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The Pope of YouTube: Metaphor and Misunderstanding in Atheist-Christian YouTube Dialogue

By Stephen Pihlaja

Abstract

Using a discourse dynamic, metaphor-led analysis, this article investigates the use of metaphor in three YouTube videos made by two American YouTube users: one a fundamentalist Christian and one an atheist. The focus of the analysis is on how metaphor was produced dynamically in the interaction and what this interaction may tell us about how misunderstanding occurred between the two users. Analysis shows that understanding of specific metaphors seems to differ depending on who is producing and interpreting a given metaphor.

Introduction

On the popular video sharing website, YouTube, users from all over the world engage in dialogue with each other on a myriad of subjects. Often, religion is discussed, and this article is an attempt to investigate one dialogue between a fundamentalist Christian and an atheist by looking specifically at how the two users employed metaphor to talk about their role and position on the website and how the use of metaphor perhaps led to misunderstanding between the two. Although there has been much interest in YouTube and other forms of computer-mediated communication (cf. Burgess and Green 2009), to date there has been no close analysis of YouTube discourse in relation to inter-religious dialogue despite a diverse community of individuals arguing and discussing religious issues on the website. As language is one of the primary means of communication, analysis of language used in inter-religious dialogue is apt to provide some insight into the interaction between people holding differing religious viewpoints. Using an applied linguistic perspective, this article will show that metaphor is used in the dialogue, and that significant differences can be seen in how users interpret metaphor over the course of the videos.

Over the last thirty years, there has been a significant interest in metaphor studies (cf. Steen 2007 for a comprehensive introduction), stemming from the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, which argued that metaphor was fundamental to human experience, both in language and thought (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Unlike cognitive, literary, or philosophical approaches to metaphor, a discourse dynamics approach begins by focusing on metaphor from a complex systems theory perspective, focusing on change and how change occurs. It engages metaphor as a phenomenon that emerges out of the complex system of language—something that develops naturally in the course of language being used (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008). In particular, it can be used to investigate

how metaphor use emerges and how particular metaphor use or systems of metaphor use can develop and change in sections of discourse or whole discourse events. This approach is particularly appropriate for researchers interested in how language is organized in speech communities, not in conscious, prescribed ways, but as naturally occurring from the interactions of the speakers. In the context of asynchronous Internet text where videos exist in a dynamic environment with responses and comments being produced by different users, mapping the dynamic interactions may give some insight into the reasons behind the dialogue outcomes.

Although the definition of metaphor has been debated, this article understands metaphor in terms of transfer of meaning; metaphor is “seeing something in terms of something else” (Burke 1945: 503, cited in Cameron and Low, 1999). Metaphor begins with a “focus term or vehicle” in the text which is incongruous with the surrounding text and context, and in which the incongruity can be understood by some “transfer of meaning” between the vehicle and the topic (Cameron 2003). For example, in the data used in this study, the term “pope” is used to describe a user: pope is the vehicle and the user is the topic. Obviously, the word is not intended to be literally understood, but something about the role or identity of the pope is being transferred to the YouTube user. Although this transfer of meaning can be described in different ways (conceptual metaphor theorists, for example, use the terms “target domain” and “source domain” rather than “topic” and “vehicle”), it is generally considered the essential element of metaphor.

Data & Methods

The video thread analyzed in this article consists of a back-and-forth response series from two users: *fakesagan* and *jezuzfreak777*. *fakesagan* is an American male in his late-twenties from the American Northwest. His videos tend to address issues of atheism, anarchy, and libertarian politics. *fakesagan* has had several YouTube accounts and at the time of this writing is currently suspended from YouTube. *jezuzfreak777* is from the American Midwest, an outspoken Christian. His videos address faith, atheism, evolution, and, less frequently, politics. Both users had several thousand subscribers at the time of the analysis and had many fans and detractors as evidenced in the comments attached to the videos. Both had been quite active in the atheist or Christian communities of YouTube, respectively, as well as frequently commenting on and making video responses to videos made by other users.

The video thread analyzed in this text began when *fakesagan* asked two moderate Christians on YouTube their opinion of stem cell research. *jezuzfreak777* responded to the video stating his opinion, and *fakesagan* made a response, recounting a story about *jezuzfreak777* leaving a text comment on video made by a friend in which *jezuzfreak777* admonished *fakesagan*'s friend for positioning the camera to show her breasts in her video and accusing *jezuzfreak777* of being overly pious and imposing his opinion on others. *jezuzfreak777* responded saying that his goal was to “clean YouTube up” and that his piety wasn't a negative thing, but

rather something that *fakesagan* and others saw and envied. The thread ended with *jezuzfreek777*'s last video.

