already heard speech (Bolinger 1961: 381), the lack of interest and documentation of repetition across speech events is quite puzzling. Possible explanations for this gap include the tendency to focus on “language,” “speaking,” or “talk” and, more frequently, on specific forms rather than individual speakers’

performance across time and space (Johnstone 1996); the practical and ethical problems associated with recording the same individual speaker throughout the continuous and sufficiently lengthy span of time that would allow researchers to find examples of the same linguistic material recycled in different contexts; the low statistical likelihood of recording spontaneous repetition of the same linguistic material across events, with the exception of phonological segments deprived of denotative meaning, as quantitative sociolinguists have done; and doubts about whether variation analysis can be extended to denotative meaning at all (Lavandera 1978; Romaine 1984).

As I show in this essay, documentation of the speeches by the same political candidate over the course of a campaign can offer a solution to some of these problems. As a candidate moves through a district or state, we can assess changes in his or her slogans, analyses, stories, and jokes across time and space. This type of variation not only gives us a sense of how speakers adapt or “design” their speech for particular audiences, it also gives us a glimpse of the role played by members of the audience in shaping the form and content of a person’s talk. By comparing different versions of what can be considered as the same stories, assessments, promises, attacks, questions, answers, and introductions, we have a chance to evaluate the extent to which candidates adapt to or resist the audience’s wishes. More important, we also get a glimpse of a struggle that all speakers must face, yet becomes particularly conspicuous in political arenas—namely, the struggle to maintain control of one’s goals and values while trying to win the favor of the widest range of people.

For political candidates who are seeking approval, it is quite easy to move closer and closer toward the ideal projected by their audience responses and to lose touch with their own original plans and aspirations. The issue of authorship (e.g., who is the author of this message, its premises, its implications, its consequences?) becomes, in very concrete ways, the issue of the coherence of the self.

I approach the topic of intersubjectivity with this particular issue in mind. In the anthropological tradition of person-centered ethnography, I take a sympathetic rather than an adversarial or critical view of a political candidate’s (in this case, Walter Capps’) struggle over the meaning of his words, and I use the tools of my trade (ethnographically informed discourse analysis) to identify the methods he used in dealing with some of the dilemmas encountered by anyone seeking public office.

The Capps-for-Congress Campaign

In 1995–96 I had the opportunity to document the political campaign of Walter Capps, a professor of religious studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB), for the U.S. Congress. I first met Capps in the summer of 1994 through his daughter Lisa, then a graduate student in psychology at UCLA who was interested in ethnographic methods. At the time of our first meeting, Walter Capps was running his first campaign for Congress. I met him again in

January 1995. By then he had lost to Republican Andrea Seastrand (a former California Assemblywoman) by less than 1 percent of the vote. I asked him whether he would run again, given that, I confessed, I would love to follow him around with my video camera. He said that if he decided to run again, he would call me. A few months later he did. He told me then that, although some of the people on his staff were a bit apprehensive about my project, he saw no problems having a video camera record his interactions throughout the campaign. If anything, he seemed intrigued by the idea of documenting the political process and comforted by the prospect of having a fellow academic next to him while he engaged in this new adventure, toward which he had complex feelings—which I would not hesitate to characterize as a mixture of fascination and aversion, depending on the situation.

Over a period of twelve months (November 1995 to November 1996), I spent as much time as I could driving up and down the central coast of California, recording Capps at debates, rallies, and fundraising events, as well as in more intimate moments, in the car or at home. By November 6, 1996, I had collected a thick notebook of field notes and more than fifty hours of videotapes that showed Capps interacting with staff members, family members, journalists, opponents, and government officials (including George Stephanopolous, Bill Clinton, and Hillary Rodham Clinton). Throughout the campaign, Capps continued to be a strong supporter of my project and never asked me to turn off the camera even during the most private conversations. (The only times I was not allowed to record were related to the foreseen or actual reactions of other participants involved in the interaction, not Capps' own concern for privacy.) After a close and nationally monitored race, Capps won the 1996 election and served in Congress until October 28, 1997, when he suffered a fatal heart attack at Dulles Airport on his way to Capitol Hill. His wife Lois, who had provided continuous emotional support and political advice throughout both campaigns and had followed him in Washington, ran for the same seat and won. She was reelected in 1998 and 2000.

Among the large corpus of transcriptions that this documentation produced, I concentrate on a small subset of the verbal interactions recorded during the first official day of the campaign—November 14, 1995—when Capps announced his candidacy to groups of supporters and potential voters at several places in the 22nd District of California (Santa Barbara-San Luis Obispo).

