Briggs, Milk, and the Battle for Teacher Privacy: Rethinking Debate Performance through Thematic Transcription

Caitlin O'Loughlin-Rosa

Briggs, Milk, and the Battle for Teacher Privacy: Rethinking Debate Performance through Thematic Transcription

Caitlin O'Loughlin

School of Education, University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill

Abstract

This study argues that new metrics for assessing debate performance, including floor control and idea resonance, provide a stronger framework for gauging success than the traditional markers. Using a new technique for thematic transcription of a debate between Supervisor Harvey Milk and Senator John Briggs over a proposed law which would have removed gay teachers, it rethinks debate success and posits how this analysis could be used to think through debate performance today.

Keywords: Debate, Educational Policy, Floor control

Briggs, Milk, and the Battle for Teacher Privacy: Rethinking Debate Performance through Thematic Transcription

As we move closer to the 2020 election, the question of how to evaluate candidate debate performance grows in relevance. Much debate coverage is taken up with perceived measures of debate success including time spoken (Cai, Lee, & Patel, 2019) and effective fact-based rebuttals to attacks (Clifford, 1960). These categories are thought to be useful in measuring debate success for the lay audience (as seen by their continued popularity in post-debate coverage across news outlets). Even judging criteria for debate competitions focuses on categories like fluency of argument, stability of narrative, and critique of an opponent's argument (Holm & Foote, 2015). While all of these are useful in creating a larger picture of the debate, using these categories as metrics for success ultimately fails to take into account how debaters can control the larger terms of the debate and misses an opportunity to analyze how these moves control the flow and topics of the conversation in ways which materially benefit one candidate. An analysis of these moves provides a stronger metric for judging the outcome of the debate than traditional markers of debate performance such as time spoken and persuasive rebuttals that can obscure the deeper workings of the conversation.

Stepping back from the current political cycle, this study analyzes how two debaters, San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk and California State Senator John Briggs, construct and navigate the floor in their 1978 debate on John Briggs' proposed ballot proposition which would have mandated the firing of gay teachers who engaged in "homosexual conduct or activity" (Eu, 1977).

This study uses a new method of thematic transcription in order to illustrate the ways in which both parties attempt to control the topic and flow of the debate. It explores how control of the

floor is established through the debate, how debaters are able to control the flow of conversation to better position themselves, and to think through what this tells us about successful debate performance. This study focuses on the conversational moves made during debates in order to control the floor and analyzes not only who is speaking but what topics are introduced and integrated into the debate, and how that positioning benefits or disadvantages some candidates. Through an analysis of these moves, a new method of measuring debate performance emerges-one which focuses on how successful debaters are able to maneuver a conversation in order to position themselves better in the debate.

Method

The initial transcript used in this project came from Emery's edited collection of Harvey Milk's interviews (Milk, 2012a**)**. Milk and Briggs conducted their first debate on Proposition 6 in San Francisco on September 6, 1978. The original transcript and footage of the debate appears to be lost according to the director of the Bay Area Television Archive (A. Cherian, personal correspondence, 9/6/2019).

I began this study by attempting multiple transcription techniques in order to represent what was happening in debate. My initial transcript vertically listed each utterance sequentially in a script format. Without an audio source for the debate, I was unable to incorporate audio cues outside of the information provided in the written texts which were limited to interruptions and overlapping talk. I used a simplified transcription notation from Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson (1974) indicating the conversational overlap and interruption (example 1).

Example 1

```
17    Milk: We are saying that a gay person should have the right to say
18    "I am [a] gay that is part of society" period. No more.
19    Briggs: In the classroom? In the classroom?
20    Milk: In the classroom, out of the classroom, because it is a part of society
21    Briggs: But not in the classroom or=
22    Milk:                                  = Why?
23    Briggs: Because we don't allow prostitutes to do that in the classroom, we don't allow dope addicts, we don't
24    allow thieves, and we don't allow alcoholics. Why? Because that's considered to be immoral. [sarcastically]
25    what's wrong with a man being an alcoholic?
26    Milk: Wait, but, but talk about morals, and you're lumping together different groups of people. Are you taking
27    about what Christ said Is moral?
28    Briggs: No. I'm talking about what the standards of this society is. We do
29    Milk:                                                      Who sets the standards?
30    Briggs: People
31    Milk: The people? Okay. The constitution set by the majority or the minority?
32    Briggs: [nodding] by the majority
33    Milk: No, it's by the minority. That's why it takes two-thirds. You see, the constitution
34    and censorship are to protect the rights of the minority. The majority do not need a constitution.
35    This gets into allowing the constitution to be governed by the majority, and therefore in certain places
36    you can disallow whites or blacks or Jews or anybody else from teaching in you allow the majority to rule.
37    And the whole concept behind democracy and the constitution is to protect the rights of the minority, not the
38    majority
39    Briggs: Morality is that which is the prevailing customs of the people.
40    In some societies, homosexuality is okay. But in this society, homosexuality is frowned upon
41    Milk: Why?
```