Figure 1: Images of *jezuzfreek777* and *fakesagan*

<i>jezuzfreek777</i>	<i>fakesagan</i>

The videos were transcribed and analyzed in early 2009. Although *jezuzfreek777*'s videos remain accessible, *fakesagan*'s videos have been taken down, as he has been suspended from YouTube. The numbers of views, responses, and text comments were taken in late November 2008. The numbers of video responses and text comments can be altered if users take down their responses, but the view count cannot be changed. Table 1 (next page) shows relevant information related to each video.

Table 1: List of videos in thread

Title	User	Length (min:secs)	View count	Text Comments	Video Responses
Fake hips and hippy christians (part 1 of3)	<i>fakesagan</i>	9:13	3,200 (26-11-08)	67 (26-11-08)	1
[cited 26 November 2008] Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmhCgxGz26E					
Fake hips and hippy christians (part 2 of3)	<i>fakesagan</i>	8:03	2,800 (26-11-08)	65 (26-11-08)	1
[cited 26 November 2008]. Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Twm4nRphik					
Fake hips and hippy christians (part 3 of3)	<i>fakesagan</i>	10:05	6,524 (26-11-08)	118 (26-11-08)	2
[cited 26 November 2008]. Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qovTzwl97cc					
Is stem cell research wrong	<i>jezuzfreek777</i>	3:07	4,291 (26-11-08)	268 (26-11-08)	2
[cited 26 November 2008]. Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJHgOHmLUoQ					
moderate* christian stem cell responses- jezuzfreek777	<i>fakesagan</i>	8:38	5,109 (26-11-08)	179 (26-11-08)	1
[cited 26 November 2008]. Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uI4sXm_ARIY					
Missing jezuzfreek777 video	<i>jezuzfreek777</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
URL N/A					
jezuzfreek thinks he's the pope of youtube (part 1 of 2)	<i>fakesagan</i>	10:05	6,007 (20-11-08)	174 (20-11-08)	1
[cited 26 November 2008]. Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qovTzwl97cc					
jezuzfreek thinks he's the pope of youtube (part 2 of 2)	<i>fakesagan</i>	9:07	6,524 (26-11-08)	118 (26-11-08)	2
[cited 26 November 2008]. Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qovTzwl97cc					
Am I the Pope of YouTube?	<i>jezuzfreek777</i>	6:40	4,593 (24-11-08)	524 (24-11-08)	5
[cited 26 November 2008]. Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPiEqALvvJU&watch_response					

Metaphor was identified in the video transcript using Cameron's vehicle identification procedure (Cameron 2003). After metaphors were identified following the method proposed by Cameron et al. (2009), several linguistic features including topic and metaphor vehicle groupings were identified in the transcript. Metaphors were gathered into interpretive, flexible groups or categories to aid in identifying systems of metaphor use in the discourse (Cameron et al. 2009). Metaphors relating to the same grouping (for example, government metaphors) were then compared not only within the transcription of the spoken language in an individual video, but with all elements of the video page (including text comments). Metaphors were then analyzed, particularly whether or not the same metaphors were recurrent across the whole thread, whether or not the same metaphors appeared in talk from both users, and whether or not metaphors activated by one user were also drawn upon in subsequent video responses made by other users. The process of grouping metaphors is arguably more subjective than metaphor identification as a clear procedure has not been (and likely could not be) established to group metaphors since the process relies heavily on the context in which they are being produced. Keeping in mind this perspective on the metaphor groupings, care was taken to constantly refer back to the context of the video so as to allow for the possibility that metaphors could belong to more than one group or to avoid forcing a grouping where no group is emerging.

Analysis and Findings

Given the constraints of this article, the analysis will focus on the final three videos of the thread. Of the 65 unique metaphors identified in the text, we will focus on the repeated use of the "pope" metaphor, as it seemed to play an important role in the development of the last three videos. The metaphor was repeated at every level of the dialogue: the video content, the titles of videos, textual content surrounding the video made by the user, and the comments. For the purpose of this article, we will look primarily at the use of the metaphor in the spoken words of the videos, but with care to consider the text surrounding the videos (ie., titles, description boxes, comments, tags, etc).