Designing a Joke for Different Audiences

I start from what we already know: Speakers fashion their speech in ways that make it interpretable by their listeners, and in so doing they display their understanding of audience needs and wishes while activating situationally significant frames (e.g., private versus public identities). The most important work in this area has been done by conversation analysts, who introduced and employed the notion of “recipient design” to highlight in particular the fact that speakers, in

choosing among several alternative descriptions (e.g., here, my office, my house, Los Angeles, California, the United States) display their knowledge of and sensitivity to specific interlocutors (recipients) (Schegloff 1972; Sacks and Schegloff 1979; Sacks 1992). In some cases, as shown by Goodwin (1979, 1981), speakers can even change the meaning of their utterances in midstream to make it relevant to the particular individual who is actively listening (e.g., the individual who is gazing at the speaker at the moment).

I often was reminded of this sensitivity to the audience in designing one's talk while following Walter Capps around during his campaign. He was constantly editing his speeches, adding some phrases and paragraphs, deleting others, making some new connections, and adjusting transitions from one point to the next. Between stops—especially in the privacy afforded by the car rides with his wife Lois and some of his closest associates—Capps often discussed the logic and content of his verbal performance, showing a keen interest in whether he was reaching out to the audience. In going from one stop to the next he made small but potentially consequential modifications around the same theme or point. His ability to adjust and revise his speech must have been nurtured by a very successful teaching career at UCSB. (His “Religion and Politics” course enrolled more than 1,000 students, and his course on the Vietnam War—the first of its kind in the United States—had reached enrollment of as many as 860.) As I had a chance to see again and again throughout the campaign, Capps was quite receptive to the pulse of his audience, and he knew not only how to build an argument but also how to tell a story that would make the argument come alive for his listeners. He was not always right in his expressive choices or his timing, but he was constantly engaged in predicting and assessing audience responses. From my experience in watching Capps deliver his speeches and then reflecting on them, there is no question in my mind that he tried to learn as much as possible from each performance and tried to put what he learned into practice in the next appearance on the campaign trail.

One of the most revealing examples of Capps' ability to assess his audience's knowledge and evaluate their preferences is provided by the different versions of an account of his itinerary that he offered on the first official day of his second campaign. The first version of the itinerary-narrative is delivered in Paso Robles—the northern tip of the 22nd district—after he has concluded his speech, thanked the audience, and asked first his wife Lois and then the rest of the Capps-for-Congress team (consisting of his brother Doug, his nephew Lindsey, and two campaign staff members, Bryant Winnecke and Thu Fong) to stand next to him before they leave for the next stop of the day. In this context, the itinerary-narrative is delivered as an afterthought or coda to his speech, a way of closing the event. As is common in these situations, the information about the places he is going to next also works as an excuse for having to leave. The itinerary-narrative employs repetition as well as syntactic and semantic parallelism, which includes

the temporal conjunction *then* and four tense/aspect formats that project future actions: the future form *we're gonna go*, the present progressive *we're goin'*, the present form *we go*, and the future *we'll. . .go*. In each case, the verb is followed by the name of a location. As shown in (1), as Capps finishes the list of places where he and his team will be going to make the announcement of his candidacy, he introduces a type of location that constitutes a violation of the implicit type defined by the previous locations. The breaking of the frame, i.e. the adding of an item of the list that is incongruent with the previous items (Beeman 2001), produces a well-timed joke that evokes a good laughter from the audience.²

- (1) (November 14, 1995, Paso Robles, CD1.51m:54s)
- W. Capps: (well) we're gonna get in the car here in a minute
 because- uh because we're gonna go now to uh-
 we're gonna go to: San Luis Obispo, . . .
 then we're goin' to Santa Maria, . . .
 then we go to Santa Barbara, . . .
 then we go to Lompoc, . . .
 then we go to Buelton, . . .
 then we go to:- Solvang. . . .
 and then I think- uh after ((fast ->)) we'll probably go to bed.
- Audience: ((loud laughter)) HA!! HEHEHE!

