

‘Buy Kiwi Made’: The Construction of a ‘Green’ Political Identity

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Abstract

The focus of this study is to provide greater understanding of language use as an exercise of power and identity construction within political public relations. Using Fairclough’s (1992) three-dimensional discourse analysis, we examine the discourses employed by the Green Party in the construction and reproduction of its identity and ideology, communicated through key messages in the ‘Buy Kiwi Made’ campaign conducted in New Zealand from 2005 to 2009. The findings suggest that the Green Party contested the ‘free trade’ discourse that has driven economic policy in Aotearoa New Zealand since the mid-1980s, and positioned itself as the leading political party for New Zealand’s sustainable development. The campaign enabled the public to identify with the philosophy of the Green Party through a process of meaning creation. It demonstrates language use as an exercise of power, through which the Green Party struggled for a stronger political position. The study also contributes to public relations theory building through incorporating a ‘critical discourse’ perspective into understanding the dynamic functions as well as the implications of political public relations.

Keywords: Public Relations; Political and Government Communication; Critical Discourse Analysis; New Zealand Green Party

Introduction

In the 2011 New Zealand General Election, the Green Party won an 11.06% share of the party vote, with a significant growth in popularity of 4.34% from the 2008 election. This was a strong indication that the Green Party's vision of 'ecological wisdom' and 'social responsibility' was increasingly recognised and celebrated by the New Zealand public. In accordance with a broader global 'Green' movement, the Green Party's vision premised on the building of a 'Green' economy that takes into consideration the long-term environmental and social impacts of economic development. One strategy towards attaining this goal espoused by the Green Party was to promote locally-produced products and food. As part of its ongoing effort to encourage consumers to 'buy local', the Green Party conducted a 'Buy Kiwi Made' campaign from 2005 to 2009.

The 'Buy Kiwi Made' campaign was part of the Green Party's *Co-operation Agreement* with the Labour-led Government after the 2005 election. The Green Party projected the campaign as part of a broader program to achieve sustainable development for the New Zealand economy, which is in line with the philosophy of the Green Party: environmental sustainability; social and economic justice; non-violence; and participatory democracy (Green Party, 2006a). Green Party co-leader, Rod Donald, was the key negotiator for the 'Buy Kiwi Made' part of the agreement with the Labour Party. Following his death Sue Bradford took his position as the government spokesperson for the 'Buy Kiwi Made' campaign.

This study analyses the 'Buy Kiwi Made' campaign conducted by the New Zealand Green Party from 2005 to 2009. It seeks to provide a greater understanding of language use as an exercise of power and identity construction within political public relations. The use of Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional discourse analysis in this study contributes to the theoretical development of public relations by incorporating a 'critical discourse' perspective in analysing political campaign messages. Our analysis of the campaign messages therefore places a focus on the process of meaning creation and how such a process weighs into the construction and reproduction of the Green Party's identity and ideology. We argue that the 'Buy Kiwi Made' campaign marks a significant phase in the construction of a stronger political identity, by communicating a distinct perspective on building a 'Green' national economy.

Literature review

Political public relations campaigns increasingly involve public appearances by politicians, the staging of political events, and social media campaigns—strategies often dismissed as ‘political spin’ in the popular press. When such attempts to persuade the voting public are foregrounded we risk failing to understand the myriad ways in which more traditional political communication tactics, such as media releases, speeches and debates, pave the way for longer-term efforts to manage public opinion. In this paper we bring together theoretical understandings of political communication, public relations, and identity management, to discuss the use of language as an exercise of political power from a discourse perspective.

One central concern of a discourse perspective is the production of meanings that, according to Motion and Leitch (2007), is at the centre of public relations activities and functions. They argued that the conceptualisation of public relations from a discourse perspective is based on understanding public relations as a meaning creation process with an ideational function (to influence thought and shape opinion), relational function (the construction of power relationships) and identity function (the creation and transformation of the subject positions). Similarly, in arguing for a broader theoretical scope for public relations, Ihlen and van Ruler (2007) viewed the key function of public relations as the building of relationships with the public through the creation of meanings.