On the video level, the use of the metaphor "pope" did not occur until the first part of the last two videos *fakesagan* made in the exchange, titled "jezuzfreak thinks he's the pope of youtube." The metaphor, however, was not mentioned in the video text, which is devoted largely to denouncing *jezuzfreak777* as overly pious and intrusive. To understand what *fakesagan* means by "pope" requires some understanding of the text of his video. The clearest hint for the intention of the "pope" metaphor seems to be in *fakesagan*'s rejection, an analogy which *jezuzfreak777* had made in an earlier video, when he states,

Time	Intonation Unit	Text
2:52	86	and you made the analogy
	87	<well isn't that like being pulled over
	88	and telling the cop
	89	you know why are you givin me
	90	a speeding ticket when
	91	this guy's getting murdered over here>
	92	it-it's not your place
	93	to tell anyone how to make their
	94	fucking videos
	95	or question
	96	what they do with parts of their body
	97	a-alright
	98	that's-that's not your
	99	you're a pious asshole
3:16	100	it was-it was out of line

(*fakesagan* 2007)

Here, *fakesagan* criticises *jezuzfreak777*'s comment on *anangel13*'s video as being inappropriate because it is, in *fakesagan*'s opinion, not *jezuzfreak777*'s role to make such comments. For *fakesagan*, the word "pope" seems to invoke a sense of *jezuzfreak777* as an uninvolved third party, imposing himself unfairly in the conversation. *jezuzfreak777*, however, links the metaphor "pope" with the qualifier "self-appointed."

Time	Intonation Unit	Text
0:00	1	I wanna make this video response
	2	concerning me being the
0:05	3	self-appointed pope of youtube

(*jezuzfreak777* 2008)

By looking carefully at *jezuzfreak777*'s use of the metaphor in his video, it seems that he perceives the problem not being the content of his comment on *anangel13*'s page, but whether or not he has the authority to make the comment. His use of the qualifier "self-appointed" in rejecting the use of the metaphor seems to imply that perhaps the comment would have been inappropriate if he was acting in his own name, but he appeals to his identity as a Christian to counter that claim. Although it seems clear that *jezuzfreak777* rejects the labeling of "pope," that does not seem to be a rejection of *fakesagan*'s claim that he is pious. *jezuzfreak777* says,

Time	Intonation	Text

	Unit	
4:36	188	you know I can say this
	189	concerning piety
	190	it's not usually
	191	that the person is
	192	acting holier than thou
	193	that bothers people
	194	it's not really the fact
	195	that the person
	196	clings to their faith
	197	that bothers people
	198	what really bothers
	199	people the most
	200	in my opinion is
	201	that they realize
	202	that someone else
	203	has something that they don't have
	204	and
	205	they become
	206	upset
	207	that they can't
	208	enjoy that same thing
5:09	209	because they don't understand it

(*jezuzfreak777* 2008)

jezuzfreak777, it seems, holds a much more positive view of piety, and this perhaps affects his interpretation of the pope metaphor. Whether knowingly or not, it seems he has subtly shifted *fakesagan's* use of the metaphor to fit his understanding of the word and create an acceptable interpretation. This is not to say that the message of *fakesagan's* comment is lost on *jezuzfreak777*, who seems to understand it as an insult and implicitly disputes it. The reason it is insulting, however, seems to be unresolved at the end of the thread and perhaps is evidence for why the two users appear to have difficulty communicating with one another.

The "pope" metaphor also seems to evoke strong reactions in the comments, particularly the final video in which *jezuzfreak777* repeatedly refers to it, including comments like "Your the Pope of Youtube??? *kneels* Bless me Father lol" and "maybe not the pope of youtube...but SURELY the poop of youtube!" For these commenters (and the few comments on the earlier videos), the phrase the "pope of YouTube" doesn't seem to relate to the dialogue that *jezuzfreak777* and *fakesagan* are engaged in, but rather in the "drama" of the exchange and their own perceptions of what the metaphor might mean and entail. Another commenter writes, "You and Pope? We Catholics find that more offending than the 'F' Word which you demonize..." to which *jezuzfreak777* responds, "did you even watch this video" and receives the response, "It's actually a general comment on the title."

This suggests that for some video watchers and commenters, the content of the dialogue doesn't necessarily play a key role in how they understand the video or react to it. In this case, the commenter does not seem to have watched the video on which they are commenting, suggesting they are unaware of the larger issues at stake in the exchange.