There are two properties of the punch line that I want to focus on briefly. The first is that the punch line is audience-designed, and the second is that it is spontaneous. By *audience-designed*, I mean to say that the joke is produced to be understood and approved by this particular audience, which is made up mostly of senior citizens. The breaking of the frame is accomplished by mentioning an activity (“going to bed”) that maintains the syntactic and semantic frame “go to + NOUN” of the last four clauses while contrasting in several ways: “bed” is not like the other locations—that is, instead of being the name of a city or town, it is a common noun that is part of an idiom “(to) go to bed,” which requires a different type of “going”; it describes an ordinary as opposed to special activity; it introduces a private as opposed to a public space; and, as such, it implies a different set of activities (resting and sleeping are the most obvious, but also—for at least some listeners—other, more intimate, acts are suggested). The resounding laughter that the joke receives suggests that the audience gets some pleasure out of the breaking of expectations constituted by the “go to bed” punch line. This

response, I believe, is the strongest evidence of the hypothesis that the joke is appropriately designed for this particular crowd: mostly older and retired people, who certainly can sympathize with the fact that one might be tired after having to go to all the places Capps mentioned and for whom the connotation of intimate contact, if perceived, would not be regarded as problematic.

The second property I want to discuss briefly is the degree of spontaneity of the joke. I suspect that this joke had not been planned with the rest of the speech but was inspired by the long and repetitive structure that Capps himself had just produced. The evidence for this claim is circumstantial. At the second stop, in San Luis Obispo, when Capps had his written speech in front of him, the itinerary-narrative showed up again—but this time it was placed at the very beginning of the speech and did not have a humorous resolution. Instead, Capps inserted a conclusion-summary at the end of the list of places (“we’ll be doing this the entire day”) and then quickly moved into his (first) two announcements.

(2) (November 14, 1995, San Luis Obispo,
CD2.14m:50s)

W. Capps: Thi- this is the uh- the third stop of a: .. of a-a full day.
of making- of making this announcement.=
=we started in San Miguel this morning. uh,
we’ve just come from Paso Robles. uh
after this we’ll go to. Santa Maria
and on to Santa Barbara.
then we go into Lompoc
and back to Buelton
and Solvang=
=we’ll be doing this the entire day=but I came here-
I came here actually to make two announcements. [. . .]

The humorous punch line returns, however, in Santa Maria, at Hancock College, and at UCSB—two situations in which Capps addresses audiences that are made up mostly of students. The punch line changes each time, however, and is aptly formulated to display an understanding of the cultural preferences of the audience.

First, let us analyze the other two versions of the itinerary-narrative joke. Here is the version delivered at Hancock College, near Santa Maria, where Capps has been invited to speak in a political science course.

(3) (November 14, 1995, Hancock College, Santa Maria, CD2.53m:47s)

W. Capps: We're in the middle of a:- . . . a: very very full day. . . . uhm we started the day at- San Miguel Mission. . . . uh, we did that for uh . . . spiritual. liturgical reasons to become . . . (you know) rightly .. rooted and oriented . . . uhm in . . . this life. which is:: sacred life to me. and then we went . . . from there. to Paso Robles and met some people . . . um- on the street corner and- . . . talked with them for a while and uh- we've just come from San Luis Obispo and we'll go next . . . back to our own campus, UCSB, then on to .. Lompoc and- .. Buelton and .. Solvang, and then -hh it will probably be time for dinner. // uhm.

Audience: ((sparse laughter)) he-he-he.

Inside the classroom, the audience comprises staff, supporters, at least one representative of the media, and the students in the political science course whose instructor invited Capps to speak. The punch line changes from going to bed to having dinner. This change makes sense given that college students are notorious for not going to sleep until late, and mentioning bedtime might make Capps sound “lame” or “old” whereas the desire to have some food (“time for dinner”) is a more safe activity with a young crowd. It also is possible that the “going to bed” activity is not used because its possible sexual connotations would not be appropriate in a classroom context.

Finally, at UCSB, the itinerary is not quite at the start but certainly within the first part of Capps' speech. Here the list of places also ends with a joke, this time about going to a bar in downtown Santa Barbara that features live music—an unlikely place for Walter and Lois Capps to attend but one that is quite popular among UCSB undergraduates (Capps also inserts a deadpan joke in the midst of the list of places that is more difficult to appreciate out of context).

- (4) (November 14, 1995, UCSB Campus, CD3—15:45)
- W. Capps: you know- we-we-we started the day in San Miguel. uh,
north of here. uh-
we went all the way to the- to the Monterey County line. . . .
we started the day there=
=we went to Paso Robles next. . . .
we've been to San Luis Obispo=
=we've been to Santa Maria. . . .
we- we- we're here now of course.
I'm standing here.
we go //next to uh I mean it's clear.
- Audience: ((sparse laughter)) haha- haha
- W. Capps: //it's clear that I'm standing here.
- Audience: ((laughter)) haha- hahaha- hahah
- W. Capps: ((clears throat))
uh, and we go next to:- .. to Lompoc, . . .
and then we go to Buelton, . . .
and then we go to Solvang,=
=and then uh- . . . if-
if my wife agrees we're gonna go to Matty's Tavern //after that.
- Audience: ((Laughter, cheers)) hehehe-hehehehehe

There are other variations in these four excerpts that are equally interesting. I briefly mention the changes in the grammatical subject of the utterance constituting the punch line. It is an undifferentiated “we” in excerpt (1) (“we’ll probably go to bed”)—which could be interpreted as the whole group that is at that moment standing in front of the supporters (Capps, his wife Lois, his brother Doug, his nephew Lindsey, and the two staff members Thu Fong and Bryant Winnecke) or as just Capps and his wife Lois. In excerpt (3), the change of the punch line is done with an impersonal construction (“it will be time for dinner”), which does not commit the speaker to any particular referent but carries the conversational implicature that the people who have been going to all the listed

places will be the ones wanting to have dinner. Finally, in excerpt (4) there is the introduction of “my wife” in “if my wife agrees,” which pushes the following “we” of “we’re gonna go to Matty’s Tavern” toward the more restricted interpretation of Walter and Lois.

I chose these examples of conscious efforts to elicit laughter from the audience by displaying an understanding of their habits and potential wishes in order to establish an appropriate contrast with my next point which will be based on situations in which it is the audience who decides that something is humorous.

When the Audience Has a Different Take

The audience is important not only in the designing of the talk (e.g., referential expressions, use of humor, types of jokes). Audience members also actively participate in guiding the direction of talk, even in a formal event in which they are expected to give minimal responses at largely predictable points.

Previous analyses of audience responses in political arenas have identified specific ways in which speakers design their speech to elicit approval or support from the audience at predictable moments (e.g., Atkinson 1984a, 1984b; Heritage and Greatbatch 1986), as well as the most common conditions under which the audience disaffiliates, such as with boos or derisive laughter (Clayman 1992, 1993). Although these studies are programmatically interested in political oratory “as an emergent interactional process in which the audience plays an active role” (Clayman 1992: 34), the authors’ ability to see more fully the outcome of such an interactional process is restricted by the paucity of data that can show what happened the next time the same speaker used or was about to use the same expression, promise, joke, or story. The longitudinal data collected during Walter Capps’ 1995–96 campaign provide us with an opportunity to analyze some of the consequences or effects of audience responses.

In addition to expressing their approval or disapproval of a candidate’s position, audiences have ways of imposing a particular interpretation on what is being said to them, and speakers may find themselves struggling to retain control of the meaning of their own words. Clayman (1992, 1993), for example, showed that audiences may use laughter to display their disbelief of a particular claim that has just been made by a candidate. In those cases, the audience usually is considered to be taking a stance that is clearly in opposition to that of the candidate (e.g., refusing to believe the candidate’s claim to be a strong supporter of a particular policy). In the data that I analyze here, however, the audience is manifestly approving and sympathetic. In other words, the laughter produced is meant to be affiliative, not disaffiliative. Yet it seems to be taking the meaning of the candidate’s words in a direction that he does not intend.

To illustrate this situation, I return to a particular point in Capps’ first speech of the day in Paso Robles, where he makes two consecutive statements that are

taken to be humorous by his audience despite the fact that, as I claim below, no humor seemed to be intended by the speaker.

(5) (November 14, 1995, Paso Robles, CD1—41m)

W. Capps: but the second announcement is just as important. . . .

and that is we- that- that we will win this time.

//we will win this time.

Audience: ((clapping)) yeah::

//((more intense clapping, cheers))

W. Capps: ((smiles visibly pleased by the audience reaction))

W. Capps: and how do- how do- how do I know that?

how do I know // we're gonna win?

Audience: ((laughter starts)) hehe ((increases)) HEHEHE!

W. Capps: ((smiles at the audience)) well, you know, I can see it in your faces. (I mean-)

Audience: ((laughter)) haha//ha

W. Capps: and- and- and I- and I- and I mean that totally because-

because . . . uh, ((points to his wife Lois))

Lois and I . . . have lived. here,

in fact the first time we came in here in- August. of 1964 [. . .]

I argue that the rhetorical question “and how do I know that?” and the statement “I can see it in your faces” were not originally meant to be funny by Capps, despite the fact that he had purposely injected humor earlier in his talk. The humorous interpretation is imposed by the audience and only partly endorsed by Capps himself; while still smiling with satisfaction at their support—the clapping and cheers that greet his fake second announcement (“we will win this time”)—he finds himself endorsing a humorous reading that does not quite go along with his next point: namely, that he knows the people of the 22nd district. In fact, when we examine the next stretch of talk, we find a narrative of personal experience that is full of old memories and ends in an emotionally charged coda that might have been produced exactly to move away from the light mood established by the laughter (“You are. . . the people with whom we’ve lived our lives”). One sign of the fact that Capps wants to reduce the force and potential implications of the audience response is his metanarrative statement (Babcock 1977) “I mean that

totally,” which he produces just before transitioning to the personal narrative. “I mean that totally” makes sense only if we assume that he is not fully (i.e., “totally”) satisfied with how the audience thinks he means it. Here is the passage again, all the way to the climactic end of the personal narrative:

(6) (November 14, 1995, Paso Robles, cont., CD1.41:59)

W. Capps: that I- and I- and I mean that totally because- 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 UC 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 nineteensixtyfour. . . . we've been here a:l this time. .. we've lived here a:l 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.

The narrative of belonging is anything but humorous. It is constructed to create a sense of solidarity and trust through the recounting of key points in Capps' life in California (hence the added importance of the mentions of “Yale” and “Oregon”). One might even argue that in Paso Robles the personal narrative is particularly charged with emotions precisely to counteract or cancel the humorous reading of Capps' earlier question.

In his second stop, in San Luis Obispo, Capps delivers a speech that is closest to his prepared written speech (this was the only time he had his written speech in front of him). In this speech, the rhetorical question “how do I know that?” reappears—suggesting that it had been planned—but is delayed. It is presented only after its variant “how do we know we will- how do we know we're gonna win?” has been answered by Capps himself while maintaining a straight face, with no hint of a smile.

(7) (November 14, 1995, San Luis Obispo, CD2.15m:30s)

W. Capps: and then the:: um- and the second announcement I think is probably even more important. . . . the second announcement is. that we. will. win. we will win.// in November.

Audience: ((clapping, cheers))

W. Capps: how do we uh- how- how do we know we will- how do we know we're gonna win? .. uhm- I- I- I can tell you. the reason we're going to win is that- uhm- that I have. every confidence. that I represent . . . majority. .. opinion- the majority (of) viewpoint .. of the people in the 22nd. district. of California. . . .
how do I know // I do that?=-

Audience: ((sparse clapping))

W. Capps: thank you. how do I know that? because we've lived here for thir-ty-two years. we've, ou::- our children were born here, I've taught here uh a:ll that time. we've lived among you. we know what you think about things. ((looks at notes)) uh ((looks up)) we- we know your points of view, we know your attitudes, we know your beliefs, we know your convictions.

The restrained, serious “key” of the San Luis Obispo speech is particularly striking given that after the Paso Robles speech, while Capps was going around shaking hands with members of the audience, at least two of them encouraged him to “keep up the humor” in his speeches. One possible explanation of such a switch of interpretive “key” (Hymes 1972) is that Capps had learned from the Paso Robles performance that if he did not want the audience to decide for him what was funny and what was serious, he ought to keep his own joking under control. In San Luis Obispo, he never smiled throughout any of his statements or rhetorical questions, and the audience did not interject any laughter.

One might argue, however, that the San Luis Obispo speech is not a good indicator of how Capps conceptualized the rhetorical question “how do I know that (I'm gonna win)?” precisely because of the overall lack of humor throughout the speech. (The audience eventually produces some laughter after the speech is over—when Capps, prompted by his wife, speaks again to acknowledge some of the people in the audience.) Given this possible objection to what to make of the San Luis Obispo speech, the version delivered at his third stop, at Hancock College, is potentially more revealing. On this occasion, inside a classroom, Capps returns to a more informal tone, starting the speech in a nonserious “key” with what will become one of his favorite jokes throughout the campaign—the “seventy-five minutes joke”:

(8) (November 14, 1995: Hancock College, CD2.53m:26s)

W. Capps: I'm- uh- I'm very happy to be here today and:- . . . uh- see the problem with this is that I'm- I'm so used to this format . . . that I ma- I may go on here for- . . . you know seventy five minutes because-

Woman: ((laughter)) ha-ha-ha!

W. Capps: because the classes in Santa Barbara are an hour and fifteen minutes. but, ((clears throat)) [. . .]

Capps then continues with the itinerary-narrative joke, as shown in (3). This time, however, despite the earlier introduction of humor, when he uses the line about his confidence in a victory (“we’re gonna win . . . we(’ll) win”) he leaves out the “how do I know that?” question, thus removing the piece of talk that had been followed by laughter in Paso Robles.