The key focus in analysing political public relations from a discourse practice perspective, then, is to understand how political identities are constructed and the process of power struggle through the use of language. This echoes Weaver’s (2001) approach calling for power, identity, and discourse to be incorporated into public relations theory in arguing for a broader theoretical perspective for public relations. The interest in the examination of power relations and language use, according to Billig (2003), exhibits a critical approach to discourse analysis. Thus critical discourse analysis, as Phillips and Jorgensen (2002: 64) comment, aims to ‘uncover the role of discursive practice in the maintenance of unequal power relations, with the overall goal of harnessing the results of critical discourse analysis to the struggle for radical social change’.

The critical discourse analysis of political public relations, therefore, can provide valuable insight into how political interest groups use mediated communication, such as media releases and speeches, to foster positive attitudes towards certain political goals. Gilpin (2008), for instance, argued that political public relations provide an opportunity to bring issues to public attention and for an unfolding organisational narrative that enables identity negotiation and construction. It is clear that publics identify with particular political parties and ideological positions both through mediated communication and through developing interpersonal trust and interpersonal relationships over time (Levenshus, 2010; Seltzer and Zhang, 2011).

Identity management is thus a useful way of theorising our understanding of how discursive strategies can be used to obtain public consent (Henderson, 2005). Recent scholarship highlights the dynamic nature of organisational identity, which is increasingly viewed as fluid and constantly mutable in meaning (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley, 2000), and Cheney and Christensen (2001: 233) argue that organisations must increasingly ‘attempt to manage both identifiable issues and their own identities’. In political contexts, individuals and interest groups construct identities and policy positions through political discourse (Roper, 2005). Also, in an effort to garner electoral support, political parties employ a variety of discursive strategies and practices to construct and defend their political identities, drawing on various ideological positions. The discourses which underpin these policy positions are then a way of creating identification and serve to divert attention away from the multiple meanings constructed by other organisations (Henderson, Weaver, and Cheney, 2007). If political parties gain citizen approval for various policy positions they may succeed in legitimating that position, and gain political power (Habermas, 1996).

Fairclough’s (2001) analysis of New Labour’s discourse practice provides an illustration of how discursive strategies can be employed to create political identities, drawing on specific ideologies to influence public opinion. In this case, New Labour’s ideology is based on the presupposition of a ‘new global economy’, which is constructed throughout its political discourses as an inevitable fact of life. For example, the absence of an ‘agent’ in New Labour’s discourses when discussing ‘change’ indicates that ‘change’ is out of everyone’s control and thus ‘inevitable’. Fairclough (2001) argues that representing the ‘new global economy’ as inevitable excludes any other possible ways of organising international relations and therefore contributes to sustaining unequal relations of power. Thus, in this process of

meaning creation through discourse practice, the public is prompted to identify with New Labour's ideology because their 'Third Way' is the 'only' way.

Fairclough's critical analysis of New Labour's political discourse clearly demonstrates how language is used as an exercise of power where specific discursive strategies are used to construct political identities and reproduce certain political ideologies. As Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000) explain, discourses, and the identities produced through them, are inherently political entities that essentially involve the exercise of power. In the political arena, such an exercise of power is specifically reflected through the discursive struggles over the hegemonic discourse order. According to Fairclough (2001), the hegemony of any social order is constantly challenged and is, in one way, signalled through discursive struggles between dominant discourses and marginalised discourses which indicate, and result in, both change and resistance. In analysing political discourse from a critical perspective, therefore, we can gain a better understanding of the process of meaning creation through political public relations where identities are constructed and power is played out.

