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A “*glowing marble*”: “*brushed with clouds*” or “*parched, scorched, and washed away*”?
Barack Obama’s use of contrasting metaphors and stories in framing climate change.

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**A “*bright blue ball*”: “*brushed with clouds*” or “*parched, scorched, and washed away*”?
Barack Obama’s use of contrasting metaphors and stories in framing climate change.**

This paper examines President Barack Obama’s use of contrasting metaphors and metaphorical stories to frame the issue of climate change and the associated political controversies in a major policy speech at Georgetown University in 2013. One major theme in the speech contrasted a series of metaphors based on violence and destruction with a series of metaphors based on peace, tranquility, and health, all within an overall framing story about the Apollo 8 astronauts and the picture they took of the Earth from lunar orbit. Another major theme is the contrast between metaphors of passivity or obstruction and metaphors of movement and dynamic activity. Within these two sets of thematic contrasts are more subtle contrasts between metaphors associated with the effects of climate change and metaphors associated with ameliorative actions to counteract climate change. All of these themes are presented in a way that fails to acknowledge – and implicitly discredits – possible alternative frames: This, plus the obstruction / movement contrast, effectively aggravates the frame conflicts that have stymied fruitful discussion of these issues throughout the Obama administration. We close the analysis with some specific recommendations for increasing the potential for empathetic understanding through explicit awareness of the framing effects of language.

Key words: transportation theory; story-metaphors; blending; framing; climate change

A “*bright blue ball*”: “*brushed with clouds*” or “*parched, scorched, and washed away*”?

Obama’s use of contrasting metaphors and stories in framing climate change.

1. Introduction

During the past decade, the long increase in concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere and the overall warming of the atmosphere expected by most scientists to result from the associated ‘*greenhouse effect*’ has become a major policy issue, both in the U.S. and worldwide. In the U.S., concerns about climate change and proposals to reduce the level of CO₂ emissions have also become the focus of political controversy and polarization, as some groups dismiss the scientific claims about the contribution of human activities to environmental warming altogether and other groups offer competing and often contradictory frames for the topic, each with its own distinct set of policy implications. In this paper we examine a recent (2013) speech by U. S. President Barack Obama in which he deployed a set of complex and interlocking metaphors, stories, and story metaphors to frame both the topic of climate change and the political debate about proposed policy responses to the problem.

Metaphors often imply stories, and stories are often developed from metaphors (Ritchie, 2010). Familiar metaphors may be processed primarily by way of amodal (semantic) links to other words and phrases (Barsalou, 2007), but metaphors often activate perceptual simulations based on associated schemas (Gibbs, 2006; Ritchie, 2008b; 2009; 2010). It appears that stories also activate perceptual simulations (Oatley, 2002), although the level of detail appears to vary according to factors such as the reader or hearer’s level of attention, involvement, and transportation into the story world (Green, 2004; Green & Brock, 2002). There is extensive evidence that metaphors and stories can influence how a reader or hearer processes a message

and thinks about the topic (see for example Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011). The degree to which a reader or hearer is ‘*transported into*’ a story, i.e., the extensiveness and detail of the simulations activated by a story also appears to influence the persuasiveness of the message (Brock, Strange, & Green, 2002; Green, 2004; Green & Brock, 2002).

Ritchie (2010) showed that stories and metaphors are often intertwined, and argued that similar cognitive processes may be implicated in both stories and metaphors, including the partial activation of perceptual simulations (Barsalou, 2007; Gibbs, 2006) and the search for relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; 1995). Ritchie also argued that both story-telling and metaphors in ordinary conversations must be analyzed not only for their propositional content and persuasive force but also for their function as a means of reinforcing social identity and bonding through shared enjoyment, consistent with Dunbar’s (1996) analysis of language as a kind of *grooming*.

Ritchie and Cameron (2014) showed that the stories and metaphors invoked in discussing controversial issues often establish quite different frames, which are often contrasting or contradictory. When speakers are unaware of or fail to take into account these contradictory frames the result may be to block empathy, decrease rather than increase mutual understanding, and exacerbate conflict and polarization. Ritchie and Cameron concluded that, in order to build a foundation for empathy and mutual understanding, interlocutors must explicitly acknowledge and account for the frames in each other’s as well as their own metaphors and stories. This essay addresses the intertwined use of stories (e.g. Apollo 8), metaphors (“*rising levels of CO₂*”), and story-metaphors (“*disrupt the fragile balance*”) in a political speech by President Barack Obama about climate change, identifies the frames implied by these stories and metaphors, and assesses the potential effect of these implicit frames on future discourse about the topic – including the

potential for aggravating rather than alleviating the implicit frame conflict that has stymied discussion of climate change throughout Obama’s term in office.