(9) (November 14, 1996: Hancock College, Santa Maria, CD2.54:46s)

W. Capps: the second announcement is- . . . and I- I have total confidence on this one, we’re gonna win. .. // we(’ll) win.

Audience: ((clapping))

W. Capps: and: uh, I think the reason we’re going to win is- .. becau::se I understand the people. of the twenty-second district, .. uh I know their views, .. I know what they want . . . uh- a representative to do. in Washington. and I’m committed to doing that because I’ve- we have-.. lived our- lives with-.. these people- I’ve been here for- thirty one years as a professor at- UCSB, . . . our children were born and raised here- so um- .. you know- we-uh, we belong here ((CL)) and we- and uhm- . . . and-uh. . . we- we know the people. so well that I know I can represent. their views in- in Washington.

The skipping of the planned question suggests that by the third speech of the day, Capps had learned how to have some control over the potential implications of his words. The insertion of humor earlier in the speech had to be balanced by the removal of verbal material that could be interpreted as a continuation of that humor.

Can One Attack without “Being Mean”?

In presenting his political persona, Walter Capps faced problems—often leading to paradoxes—that are not uncommon for candidates in the United States. One was having to explain why he wanted to leave a respectable profession and a successful, thirty-two-year career at the University of California to embrace a political career that was not equally respected in the public’s eyes. Another problem was created by the pressure he felt to attack his main opponent, the incumbent Rep. Andrea Seastrand, while wanting to remain faithful to the image of fairness and compassion that he had acquired in his teaching—especially through the highly popular and highly publicized course on the Vietnam War.

On the first day of his new campaign, we find Capps working hard to try to deal with both of these problems. He dealt with the first by presenting himself as

following a call—inspired, in his own words, by the Jeffersonian model of the citizen-representative who goes to Washington as a form of duty to his country rather than for personal ambition. He approached the second problem by framing his negative assessment of Seastrand as something unfortunate but necessary in politics. Capps seemed to be convinced that he could do “attacking” in some straightforward fashion, without having to sound too critical or mean-spirited. But he had not taken into consideration his audience’s expectations, grounded in contemporary American political discourse.

Whatever image Capps was trying to project through his words was going against deeply rooted assumptions about political speeches and political criticism. Contrary to his own anticipation, his audience did not always allow him to be “Mr. Nice Guy.” On the contrary, they read “meanness” in his words, regardless of his framing and his disclaimers. Here is an example of how Capps’ criticism of Seastrand is interpreted in a way that seems contrary to his intentions. His attempt to reframe his own words (“I’m not being mean here”) is greeted with even more laughter, confirming the audience’s reading of his earlier words as purposely critical and his added disclaimer as sarcastic.

(10) (November 14, 1995, Paso Robles, CD1.42m:55s)

W. Capps: now, you know when you run for office, . . . it isn’t just like applying for a job=I mean you have to- you’ve gotta beat the uh- . . . you’ve gotta beat the other candidate. . . . and this is what I say about her. . . she doesn’t represent . . . // the majority

Woman: no. she doesn’t.

W. Capps: she does not represent the majority .. viewpoint. of the people of the 22nd district. . . .

in fact, I don’t think she represents anybody. // in the 22nd district.

Audience: ((laughs)) hehehe! hahaha!

W. Capps: (???) I’m not- . . . I’m not being mean here,

//I’m not at all being mean.

Audience: ((laughter)) hehehe. //haha

We can easily speculate that the audience is led to laughter by the rhetorical effect produced by the contrastive pair shown in (11)—a well-known technique that also is used to evoke applause (Atkinson 1984a: chapter 3):

(11)

- A. she does not represent the majority .. viewpoint. of the people of the 22nd District. . . .
- B. in fact, I don't think she represents anybody. // in the 22nd District.

The second part of the contrast violates what is a reasonable inference from the first part—namely, that she represents the minority viewpoint.

The laughter, however, must make Capps realize that this group of supporters is not buying into the innocence of his criticism. Before continuing with his attack, Capps tries again to regain the high moral ground by claiming restraint during the first year of Seastrand's tenure in the House. The addition of the hypothetical "whether anyone believes this or not" and the emphasized repetition "I mean I really wanted her to do well," however, give away his fear of not sounding sincere even to a group of supporters.

(12) (November 14, 1995, Paso Robles, CD1.44m:08s)

- W. Capps: but now, I have not critiqued her in a- in a full year because, . . . whether anyone believes this or not, .. you know she's my representative too, .. and I wanted her to do well, I mean I really wanted her to do well because I want- people in our district, .. to be well represented. in Washington.