Methods of data collection and analysis

In this paper we take a critical perspective, drawing on theoretical understandings of political communication, public relations, and identity management to analyse the Green Party's 'Buy Kiwi Made' campaign. We analysed the Green Party's media releases and speeches published as the 'Buy Kiwi Made' campaign was developed between 2005 and 2007. In order to organise key topics and themes from the data, we used the method of thematic analysis to identify, analyse and report patterns and themes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A theme, according to Braun and Clarke (2006: 82) 'captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set'. In our study, we identified three key themes in the Green Party's 'Buy Kiwi Made' campaign that occurred at a high frequency across our data set. These three key themes occurred repetitively and fitted with our analytical frame. Once key themes were identified, we then examined the three key themes using Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional discourse analysis, drawing on the work of van Dijk (1997). Van Dijk argued that in constructing meaning, language users also construct and display their roles and identities. He viewed discourse as a practical, social, and cultural phenomenon in which language is used to accomplish social acts and participate in social interaction. To analyse how meaning is constructed, van Dijk (1997) emphasised the need to examine (i) the

structure of discourse—syntax, semantics, stylistics, and rhetoric; (ii) the cognitive process of discourse—mental representation; and (iii) the context for discourse. While local context indicates the immediate settings of a discursive process, the global context emphasises the social categories and implications of the discourse.

Specifically, we examined the discourses in the ‘Buy Kiwi Made’ campaign at three different levels: textual practice; discursive practice; and social practice. At the level of textual practice, we examined the data in terms of basic language use, for example, specific choice of words and syntactic structure. At the level of discursive practice, we looked at discursive strategies employed by the Green Party to create and communicate meanings; for example, the discursive strategy of identification and the construction of antagonism. At the social practice level, we analysed the construction of a ‘Green’ identity by the Green Party in the context of the political climate at the time of the ‘Buy Kiwi Made’ campaign.

Analysis

The ‘Buy Kiwi Made’ campaign is part of a broader program—a ‘Green’ vision—aimed at achieving sustainable development for the New Zealand economy (Green Party. 2006a). In analysing the campaign’s media releases and speeches, we identified three central themes that together demonstrate how the Green Party, through its discursive strategies, constructed and sustained a strong political identity in the ‘Buy Kiwi Made’ campaign.

Promoting ‘fair trade’

The first central theme in the ‘Buy Kiwi Made’ campaign revolved around the Green Party’s initiative promoting ‘fair trade’. The Party had a strong stance on the Fair Trade policy, based on the principles of conducting fair, safe, and sustainable trade. This provided a strong rationale for the campaign because ‘buying local’ was in accordance with, and promoted, the principles envisaged in the Fair Trade policy.

At the level of textual analysis, one key form in the process of meaning creation employed by the Green Party was the use of differentiation. In her speech at the New Brighton Mall, Christchurch, Bradford stated:

... he [Rod Donald] and the Greens advocate **fair** trade as **opposed** to the **economic orthodoxy** of **free** trade embraced by **Labour, National, United Future** and **now even NZ First**. ... the Green Party does not oppose trade. It supports **fair, regulated** and **mutually**

beneficial trade. It does oppose **free, de-regulated, exploitative, win/lose** trade. (Green Party, 2007) [Emphasis added].

In this pronouncement, the Green Party set itself in opposition to Labour, National, United Future and NZ First. A vivid distinction was drawn between the Green Party – standing for being ‘fair’, ‘regulated’ and ‘mutually beneficial’ – and the rest who promoted trade that was ‘free’, ‘de-regulated’, ‘exploitative’, ‘win or lose’.

This differentiation, at the level of discourse practice then, functioned to place the Green Party in a distinguished position. A clear discursive strategy adopted by the Green Party here was the construction of antagonism. While all other Parties were collectively presented as the antagonist, the Green Party remained as the protagonist by being on the exact opposite end. This was achieved specifically in the quoted passage through using value-laden terms such as ‘moral’, ‘just’ and ‘equitable’. As such the discussion was contextualised in a moral debate where the antagonist Parties represented unjust moral grounds, especially through supporting trading with countries that do not respect human rights (e.g., paying workers low wages, poor working conditions) and the environment (Green Party, 2005a).