2. Method.

This project is based on a form of discourse analysis that includes analysis of metaphors (Cameron, 2007; 2010; Ritchie, 2010) as well as stories and humor (Ritchie, 2010). Previous work (Ritchie, 2008a; 2009; 2010; Ritchie & Schell, 2009) has shown that stories often include metaphors, metaphors often imply stories, and stories frequently serve as metaphors. In ordinary conversations, patterns of metaphor use and story-telling provide evidence both about how individual speakers think and feel about a topic, and about the developing dynamics within a relationship (Cameron, 2007). In the context of a formally crafted text such as a political speech, patterns of metaphor use and story-telling provide clues about the speaker’s positioning with respect to various potential audiences (Ritchie, 2008a) as well as about the deliberate or inadvertent framing of a topic (Musolff, 2006; Ritchie, 2008a; Ritchie & Cameron, 2014; Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011).

2.1. Coding

This project used a workshop approach to identifying and coding metaphors and stories. In addition to the authors, participants included three second-year graduate students in Communication and a visiting scholar from Romania. Each of the six participants reviewed the texts beforehand, then we met as a group to identify and code the metaphors and stories in the text. We began by identifying the overall structure of the text and the dominant themes. We then worked through the text, paragraph by paragraph, as follows. Each member of the group identified words, phrases, and brief passages believed to be either metaphorical or a story according to the criteria outlined in the next sections. We discussed each candidate text segment

in turn until the group reached consensus, then moved on to the next, until we had coded the entire text. At the end of the first day, we identified several overarching themes among both the metaphors and the stories. On the second day of the workshop we began by reviewing what we had accomplished on the first day, and discussing each theme in more detail. We then identified coherent groupings of themes for more detailed analysis. Working in smaller groups, we conducted these analyses, then if any items remained unresolved discussed each in detail as an entire group.

2.2. Metaphors.

Semino (2008, p. 1) defines *metaphor* as "the phenomenon whereby we talk and, potentially, think about something in terms of something else." Cameron (2006; also Cameron & Maslen, 2010) focuses on the metaphor vehicle in its discourse context as the unit of analysis. Steen (2007; see also Dorst & Kaal, 2012; Steen et al., 2010) identifies metaphor in the conceptual structure rather than in the language use. We followed a procedure for identifying utterances as metaphorical based on Cameron's discourse-analytic approach and incorporating the insights of the Steen group. In brief, we determined the meaning of a word or phrase in context, taking account of the underlying conceptual structure as well as the most basic customary meanings of lexical units, and if the word or phrase has a more basic contemporary meaning that can be clearly distinguished from and understood in comparison with the meaning in context, the phrase was identified as metaphorical. Thus, when Obama uses the idiom "grateful for their *support*," members of his audience are potentially likely to¹ think of success as '*remaining upright*' and assistance as '*support*,' i.e., '*helping to remain upright*.' Accordingly, we coded the phrase as a metaphor.

¹ As Ritchie (2013) points out, neither interlocutors nor discourse analysts can ever be certain how others interpret a word or phrase.

2.3. Stories.

Story-telling is universal, and is apparently a central part of how we organize our social interactions as well as our understanding of the world. However, until quite recently research on story-telling has focused primarily on artful and highly structured story-telling in entertainment and instructional media (Abbott, 2008; Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock., 2002) or on stories obtained through structured interviews (Riessman, 2008). Recent research in the present series has examined more informal and loosely-structured stories and metaphors in ordinary conversations and informal meetings (Ritchie, 2008a; 2009; 2010; Ritchie & Cameron, 2014; Ritchie & Schell, 2009) and in a political speech (Ritchie, 2008a). This paper focuses on the use of metaphors and stories as framing devices in a major political speech.

Different researchers have defined *story* and *narrative* more or less broadly, depending on their purposes. For this project, the general concept of a *story* is defined broadly, as a reference to *any* “representation of an event or a series of events” that are causally-related (Abbot, 2008, p. 13), whether or not it satisfies Bruner’s criterion that “something unforeseen must happen” (2002, p. 18) or satisfies the criteria, associated with more formal narratives, of a minimal plot with reversal and resolution (for a detailed discussion see Ritchie, 2010). *Narrative* or *extended narrative* is defined as a story that has been intentionally (or artfully) constructed, and satisfies the criteria of a minimal plot, including a problem, expected resolution, difficulty or surprise, and actual resolution. A word or phrase that identifies or activates a story is a *story index*. In sum, for this project any utterance that describes or references a readily-identified and causally-related sequence of events is identified as a *story*, and any utterance that apparently functions to remind hearers of a known story, whether fictional or actual, is a *story index*. Note

that a story may often involve parallel sequences of events, and may incorporate more than one component story into a larger narrative.

3. Analysis

President Barack Obama’s Georgetown speech was constructed around three major contrasts, peace vs. violence, active vs. passive, and Republicans *then* vs. Republicans *now* (past Republican support for environmental causes vs. present Republican obstructionism). The speech was framed within a brief but complex story about the Apollo 8 broadcast from lunar orbit, a story that alludes to American accomplishments (the series of Apollo moon missions), the beauty and fragility of the Earth, and shared religious values associated with peace and stewardship. Within this overall story-frame, several other stories are mentioned. Some are briefly recounted and others are only implied by Obama’s use of metaphors. Each of these contrasts is presented in a way that effectively precludes consideration of alternative or contradictory frames.

3.1. The initial framing story.

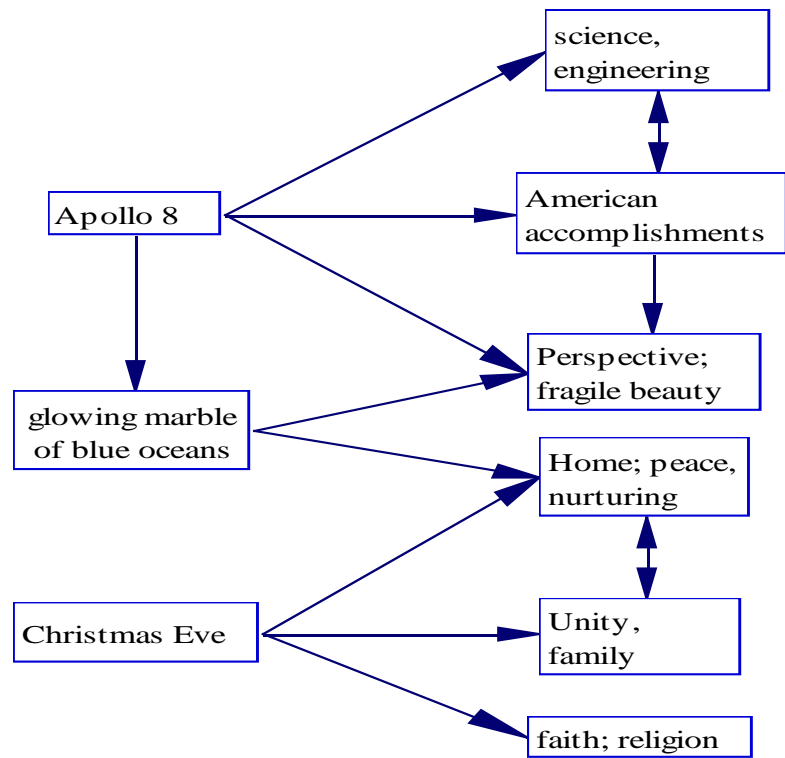
Immediately following the usual acknowledgements of the audience and assembled dignitaries, Obama recounted the story of a live broadcast from lunar orbit:

On Christmas Eve, 1968, the astronauts of Apollo 8 did a live broadcast from lunar orbit. So Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, William Anders — the first humans to orbit the moon — described what they saw, and they read scripture from the Book of Genesis to the rest of us back here. And later that night, they took a photo that would change the way we see and think about our world.

It was an image of Earth – beautiful; breathtaking; a *glowing marble* of blue oceans, and green forests, and brown mountains *brushed with* white clouds, *rising over* the surface of the moon. (6 & 7)²

Figure 1. Framing story I: Apollo 8

This entire story, especially the phrase, “the first humans to orbit the moon,” indexes a shared story of American scientific accomplishment, to which Obama referred again at the very close of the speech, after detailing what will be required to mitigate the effects of pollution and climate change. *Christmas Eve* indexes and potentially



activates a set of stories familiar to most if not all members of the audience, including the Nativity story itself but also the generic story of families gathering together to celebrate the holiday, complete with Christmas carols about (e.g.) “peace and goodwill.” The reference to “scripture from the Book of Genesis” activates both the Biblical creation story and the implication in the creation story that humans (as heirs of Adam) are responsible for the Earth and the other living things on Earth. These inter-linked stories can be understood as the metaphorical expression of humans’ *present* responsibility for “God’s creation.” The effect is to anchor the

² Paragraph numbers were added for reference purposes.

science-based concerns about pollution and its effect on the environment in a widely-shared religious sensibility.

- Figure 1 about here -

The poetic metaphors in the second paragraph of the story, “*brehtaking*,” “*glowing marble*,” and “*brushed with white clouds*” emphasize both the beauty of the scene and the astronaut’s response to the scene (and by implication the response of humans watching the broadcast). “*Rising above the surface of the moon*” echoes the diminutive metaphor “*marble*,” which invites listeners to experience the Earth as a tiny, fragile globe and to adopt the astronauts’ perspective in which Earth is seen from outside and above, not as a fixed and permanent environment, but as an object in a much larger context, a small planet moving through infinite, empty space. The potential emotional implications of this perspective are made explicit by a quote from one of the astronauts: “‘It makes you realize,’ Lovell would say, ‘just what you have back there on Earth.’”

In this brief recounting of a familiar story, with embedded references to several other stories, Obama established a religious context (the book of Genesis and the Christmas Story) as well as a political, scientific, and engineering context (the accomplishments of the Apollo space program) and affirmed our shared interest in preserving the “beautiful, breathtaking, glowing marble” of Earth. This scene is peaceful, almost pastoral – it also activates and blends the past story of how American ingenuity accomplished the complex tasks required to put humans in orbit around the moon with the present and future story of addressing the problems of pollution and climate change. Thus, the story set the context by addressing both motivation and efficacy. By emphasizing the *fragility* as well as the peaceful beauty of the scene, it also established a context for the subsequent contrast between metaphors of peace and war.

3.2. Peace vs. Violence.

The simulations of peaceful beauty evoked by the indexed story of Christmas Eve as well as by the poetic description of the image of Earth broadcast from lunar orbit are reinforced by several other metaphors and stories sprinkled through the speech, which contrast sharply with metaphors of violence that are also sprinkled throughout it. The speech begins, immediately after the Apollo story, with a hypothetical story about potential destructive effects of “*rising levels*” of CO₂ that might “*disrupt the fragile balance*” and “*have profound impacts*” on humanity. Each of these metaphors index and potentially activate stories within a larger narrative of humanity facing potentially disastrous events. This sequence of dynamic metaphors is followed by an explicit story: “The 12 warmest years in recorded history have all *come in* the last 15 years.” The JOURNEY metaphor introduced here is followed by two metaphors that echo “*rising levels*”; “temperatures... *reached record highs*, and ice in the arctic *shrank*...” (10). Together, these metaphors present the climate change story as *active, in motion*, and potentially *destructive*.

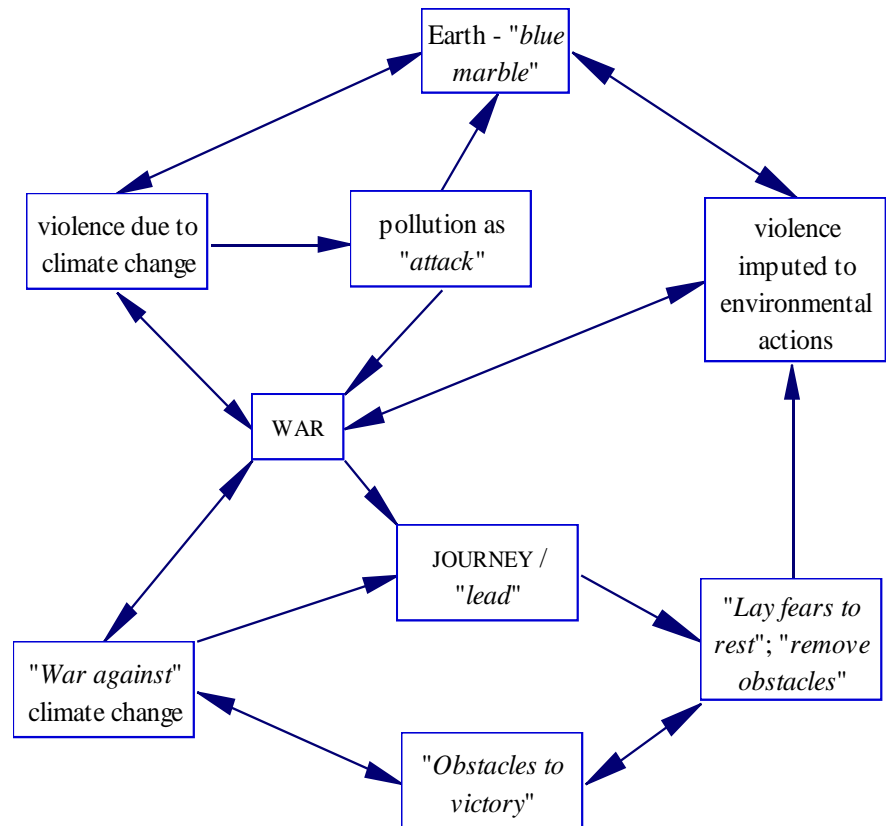
The next paragraph introduces a tricolon (a series of three parallel phrases), “droughts and fires and floods,” which immediately index recent disaster headlines and connect them with stories that “*go back to ancient times*.” This JOURNEY metaphor potentially transports the hearer in geological history, but also resonates with Biblical stories, including Noah and the flood, the pestilences visited upon Egypt, and the disasters foretold in “Revelations.” The following paragraph repeats the tricolon with allusions to specific recent events in the U.S.:

2012 was the warmest year in our history. Midwest farms were *parched* by the worst drought since the Dust Bowl, and then *drenched* by the wettest spring on record. Western *wildfires scorched* an area larger than the state of Maryland. (12)

This string of stories about the violence of climate change ends with an even more explicitly violent metaphor: “a heat wave in Alaska *shot* temperatures into the 90s.” These images are reinforced in the following paragraphs with stories of “firefighters braving *longer* wildfire seasons” (13) and farmers who “see crops *wilted* one year, *washed away* the next.” (14)

Figure 2. Framing Stories: climate change and the call to arms

The accumulated effect of these stories is to encourage hearers to experience climate change as violent, destructive, and active, and to experience humans ourselves as implicitly passive onlookers, who “*brave* longer fire seasons,” “*see* crops wilted...,” and “*pay the price* of inaction.” (14) This



contrast is reversed, first by asking “whether we will *have the courage to act*,” (16) then by yet another, contrasting tricolon: “As a President, as a father, and as an American, I’m here to say we need to act.” (17) Here, three sources of moral authority are summoned against the three forms of apocalyptic destruction introduced in the prior tricolon; note also how this tricolon implicitly carries forward – and opposes – the narrative begun by the preceding tricolon.

Up to this point, the metaphorical violence has all originated with climate change. Now Obama escalates the violence of fire, flood, and drought to the level of war, and summons the audience to respond in an even more warlike way, by “enlisting” in “the *fight against* climate change” with the United States as “*leader*” in the fight. These metaphors activate and reinforce a familiar story, part of the American Myth, a story of a nation under attack that responds with a vigorous counterattack. The military and violence metaphors reappear later in the speech, when Obama refers to his plan “to *lead* the world in a *coordinated assault* on a changing climate” (23). Here, Obama adopts a metaphorical frame often associated with Republican leaders as a justification for actual war (see, e.g., Lakoff, 1991)³.

A separate contrast with the initial metaphor / story of ‘climate change as *active aggressor*’ is proposed by a series of metaphors and stories that immediately follow Obama’s ‘*call to arms* in the *fight against* climate change.’ Combining JOURNEY and CONSTRUCTION metaphors, he describes how his plan “*builds on progress* that we’ve already *made*.” Continuing the CONSTRUCTION metaphor he describes how he and his administration “*rolled up our sleeves*” and “*got to work*.” He follows this metaphor-enhanced story of industriousness with a story involving “the ingenuity of our businesses” that “helped *drive* our carbon pollution to its *lowest levels* in nearly 20 years.” This theme continued with a brief story about Obama’s most recent State of the Union address, in which he “urged Congress to *come up with* a bipartisan, *market-based* solution to climate change, like the one that Republican and Democratic senators *worked on* together a few years ago,” then asserted “I’m willing to *work with* anyone to *make that happen*.” The comparison to a previous cooperative effort by “Republican and Democratic

³ We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

senators” set the stage for a crucial set of ironic contrasts, between Republican actions *then* and Republican actions *now*, all within a secondary framing story about current Republican obstructionism.

Near the end of the speech, Obama explicitly acknowledged the peace / violence contrast with a complex construction: “The *challenge* we must *accept* will not *reward* us with a *clear moment of victory*. There’s no *gathering army to defeat*. There’s no *peace treaty*.” (90) This construction implicitly activates a story of *glorious war* only to negate it. Even though he spoke, earlier in the speech, of the need for “courage” and of “the *fight against* climate change,” in this negative story he explicitly negated the “*war on –*” trope.

3.3. Ironies in a partisan framing story.

The Georgetown speech was a policy speech but it was also, perhaps primarily, a political speech. This became apparent about a quarter of the way through when Obama referred to the passage of the Clean Air Act of 1970 by a nearly unanimous bipartisan vote, under a Republican President, and added ironically “this used to be a bipartisan issue” (26). He then branched into a series of briefer stories about the current environmental situation before returning to the framing contrasts between previous Republican active support for environmental legislation and present Republican passive obstruction of environmental legislation. These intervening stories include several metaphors contrasting “*clean air*” and “*cleaner natural gas*” with “*dirty fuel*,” supported by a metonymic extension of “*pollution*” to incorporate CO₂ and active metaphors including “*pump into* our air” and “*dump* unlimited amounts of carbon *pollution* into the air.” Parallel to these “*clean / dirty*” and “*pump and dump*” contrasts, he referred to his own directives to the EPA to “develop these standards in an *open and transparent* way,” thereby connecting his own administrative actions to the “*clean*” metaphor (and, by implication, connecting his

opponents to the “*dirty*” metaphor). Finally, he referred back to the dynamic STRUCTURE metaphors introduced earlier, with “build on the leadership...” of states, cities, and companies, “*creating new jobs,*” and “*market-based solutions,*” culminating in a return to the JOURNEY metaphor with “It’s just time for Washington to *catch up with* the rest of the country” (31).

The “*clean / dirty*” and “*pump and dump*” metaphors are staples of environmentalist discourse in the U.S., and for many listeners are likely to activate complex schemas based on previous debates over air pollution, water pollution, and even topics such as urban renewal. Similarly, “*creating new jobs*” and “*market-based solutions*” appear in almost every debate about public policies, and are also likely to activate a complex schema of entrepreneurial creativity.

Obama then returned to his “obstructionist” framing story, not mentioning Republicans by name but using a pair of familiar tropes and connecting them with metaphorical references to violence, reactivating the WAR metaphor: “what you’ll hear from the *special interests* and *their allies in Congress* is that this will *kill jobs* and *crush the economy*” (32). “*Special interests*” is a trope frequently used by both Democrats (to refer obliquely, as here, to corporate lobbyists) and Republicans (to refer obliquely to labor unions, environmentalist organizations, and others who typically support the Democratic Party). Because the phrase serves to discredit the opposing party’s arguments as self-serving, it is inherently polarizing.

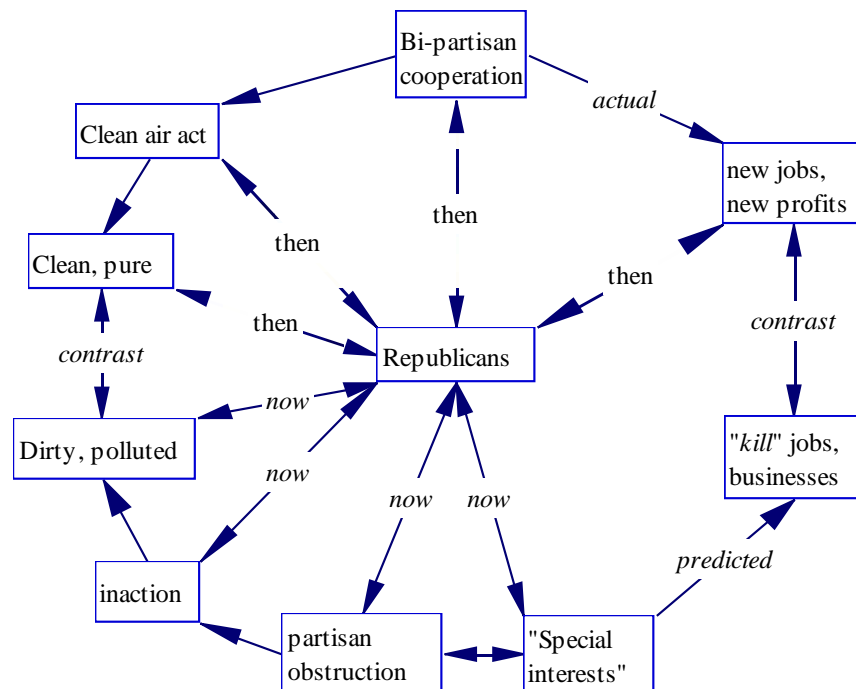
A couple of paragraphs later, the opponents are “*doomsayers*” who predict “pollution standards will *decimate* the auto industry” and that regulation protecting against acid rain would cause businesses to “*suffer... a quiet death.*” He then referred to “*tired excuses for inaction*” “that suggests a *fundamental lack of faith* in American business and American ingenuity” and proceeded to list additional metaphorical contrasts between the predictions of violence and ruin

and actual outcomes: restricting cancer-causing chemicals in plastics “didn’t *end* the plastics industry,” phasing out CFCs “didn’t *kill off* refrigerators or air-conditioners,” and fuel standards didn’t “*cripple* automakers.” Like “*special interests*,” accusations of “*lacking faith*” reinforced by the exaggerated phrasing (“*quiet death*,” “*kill off*”) serve to discredit opposing arguments as unworthy of consideration.

- Figure 3 about here -

Figure 3. Contrasting stories about politics – then and now

These contrasts were followed by a series of policy proposals, then, several paragraphs later (83), Obama repeated the contrast between the present state in which “climate change has become a partisan issue”



and *previous* bipartisan action on climate change, in which “Republicans *led the way* on new and innovative policies.” This was followed by a call to “*move beyond* partisan politics” and “*combat this threat* on behalf of our kids.” Then Obama deployed a series of conventionally disparaging metaphors (86), beginning with “We don’t *have time* for a meeting of the *Flat Earth Society*,” a commonplace (and belittling) reference to people who deny scientific findings in a way that obstructs science-based solutions. He added, “*Sticking your head in the sand* might *make you feel safer*, but it’s not going to *protect you from the coming storm*.” “*Sticking your*

head in the sand” refers to a culturally shared mythical story about the behavior of ostriches; although it is a cultural truism it still has the potential to activate a strong – and amusing – simulation of a silly response to a “*coming storm*.” All of these disparaging metaphors might seem somewhat ironic in view of his immediately preceding call to “*move beyond* partisan politics.”

There follows a tricolon of contrasts: those in power “are elected not just to serve as *custodians* of the present, but as *caretakers* of the future.” Americans don’t “*look backward*,” we “*look forward*.” We don’t “*fear* what the future *holds*; we *shape* it.” Each of these tropes contrasts *passive* with *active*, and each echoes more detailed passages from earlier in the speech. Each briefly activates contrasting stories, and invites listeners to enter into and become part of those stories.

These contrasts are followed by several other tricolons: citizens are called on to “stand up, and speak up, and compel us to do what this moment demands,” to “speak up at town halls... *push back* on misinformation ... *broaden the circle* of those who are willing to *stand up* for our future.” These also contrast *active* with *passive*. Each of these even more explicitly activates stories, stories that have a greater potential to transport the listener into a story-world in which the listener is an active participant. “*Broaden the circle*” taps into a common metaphor of sociability and inclusion, and explicitly invites the listener to invite others to become part of the story.

At this point, having just recited a list of important contrasts, Obama activated another series of contrasts – only to negate them. The first of these repeats and summarizes a theme that was expounded in detail earlier in the speech, that taking action to protect the environment will not necessarily impede economic growth, but can help foster it: “Remind folks there’s no

contradiction between a *sound* environment and *strong economic growth*.” (89) Following this is another tricolon of contrasts, this time repeating and negating the previous use of WAR metaphors: “The challenge we must *accept* will not *reward* us with a *clear* moment of *victory*. There’s no *gathering army to defeat*. There’s no *peace treaty* to sign.” (90)

Finally, Obama returned to the framing story of the Apollo 8 astronauts and how looking back and down upon Earth from a great distance encouraged them to see the Earth with greater appreciation. Here, Obama used this framing story to summarize the emotional importance of protecting the environment with another tricolon: “And that image in the photograph, that *bright blue ball rising over the moon’s surface, containing everything we hold dear* — the laughter of children, a quiet sunset, all the hopes and dreams of posterity — that’s what’s *at stake*.” (91)

4. Discussion.

Several researchers, notably Boroditsky and her colleagues (Fausey & Boroditsky 2010; Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011), have demonstrated the framing effects of metaphors. Even when audience members are not consciously aware of a metaphor and do not process it deeply, a framing metaphor can influence how they think about the topic, how they go about finding more information about the topic, and the kind of responses they consider. When metaphors are combined with or transformed into stories, these framing effects can be even stronger, particularly for individuals who are “transported” into the story-world activated by the metaphor (Green, 2004), i.e., when they simulate the actions described by the story-metaphor.

Previous work has provided examples of how stories are used as metaphors, and metaphors are developed into stories. Ritchie (2014; also Ritchie & Negrea-Busuioc, 2014) analyzes several metaphors that can only be understood if they are understood as stories⁴ (e.g. “*glass ceiling*”), and several others that provide richer meaning if related stories are activated

⁴ See also Musolf’s (2006) analysis of *scenarios* in political discourse.

(e.g. “*vulture capitalist*”), along with other examples in which metaphors activate *contrasting* stories (“I’ve heard justice is *blind* ... I hope you won’t *take advantage of her because she’s blind*”). Ironically contrasting stories and metaphors are particularly important in political and other persuasive speeches, where they can serve to discredit opponents and/or proposed policies, often but not always with humorous effects.

This paper focuses on a single speech by President Barack Obama (2013) in which he used a complex combination of stories and metaphors to frame the problem of climate change, the need for actions to address climate change, and the opposition to proposed actions and policies, primarily from Republicans. Climate change is a difficult topic for a political speech, because the underlying science is both complicated and abstract, and the long-range claims of climate science often contradict immediate evidence that may be highly salient to the audience. It is also difficult because there is no clear focus of attention: the climate, and the CO₂ and other greenhouse gases that are responsible for warming trends, are everywhere, and are invisible.

To address these challenges, Obama built the speech around three major contrasts, peace vs. violence, active vs. passive, and past pro-environmentalist policies of Republican politicians vs. present obstructionist behavior. He framed the entire issue within a story of the Apollo 8 moon mission, and the famous “Earthrise” photograph taken by the Apollo 8 astronauts, which contrasted against a series of tricolons and alliterative phrases describing the recent and forecasted effects of climate change. Forests and farms are being *parched, drenched, and scorched*. Firefighters “*brave* longer fire seasons,” farmers “*see* crops *wilted*...,” and we all “*pay the price* of inaction.” Crops are *wilted* one year, *washed away* the next. Industries *pump* and *dump* carbon pollution into the air.