Both *jezuzfreak777* and the commenters on the video seem to understand the use of the metaphor "pope of YouTube" to be insulting, but, as can be seen in the examples, what they understand "pope" to be is also quite varied. What seems to have been lost, however, in the course of the video thread and especially in the comments section, is the discussion, first, of stem cell research, and second, the appropriateness of *jezuzfreak777*'s comment on *anangel13*'s video. Both users see their role and the appropriate role of the other as being fundamentally different and their disagreement is rooted in this difference. Given that the "dialogue" does not take place face-to-face and there is no real-time feedback allowing for the person with whom you are talking to ask for corrections, challenge assertions, or orient the conversation back to their own interests and opinions, the dialogue seems to be prone to users following their own understandings and interests in their response videos, rather than truly resolving the issues that arose in the videos to which they are responding.

Implications and Discussion

Considering the exchange between *fakesagan* and *jezuzfreak777*, some potentially useful conclusions can be drawn, not simply about these two users, but other YouTube dialogues between users holding different beliefs.

Although the particular dialogue examined in this article seems to be marked by serious misunderstanding and name-calling, it is important to remember that the video series began with *fakesagan* addressing a legitimate question to two other users who considered themselves Christians. This honest request for the opinions of Christians could be evidence that the possibility of an honest exchange of ideas is possible through YouTube. The dialogue that unfolds with *jezuzfreak777*, however, highlights the difficulties with making this open exchange possible, especially when other issues of YouTube social conventions (for example, whether or not it was appropriate for *jezuzfreak777* to ask *fakesagan*'s friend to change her style of making videos) cloud what might have otherwise been a beneficial discussion. Given the often impolite and crass nature of YouTube interaction as seen in both the comments on the videos as well as *fakesagan*'s treatment of *jezuzfreak777*, it seems that the potential of negative interaction remains high.

Whether or not this data is prototypical of religious dialogue on YouTube in general is difficult to say. Certainly, there seems to be the potential for constructive dialogue between atheists and Christians as well as some examples of dialogues which remain civil and jointly beneficial. In early 2009, a series of videos made between the user *coughlan666*, a British atheist, and *nightvisionphantom*, an American fundamentalist Christian, illustrated the potential of two very different individuals engaging in some meaningful dialogue. The two users issued challenges

to each other to make videos on subjects of the other's choosing (e.g., both discussed the criticisms that they had for members of their own groups). In the end, both reflected on the positive experience making the videos had been, even though both remained ardently committed to their own ideology. Similarly, in early 2010, *theamazingatheist*, an American atheist, and *YokeUp*, an American fundamentalist Christian, met together on video to support a charity committed to the rebuilding of New Orleans. On camera, they discussed the need to find common ground whenever possible. Although this seems to be the exception, rather than the norm, it does seem possible that two users of starkly different faith backgrounds could find interact constructively.

Still, the gap between the atheists and Christians on YouTube seems to be underscored by other factors, be they geographical, socio-economic, or political. Moreover, use of the word "dialogue" might also be misleading as the two users only respond to one another in recorded videos, creating the illusion of physical proximity while the two remain, both physically and metaphorically, quite far apart. This, it seems, is both the advantage and disadvantage of technologies like YouTube: people who might never engage with those strongly opposed to them in the "real world" suddenly have instant access to users from all over the world, with all the complexities these interactions entail. What is appropriate and constructive may then be quite difficult to negotiate in an abstract world where the other person is simply a face in a YouTube video. Whether or not these issues of distance and appropriateness will subside as the technology becomes less novel and the social norms of websites like YouTube continue to develop remains to be seen, and it seems difficult to predict how technologies like YouTube (and the interactions of people using them) will develop.

Conclusion

As we have seen, both *fakesagan* and *jezuzfreek777* (as well as the commenters) employed the "pope" metaphor to talk about the community roles of other individuals on the website. Based on the analysis, it seems that one element of misunderstanding between these two users occurred when the meaning of the "pope" metaphor was misunderstood. This misunderstanding seemed rooted in deeper issues of what the users valued and how they saw their own role and the role of the other on the website. For *jezuzfreek777*, it seemed acceptable to assert his religious convictions when interacting with non-religious individuals on YouTube. For *fakesagan*, this was inappropriate. Analysis of metaphor use allowed for the possibility of seeing how one aspect of dialogue may have impacted this online interaction and seems to give at least a partial explanation for why communication between *fakesagan* and *jezuzfreek777* broke down.

In many ways, this dialogue exemplifies some of the difficulties surrounding both use of language and the negotiation of social norms on new technologies like YouTube. Although the potential remains for YouTube to become a powerful tool in bringing together people of starkly different ideological positions, how these dialogues should develop and what is appropriate behavior in interaction remains a

difficult issue. Close discourse analysis of the interaction between users (particularly analysis of metaphor use) holds strong potential for describing how misunderstanding is taking place.¹³

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