The construction of antagonism by the Green Party was clearly a discursive struggle where the Party set a distinct position for itself through meaning creation. At the level of social practice, the Green Party put forward a strong political identity by distinguishing itself within the rest of the New Zealand political parties. Even though in the quoted passage when mentioning other parties’ free trade initiative the Green Party used the phrase ‘economic orthodoxy’, the statement that followed is not at all a discussion on economic issues of fair trade and free trade. Instead, the meaning was created around the ethical implications of two different stances. In doing so the Green Party successfully positioned itself as the leader for building an economy based on high moral and ethical principles.

Considering environmental issues

One key value in the Green Party’s vision was the development of a ‘Green’ economy that does not compromise environmental standards. Hence in the ‘Buy Kiwi Made’ campaign, environmental values were highly emphasised as a key rationale for encouraging ‘buy local’ behaviour. In this analysis we use Sue Bradford’s speech at the Employer and Manufacturers’ Association Workshop in Wanganui as an example. At the level of textual analysis, it is

particularly interesting to note the choice of words in Bradford's speech. Here the Green Party desired to express a strong commitment and determination towards protecting the New Zealand environment. This was achieved through using evocative words that heightened the emotional power of a message. For example, Bradford repetitively used the words 'passion' and 'commitment'. Particularly, she mentioned the 'sudden, shocking passing' of Rod Donald, who negotiated the 'Buy Kiwi Made' part of the agreement with the Labour-led government, and spoke of his 'dreams' and 'passions' of 'developing a sustainable New Zealand economy'. Bradford then claimed that she has 'picked up' the task of carrying on the 'Buy Kiwi Made' campaign with 'enthusiasm'. These emotionally charged words reflect the evocative dimension of the language which provoked the audience to identify with the Green Party's strong commitment and formulate emotional alignment.

This use of evocative language then, at the level of discursive practice, enhanced the importance of a particular message – in this case, the importance of environmental protection. Such a discursive practice strategically 'totalises' the Green Party's position in declaring the ultimate importance of environmental issues. This is particularly evident in the following passage from the speech:

It is **imperative** that we begin here in isolated New Zealand to **future-proof** ourselves in every way possible against the **coming oil shock**, and against the **impacts** of other potential **environmental catastrophes** such as **the effects of** climate change. (Green Party, 2006a)
[Emphasis added].

In this excerpt, the oil shortage was depicted as an arriving fact which cannot be avoided, therefore expressing a sense of emergency. The words 'coming' and 'shock' are conflicting, referring to the oil shortage as an expected surprise. This means that even though it is predictable, the consequences of the oil shortage can be still shocking. This created a sense of disaster, which was reinforced by the plural form of the noun 'catastrophe'. Bradford saw no need to engage in a discussion about climate change, but instead, she referred to climate change as a certain truth that is causing 'impacts' and 'effects' which are 'environmental catastrophes'.

At the level of social practice, then, through creating a sense of urgency and emphasising the 'imperative[ness]' of the issue, the Green Party wished to demonstrate a strong passion for, and commitment to, the important mission of New Zealand environmental protection. In

doing so the Green Party reinforced and sustained its ‘Green’ identity and at the same time positioned itself as the leader that will help New Zealand to ‘future-proof ourselves’.

Supporting local business

The third central theme in the ‘Buy Kiwi Made’ campaign, in line with the vision for a ‘Green’ economy, formed around the initiative of supporting New Zealand local business. In addition to environmental concerns, the Green Party advocated that purchasing locally produced goods helped the economy because it offered business opportunities to local manufacturers and retained jobs for New Zealanders. For example, in her speech at the Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union conference in Wellington, Bradford said that the **Green Party** ‘has now become the only party in the New Zealand Parliament to consistently **champion the manufacturing sector**’ and ