From Liberal Conservative to Conservative Conservative: David Cameron's political branding

Ignacio José Antonio López Escarcena
MSc in Media and Communications (Research)

From Liberal Conservative to Conservative Conservative: David Cameron's political branding

Ignacio José Antonio López Escarcena

ABSTRACT

The main objective of this research was to analyse David Cameron's discourse, particularly his claim about being a liberal Conservative in an interview with BBC News in 2010. For that reason the two research questions that this statement triggered were *How has David Cameron attempted to rebrand himself as a Liberal Conservative in his discourse throughout his political career?* and *Has his strategy increased, decreased, changed completely or not really changed?*

The methods used in this project were Thematic Analysis, in order to find a systematic core code in his speeches, and Norman Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), so as to study the three speeches selected: the ones he gave in 2006, 2009 and 2012 at the Conservative Party Conference.

The key finding that this research suggests is that the current Prime Minister did indeed try to brand himself as a Liberal Conservative, as it can be argued after studying his 2006 speech. However, that does not seem to be the case with the texts from 2009 and 2012, where his previous allusions to the centre and to a notion of Liberal Conservatism are no longer present. Moreover, from an ideological point of view, the three speeches – and especially the ones from 2009 and 2012 – include traditional conservative values such as the importance of family and criticisms toward the prominent role of the state.

INTRODUCTION

"I believe there …I've always described myself as a Liberal Conservative. I'm Liberal because I believe in freedom and human rights, but Conservative - I'm sceptical of great schemes to remake the world" (BBC News, 2010). The previous declaration of principles was made by Prime Minister David Cameron in an interview with journalist Andrew Marr for BBC News in May, 2010, less than a week after taking office.

The aforementioned statement brings up the following question: is this really who David Cameron is or who he is trying – or was trying – to be? As we shall see in detail in the next section, there is such a concept as political branding that is based precisely on the construction of a certain image (2006). This, as it may be guessed, involves a strategy, a plan. At the same time, and even if it was a tactic, another doubt arises: would Cameron still refer to himself as a Liberal Conservative today? As I already mentioned, his remarks were made just days after becoming Prime Minister; perhaps certain circumstances have caused him to change his approach after that. Thus, not only would it be necessary to asses if this was a strategy, b

may have experimented, it will be fundamental to establish a route by which the Prime Minister's messages will be analysed. For that reason, it will not only be important to examine more than one text, but they will also need to be a part of an interval that will allow us to observe a certain trajectory in Cameron's career. That should give us the theoretical and empirical material to argue what kind of political branding David Cameron has been trying to consolidate along the years.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

Literary review

In this chapter, I will discuss the concepts of political branding; language, ideology and power; the differences between conservatives and liberals; representation; and the perceptions of David Cameron as a leader. I will start with political branding, since it is this type of strategy which gives way to the rest of the theoretical concepts considered in this section.

Political branding

According to Keller, brands are an intangible concept that relate to associations which get activated in the costumer's memory and hold the meaning that is given to a specific product (1993: 3). More specifically, and in terms of what this project aspires to analyse, branding can be applied to politics if we take into account that it "uncovers the underlying strategic concerns of efforts to maintain voter loyalty through communication designed to provide reassurance, uniqueness (clear differentiation from rivals), consistency of values, and

this scenario, we can observe the relationship between a specific form of political discourse, the ideologies that are part of it, and the consequent clash for domination among the political spectrum of that type of language.

Having mentioned these relationships in a broad manner, I will now focus on these concepts and then I will discuss their connections more thoroughly than in the example given above. In the case of power, it is rather difficult to avoid mentioning its link to language if one attempts to illustrate where that dominance comes from. That is not to say that this connection is straightforward; in fact, it tends to be subtle (Mooney, 2001: 16). Mooney herself describes this type of power as symbolic:

> We can think about this not as physical power, or even institutional power, but as symbolic power. Calling it symbolic power draws our attention to the link between power and symbols – that is, between power and language. To call it symbolic power is not to say that the power is ineffective. If you think about the things that people can do with language, this becomes clear. With language, it is possible to insult, persuade, command, compliment, encourage or make a promise (2001: 17).

This ability to persuade others through language has also been emphasized by van Dijk (1997). Nonetheless, he goes one step further than Mooney in the level of dominance that he mentions, especially when he argues that, despite its subtle manner, text and talk can help to control the minds of others and make them act as we want (1997: 18).

This power, however, is not only difficult to perceive, but it is also not absolute according to Pocock (1984: 31), who depicts a type of authority which is shared and cannot be fully attributed to a single individual. Furthermore, Pocock highlights another aspect of language that is similar to Jäger's claim about words forming consciousness. For Pocock, all speech "is performative in the sense that it does things to people. It redefines them in their own perceptions, in those of others and by restructuring the conceptual universes in which they are perceived" (1984: 39).