While this proved to be a useful starting place, I began to feel that I was missing something important in the data. I was struck by the feeling Edelsky (1981) explained as "an increasingly gnawing feeling that what was 'really' going on was not being visually captured" (p. 387). In the initial transcript, the script format makes it appear as though each subsequent comment is relevant to the prior turn. In reality, in debates not all comments are sequentially connected. Rather, the participants move fluidly through a larger theme, sometimes circling back to earlier topics, refusing to engage in some offered topics, and cycling through multiple sub-themes within a larger thematic section. Transcribing in the traditional script format obscures these conversational moves as prior-turn connection bias and its linear format makes the conversation seem linearly connected and forward moving (Ochs, 1979). In turn, this may bias debate performance as it obscures the ways in which debaters are able to take control of the conversation.

Inspired by Edelsky's (1981) use of different transcription techniques to capture the nuances of the floor that linear transcription proved insufficient to capture, I began to play around with different formats hoping to find a method that would better illustrate the flow of the debate. I ultimately created a transcript that segmented the debate by theme, using arrows and line breaks to indicate the flow of conversation around the topic as it jumps around. I focused on the conversational moves including interruptions, idea shifts, topic denial or continuation, and continuation of thought across multiple conversational units (example 2). This transcript allows for a deeper analysis of the collaborative construction of the floor around a theme (in this case, a discussion of morals and morality). The conversation is separated into four sections, each representing a sub-theme in the discussion.

Example 2
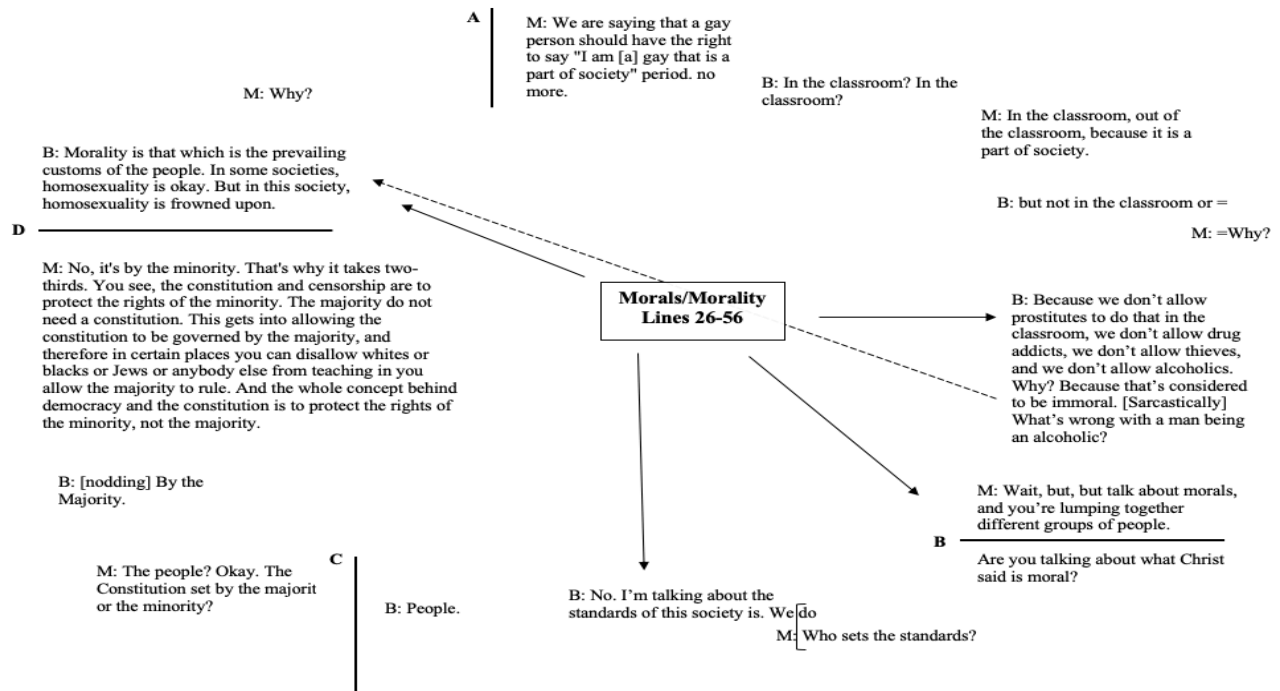
Results

Rethinking the transcription to highlight the development of the floor allows previously unmarked features of the conversation to come to light. In the original transcription, certain features of the debate including topic circumvention were not evident. While interruptions are marked, the prior-turn connection bias (Ochs, 1979) obscures the ways in which interruptions can be used to take control of the floor and change the direction of the conversation to better suit an argument. The person who controls the floor this way in a debate creates stronger positioning for themselves and is better able to control the narrative that emerges from the debate. Moving away from thinking of conversational floors in debates as discrete turns and instead focusing on both the larger context of conversational moves as well as the ability to control topic uptake and conversational flow allows for deeper understanding of the debate performance (Jones & Thornborrow, 2004)

Discussion

On first reading, it appeared as though Milk won the debate: Milk's arguments are predicated on

facts and he uses evidence from organizations like the American Psychiatric Association (APA)

as in example 3 where he responds to Briggs' argument challenging his narrative of the threat

gay teachers pose to children and pointing out the prevalence of straight male child abusers.

Example 3

```
50    Milk: No, the American Psychiatric Association=
51    Briggs:                                          =They just took a new poll.
52    Milk: They didn't take a poll, they took a
53    Briggs:                                    They said people like you are sick.
54    Milk: That's where you're wrong. There are some who do. But the myths have been shattered. Child
55    molestation, which you're worried about, is 95% a heterosexual problem-usually the parent. Child abusement
56    is a heterosexual problem. Rape is a heterosexual problem. Role model we know doesn't work, because if
57    there's role modeling there'd be a lot of nuns running around out there in schools. So we know all your
58    arguments are based on fallacies.
```

Milk tries to debunk some accusations against gay teachers that had been made by

other anti-gay rights campaigns including the claim that gay teachers are more likely to be child

molesters (Bryant, 1977). Whereas Milk tries to debunk arguments made by Briggs, Briggs

relies on inflammatory rhetoric claiming, "The American Psychiatric Society [sic] just took a

whole new poll in June and said people like you are ill and you're not to be trusted with

children." Milk argues back against this claim, starting to correct him that Briggs is

mischaracterizing the article that appeared in *TIME Magazine* citing a study of 2,500

psychiatrists polled about homosexuality, without reference to teaching or children at all (Sick

Again?,1978).

On the surface, these fact-based rebuttals, one of the metrics commonly used to

measure debate success, would favor Milk's performance. In an analysis of the 2020 Democratic

Primary Debates, *The New York Times* polled their Opinion columnists and contributors to create

a ranking of debate performances. Columnist Gail Collins justified Vice President Joe Biden's scored of 9/10 by saying he "made perfectly rational arguments on every point" (Bouie, et al., 2020). Being able to craft fact-based, clear arguments and the ability to draw clear distinctions are metrics that favor Milk's performance, yet they miss the way in which Briggs is able to control the conversation and cut off Milk's rebuttals, thus letting Briggs' inaccurate characterization stand and weakening Milk's position.

Speaking time, another traditional metric for judging debate performance, would also favor Milk's performance yet also paints a misleading portrait of the debate. In their evaluations of the September 2019 Democratic presidential primary debate, *The New York Times* and other news outlets released articles measuring who spoke the most overall and on each topic (Cai, Lee, & Patel, 2019; Zhou, 2019). In this debate, Milk speaks more than Briggs, speaking 53.9 percent of the lines while Briggs speaks 46.1 percent. Without the audio recording of the debate or a time-stamped transcript it is not possible to calculate the amount of time spoken by each candidate, so the number of lines spoken by each stands in for that statistic as it highlights the balance of the conversation.

While these kinds of debate metrics are popular ways of measuring who has won a debate, using a thematic transcription to analyze debate flow and control of the floor opens up a new way of judging debate performance, one that centers who controls the conversation. An analysis of floor control would declare Briggs the winner as he controls the floor in terms of what topics are brought up: he puts forward three of the four main debate topics including the conversation on rights, morality, and recruitment/the role of gay teachers while Milk puts forward the conversation on psychologists and experts. Briggs is also able to control the flow of conversation in such a way that turns aside many of Milk's talking points while setting Briggs up to make his

recurring arguments about the dangers of gay teachers as in example 4.

Example 4

60   Briggs: You know, Mister- Doctor Masters of Masters and Johnson said every person is born
61   with a sex organ, and what they do with it, they learn what to do with it. So, you've learned what
62   you're doing Harvey. You're not-
63   Milk: By the age of six! By the age of six.
64   Briggs: You can't say "every psychiatrist" and "by the age of six." you couldn't prove that if your
65   life depended on it.
66   Milk: The American Psychiatric Association
67   Briggs: The American Psychiatric Society just took a whole new poll in
68   June and said that people like you are ill and you're not to be trusted with children
69   Milk: No! It's not! They-
70   Briggs: [unintelligible] in the car and I'd like to go get it.
71   Milk: You believe everything you read in TIME magazine?

Going back to Milk's attempt to rebut Briggs' argument about the APA, Briggs

claims the article supports his belief that "people like you are ill and not to be trusted with

children," this control of the floor can be seen when Milk, who presumably knows this is not an

accurate characterization of the *TIME Magazine* article tries to correct the record by saying, "No!

It's not! They-" but is interrupted by Briggs who changes the topic. Despite knowing the article

does not in fact say gay people should not be trusted with children, Milk allows this statement to

go unchallenged after being interrupted and moves instead to asking Briggs if trusts *TIME*

Magazine. Here, Briggs controls the flow of the conversation and moves away from Milk's

challenge of the accuracy of a common and often-cited accusation in favor of proposition 6, that

gay teachers are attracted to children and thus pose a threat to them (see Bryant, 1977; Harbeck,

1997). Briggs moves the conversation into this topic and Milk is unable to successfully hold the

floor long enough to rebut this claim. Briggs is able to leave his claim unchallenged, and as it

represents a common allegation, he does not need to linger on the topic allowing Milk time to

refute it.

      This centering of floor construction and resonance moves away traditional metrics of

debate success such as rational rebuttals and time spoken and looks instead at how the floor

construction impacts the flow of the debate and beyond. This can paint a very different picture

of debate performance, so while traditional analysis would declare Milk the winner, analyzing

the floor shows that Briggs' controls the conversation and his ideas carry the most resonance. In

the debate, Briggs introduces three out of the four major themes. His ideas dominate the

conversation, and his framing of the issues are centered forcing Milk on the defense as he must

counter these arguments before he can put his own ideas forward. Briggs is also more successful

in controlling the floor; his conversational offerings are taken up the most frequently and he is

able to bypass many of Milk's strongest arguments. Briggs' control of the conversation forces

Milk to argue against Briggs' ideas rather than go on the offensive and present his own framing

of the issue.

References

Bryant, A. (1977). *The Anita Bryant story.* Old Tappen, FL: Fleming H. Revell Company.

Bouie, J., Ali, W., Bruenig, E., Cottle, M., Duran, G., Hemmer, N., . . . Wehner, P. (2020, March 16). Winners and losers of the Democratic debate. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from nytimes.com.

Cai, W., Lee, J.C., & Patel, J.K. (2019, September 12). Which candidates got the most speaking time in the Democratic debate. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from nytimes.com.

Clifford, C. M. (1960, September 26). *Memorandum on Television Debate with Vice President Nixon* [Memorandum].

Edelsky, C. (1981). Who's got the floor? *Language in Society*, 10(3), 383-421.

Eu, M.F. (1977). "California Voters Pamphlet." https://web.archive.org/web/20060818145437/ http://library.uchastings.edu/ballot_pdf/1978g.pdf

Harbeck, K.M. (1997). *Gay and lesbian educators: Personal freedoms, public constraints.* Malden, MA: Amethyst Press.

Holm, T., and Foote, J. (2015). Judge Training: Judging Individual Events, Judging Parliamentary Debate, Judging Lincoln-Douglas Debate. *Speaker & Gavel*, 52(1), 44-75

Jones, R. & Thornborrow, J. (2004). Floors, talk, and the organization of classroom activities. *Language in Society*, 33, 399-423.

Milk, H. (2012). ". . .the whole concept behind democracy and the Constitution is to protect the rights of the minority, not the majority." In V. Emery (Ed.), *The Harvey Milk interviews: In his own words.* San Francisco, CA: Vince Emery Productions.

Milk, H. (2012). "Just because something has been a law for a long time doesn't make it right." In V. Emery (Ed.), *The Harvey Milk interviews: In his own words.* San Francisco, CA: Vince Emery Productions.

Ochs, E. (1979). Transcription as theory. In E. Ochs & B. Schieffelin (Eds.), *Developmental Pragmatics* (pp. 43-72). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Sacks, H., Schegloff, R.A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking in conversation. *Language* 50, 696-735.

Sick Again? Psychiatrists Vote on Gays. (1978, February 20). *TIME Magazine*, p. 102.

Zhou, L. (2019, June 27). Women Candidates, on average, spoke more than men in the Democratic debate. *Vox*. Retrieved from vox.com.