Obama used similar alliterative constructions to rally support for remedial policy. Those in power “are elected not just to serve as *custodians* of the present, but as *caretakers* of the future.” Americans don’t “*look backward*,” we “*look forward*.” We don’t “*fear* what the future *holds*; we *shape* it.” Citizens are urged to “*stand up*,” and “*speak up*,” and “*compel* action.” Current Republican opposition to pro-environmental policies is contrasted in a series of comparisons with the pro-environmentalist actions of several former Republican Presidents and congressional leaders. Intentionally or not, however, these contrasting metaphors, apparently intended to rally support among those who agree with Obama’s framing, also have the potential to increase the opposition from those who frame the topics differently, and thus to increase polarization over this complex issue and further reduce the possibility of precisely the kind of constructive dialog and collaborative problem-solving Obama calls for in the speech. Even Obama’s use of the shared stories of the Apollo 8 broadcast, with its allusion to the Christmas story and the Biblical creation story, has the potential to increase political polarization if audience members perceive it as an attempt to seize the moral high ground. Unfortunately, his stories contrasting past Republican support for environmental legislation with present obstructionism and the accusations implied by his use of “*special interests and their allies in Congress*” and “*fundamental lack of faith*” have the potential to support exactly that interpretation.

One of the necessary preconditions for achieving mutual empathetic understanding is to recognize that the Other may have a different experiential world and see both events and issues through a radically different frame, and to “enter into” that world at least to the extent of acknowledging the potential for alternative frames (Cameron, 2011; Ritchie & Cameron, 2014). Irony directed at the Other, while satisfying to members of an in-group, can have the effect of

reinforcing inter-group distance and blocking the development of mutual understanding. As Obama pointed out in this speech, environmental degradation in general and issues related to climate change in particular were once a bi-partisan issue. However, his references to this history of bipartisanship were cast in an ironic and partisan way that does not seem likely to restore a spirit of bipartisanship. This ironic and disparaging tone is reinforced by the use of alliterative polarities like “*clean / dirty*” and “*pump and dump*” in a context that implicitly associates the positive polarity (“*clean*”) with Obama and his supporters and the negative polarity (“*dirty*”) with those who disagree with him.

Much of the framing in this speech – the religious context, the “American accomplishments” frame – refers to stories and values that are likely to be shared by many members of both Republican and Democratic parties. The initial reference to environmental protection accomplishments of past Republican leaders also offers a potential for empathy and collaboration. However, the heavy-handed irony of the contrast between “Republicans then” and “Republicans now,” with the disparaging metaphors, undermines the potential unifying *collaboration* frame and elevates a polarizing *conflict* frame in its place.

Several political pundits have commented on Obama’s apparent impatience with and even disdain for the political game, arguing that his aloofness has contributed to his diminishing effectiveness. Several passages in this speech imply an instinct to reach out and seek common ground but, if that was in fact a motivating factor, it is undermined by the irony and cynical humor in the speech, all at the expense of his opponents. By contrasting the stories of Republicans’ past “responsible” actions with their present “irresponsible” obstructionism, intentionally or not Obama reinforced the partisan polarization over the issue of climate change,

making it even more difficult for members of the Republican opposition to join him in some “middle ground.”

Ritchie and Cameron (2014) propose several steps that might contribute to reducing polarization and increasing the potential for mutual empathy in a situation of conflict within a community. Three of these recommendations seem particularly relevant and readily adaptable to the political discourse surrounding climate change:

1. Anticipate or find out the frames through which other groups see the issues and the underlying facts, along with the language in which they express those frames.
2. Anticipate potential contradictions between frames, bring these contradictions to the surface, and propose solutions that are compatible with *both* frames.
3. Be aware of the framing effects of language, including stories and metaphors.

As Ritchie and Cameron point out, attention to the framing effects of language can often lead to insights about why attempts to achieve common ground are unsuccessful. Public speeches in particular almost always have multiple audiences, and the language used may activate very different frames for different audiences. President Obama’s Georgetown speech was overtly and explicitly directed at a sympathetic audience of students and environmental activists – but it also unavoidably addressed a less sympathetic audience of conservative activists and a probably even larger audience of on-the-fence citizens. A more nuanced and thoughtful consideration of alternative frames for climate change and the challenges it poses would have a better chance at building empathetic understanding and reducing the politicization and polarization that has come to characterize – and paralyze – the public discussion of this crucial issue in the past several years.

In the community meeting analyzed by Ritchie and Coleman (2014), it appears that speakers were unaware of the potential framing effects of many of their metaphors, and in general did not take adequate account of the frames preferred by the Other, or of their possible reasons for preferring these frames. In Obama’s speech, it is reasonable to assume that most of the metaphors and stories were chosen precisely for their potential framing effects – but here, also, Obama and his speech writers appear not to have taken into account the alternative frames preferred by other groups, members of the Republican opposition in particular, but also non-political groups who have not been actively included in the climate change debate. Future research on the framing effects of metaphors and stories might fruitfully examine the potential of unacknowledged frame contradictions to increase polarization and conflict (e.g. in this case between Republicans and Democrats, and between pro-industry groups and environmentalists) as well as to exclude citizens who understand an issue through entirely different frames from participating in the discourse at all.

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