More specifically, Fairclough establishes the association between discourse and power from a

discourse is partly power –

account is Fairclough's (2001a) mention of a process of self-

Because of what has been already explained, this procedure wi

The next choice had to do with how many speeches were going to be analysed and which ones. Regarding the first issue, I arrived at the conclusion that analysing three of them would allow me to establish a proper comparison that included a certain trajectory in Cameron's career. Concerning the second aspect, I decided to establish an interval that would allow me to really observe if there had been a change in Cameron's way of thinking. In this sense, I discovered that by applying a three-year gap between each text, I would be able to study his most recent

With regard to lists, Cameron highlights what people can expect from a conservative government: an administration that asks what the people can do, what society can do and where British people realize that we are all in this together.

What traces are there in the features of the text of struggle between the producer and his opponents?

Negative sentences: Cameron engages in overt attacks to his political adversaries, the Labour Party. As a matter of fact, near the beginning of the speech, he has already referred to then Prime Minister Tony Blair in a negative manner ('What a nerve the man has got'). In his own words, the only real achievement that Labour has accomplished is their education reforms, but immediately after he claims that the only reason – and he repeats this phrase – that it happened was because the conservatives took the legislation through the House of Commons. Moreover, Cameron makes fun of the inner conflicts of Labour and accuses them of worrying more about their jobs than about the NHS, crime and the troops abroad. He even uses irony when he remembers that Labour spoke of a stable and orderly transition by using the expression 'Yeah right' as a reaction to that statement.

Criticism of state responsibility: Among Cameron's negative remarks towards Labour, there is a subject that is prominent through his speech: his criticism regarding what he calls

of a more sympathetic leader, an intention that is connected with the next aspect of his speech.

Second speech: Putting Britain back on her feet – David Cameron, Thursday, October 8, 2009

What relational values do textual features have?

We: Cameron repeats the use of this pronoun both in the inclusive as in the exclusive manner. An example of the first case can be seen when he talks about responsibility and how it is 'about what we all do and the way we live'.

On the other hand, an instance in which he opts for the exclusive alternative is when he talks about the protection that people who cannot work will receive ('we'll look after you'). Even then, although he does it exclusively, what he is promising is protection; therefore, he seems to be positioning himself as a concerned and compassionate leader.

You: This pronoun is present once more and, in fact, is featured in the last sentence of Cameron's 2009 speech, where he states that when Britain overcomes the hard times at hand – i.e. the effects of the subprime crisis -

Family and responsibility: Regarding the first of these aspects, Cameron is quite unambiguous about how he feels: he explains that family is not only what is most important to him, but also what he believes is most important to the country. This value is connected to responsibility since, according to Cameron, both society and responsibility begin at home. In the case of the latter, his diagnosis is that responsibility has eroded and needs to be rebuilt. What is more, responsibility gains prominence in his speech particularly when Cameron argues that the more society takes responsibility, the less government will need to do it.

What values do textual features have with respect to the subject positions of members of the audience?

Subject position: the people

There are cases of coordination such as the use of 'and' with regard to the subject position of the people. For instance, when Cameron predicts that the country will be tested, he assures that he will be ready 'and' the people from Britain will be ready too. Furthermore, 'and' is present again when – speaking about the significance of family once more – he claims that, for him, what is most important is that the people he loves are 'healthy and well'. Even though that statement may seem as a way of expressing his personal beliefs, it is said during a passage of his speech where he is speaking about the relevance of the NHS. Therefore, although it might be seen as declaration of principles at first, it could also be as an extrapolation of what he wishes for the people of the UK in general.

What traces are there in the features of the text of struggle between the producer and his opponents?

Criticism towards big government: As it was already mentioned, Cameron paints a rather grim picture near the start of his speech. He describes a reality where there is political disillusionment, a social breakdown, and the highest budget deficit and deepest recession since the war. Cameron then criticises the fact that Labour's solution to these problems is more government, when it is 'more government that got us into this mess'. An example of this is his claim concerning the economic crisis; in Cameron's words, 'government got too big, spent too much and doubled the national debt'. He reaches similar conclusions, using almost the same words, when he alludes to what he depicts as a broken society and broken politics. Cameron even clearly expresses his personal belief regarding this matter when he says that 'the state is your servant, never your master'. There are, however, some initiatives developed

by Labour that Cameron praises, such as devolution, the minim

- 23 -

by Labour that Cameron praises, such as devolution, the minim

Subject position: the leader of a rising Britain

Modality: Cameron goes back to what seems to be his most frequently used modal auxiliary, *must*, which –

Regarding the subject position of Cameron as a leader, he appears to maintain his departure from what he seemed to be trying to achieve in his 2006 speech: once again, there are no mentions of the centre or a type of liberal Conservatism. In fact, his message – from an ideological point of view - is similar to the 2009 speech, even in his mentions of family as an important value for him. Therefore, and as it happened with that text, there does not seem to be a mismatch in this level.

Finally, referring to the subject position of the audience, Cameron yet again puts himself at a

In this sense, we could say that there are two distinct brands in these three texts: the first is the brand of a leader who tries to move away from bei

from that sector only in aspects such as how he addresses the public. In other words, they are not significant ideological differences.

Electronic MSc Dissertation Series

The Media@LSE Electronic MSc Dissertations Series presents high quality MSc Dissertations which received a mark of 72% and above (Distinction).

Selected dissertations are published electronically as PDF rec