When we examine his speech at the next stop, in San Luis Obispo, we see a different framing. Capps leaves out the line about Seastrand not representing anyone and goes straight into the planned series of rhetorical questions about her performance, framed in a call-and-response format. This time the punchline is different. Furthermore, there is a metapragmatic cue that lets the audience know that they are expected to participate in a question-answer drill ("I'll just have to ask you").

(13) (November 14, 1995, San Luis Obispo, CD2.16m:35s)

- W. Capps: the reason I know we can beat my opponent is because our opponent next fall does not represent the people of the twenty second district. of California.

I'll just have to ask you,

does our representative represent the seniors of the twenty-second district?

Audience: NO:!

- W. Capps: does she represent. . . the students of the twenty-second district?

- Audience: NO:!
- W. Capps: does she represent the children, of the twenty-second district?
- Audience: NO:!
- W. Capps: does she represent the women, of the twenty-second district?
- Audience: NO:!
- W. Capps: does she represent the people who care for the environment of the twenty-second district?
- Audience: NO:!
- W. Capps: does she represent the people who believe in local government of the twenty-second district?
- Audience: NO:!
- W. Capps: who does she represent? she- she campaigned- I heard it. I heard it. she campaigned- she campaigned on the theme a leadership-leadership that listens. well I can tell you the voice to which she pays the most attention. and the voice- to which she pays the most attention is the voice of Newt Gingrich.
- Audience: YEAH!
- W. Capps: and we didn't elect-
- Audience: boo::!
- W. Capps: we didn't elect Newt Gingrich. We didn't elect Newt Gingrich. We elected a representative
- Audience: (b)oo::!
- W. Capps: and we need to hold the representative to the charge that the representative has been given.

Capps' strategy here is to stay closer to his prepared speech and perform the attack on Seastrand in a straightforward way, letting the audience co-author the criticism all the way through. He follows the same strategy on the campus of his own university (UCSB) but changes it at Hancock College, where the audience includes people who could not be counted on as supporters. In this context, instead of inviting the audience to answer the rhetorical questions about who Seastrand represents, Capps takes off from Seastrand's slogan "Leadership that listens" to ask a series of questions that he answers himself, simultaneously avoiding a test of the audience's loyalty and reducing the effect of the former drill:

(14) (November 14, 1995: Hancock College, Santa Maria, CD2.01h:02m:30s)

W. Capps: I've been asking myself, has she listened to the seniors . . . in our community? I don't think so. . .

has she listened to the people who want to protect the environment, . . . in our community?

I don't think so. . . .

has she listened to the people who are advocates of education?

that one kills me because- [. . .]

This excerpt is a much more mitigated form of criticism, with the personalized "I don't think so" instead of the well-timed collective shout "NO!!!" Capps obtained in San Luis Obispo. Furthermore, Seastrand's actions with respect to certain initiatives, such as her alleged record on education, are presented as having a direct impact on Capps himself as a believer in education ("that one kills me because- . . ."). By presenting himself as a victim of Seastrand's voting record and beliefs, Capps puts himself in the same category as the students he is trying to attract to his side.

Capps uses different form of mitigation of the attack at UCSB, where the audience—which includes some of his own students—is very supportive, making him seem more at ease and willing to insert new parts into his speech. In this context, standing at a microphone on a platform (where a rock band has just finished performing) and without the help of any notes, Capps launches into a new story about his own inability to be "critical," which ends with Seastrand becoming the butt of an obviously planned joke.

(15) (November 14, 1995: University of California, Santa Barbara, CD3.16m:20s)

W. Capps: uh, uh but what I've been telling people is that running for- running for office is not . . . quite like just applying for a job—you know, not, just that- that you're qualified . . . and you get the job. I mean it- to run for office really means . . . that you have to beat your opponents. and the only way that this can become successful, . . . is if I beat Andrea Seastrand in November.

Audience: ((clapping, // cheers))

W. Capps: well, . . . people who- . . . people who know me well . . . know that . . . I have had some difficulty in the past in being critical of other people=because it goes against my nature. uh- ((clears

throat)) uhm last time around I would say things like- . . . you know=I've heard it said that- . . . that Andrea Seastrand is a: . . . very warm- . . . human being, . . . but I looked up warm . . . in the dictionary . . . and it said "not too hot." . . .

Audience: ((laughter)) haha//hahaha!

W. Capps: now- see- that's about- that's about as far as- . . . as I can go with- . . . critique because . . . I think one of the things we want to fight in our- resist in our culture is this- this invective- this- . . . this super- charged political rhetoric that- [. . .]

This excerpt and those preceding it provide a glimpse of what I saw as a recurring pattern—namely, Capps' hard work at finding a way of attacking his main opponent in ways that could be approved by his audience without making him feel uncomfortable with the implications that such attacks would have on his own persona. Although Capps, perhaps because of his academic background, tended to verbalize some of the challenges he was facing, I believe that his dilemmas and struggles were the same as the ones faced by any candidate for public office.

Conclusions

In examining the speeches recorded during the first day of the 1995–96 campaign for the U.S. Congress by Democratic candidate Walter Capps, I have isolated several sequences in which we can see Capps' work at designing his speech for the particular audience he was speaking to. I also have identified sequences in which the audience seemed to have interpreted Capps' words in ways that he did not intend. Analysis of subsequent versions of the same points and the different rhetorical strategies employed by Capps throughout the speeches I was able to record during the same day suggest several lessons. The first is that to be a good political orator it is not sufficient to have a good script. For one thing, there are many situations in which candidates might not be able to have access to that script (e.g., if there is no podium on which to place one's notes). Furthermore, speakers must be able to evaluate their audience—its knowledge, its likes and dislikes—to design their speech in ways that display their intimate knowledge of the audience, including its habits and preferences.

We also have learned that there are situations when the audience, instead of acting as a passive recipient of made-up slogans or jokes, may impose an interpretation that diverges from whatever the speaker had in mind. This type of situation creates a difficult moral dilemma for candidates, especially when the audience reaction suggests that they approve what they are hearing the candidate say. Speakers must decide whether to go along with the audience and cap-

italize on its unexpected reaction or try to keep control of the meaning of their own words.

In this case, we have seen how one candidate edited his own speech and reformulated his stances with respect to several key issues in his speech to retain some control over his own message and present himself as a person who could be critical without sounding “mean.” This type of struggle between the speaker’s voice and the audience’s voice is fought at many different levels at once, involving specific sequences of acts; specific grammatical and narrative frames; and, in this case, specific cultural expectations about what it meant to be a political candidate for the U.S. Congress in the last decade of the twentieth century. Above all, however, this struggle over the right balance between pleasing others and asserting oneself reminds us of the centrality of morality in the construction of human agency through talk.

NOTES

1. This article is based on audiovisual recordings and participant observation of events centered around the 1995–96 race for the 22nd Congressional District in California (Santa Barbara-San Luis Obispo). The recordings and transcriptions of those recordings were partly supported by several Senate Grants at the University of California at Los Angeles. Some of the ideas presented here were developed during the 1999–2000 academic year, while the author enjoyed a sabbatical with the support of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and the University of California at Los Angeles. The project on the Walter-Capps-for-Congress campaign could not have been possible without the support of the candidate, Walter Capps; his wife, Lois; and many of the people involved in the campaign, especially Walter’s brother Doug Capps, his son Lindsey, and campaign staff members Steve Boyd, Thu Fong, and Bryant Winnecke. The original idea of following Walter Capps around during the campaign was born out of conversations in 1994–95 with Walter Capps’ daughter Lisa, while she was a graduate student at UCLA. After accepting a position in the department of psychology at The University of California, Berkeley in 1996, Lisa continued to be a fervent supporter of my project and a source of insights on the impact of her father’s campaigning on herself and the other members of the extended Capps family. Our conversations about the campaign, my project, and how to make something valuable out of it continued even during her last year of life, while she was fighting cancer. This article is a continuation of those conversations.
2. I thank Carmi Bleviss for our discussions of this and other examples of humor in Capps’ speeches.

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APPENDIX: 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, and Jefferson 1974: 731–34).

- W. Capps: name of speaker is separated from the rest by a colon (:) and one or more spaces.
- anybody underlining represents emphasis or contrastive stress.
- NO!! capital letters indicate high volume.
- job=I mean equal sign (=) stands for “latching” (i.e., no hearable interval between two turns or between two utterances by the same speaker).
- becau::se colon (:) stands for lengthening of sound.
- go //next point in a party’s turn where overlap by other speaker(s) starts.
- ((laughter)) double parentheses frame contextual information about the following talk.
- (??) a portion of talk that could not be heard accurately.
- . . . untimed pause.
- [. . .] a portion of the transcript was left out.
- . a period stands for a falling intonation that suggests the end of a turn.
- the women, a comma represents a slightly rising intonation.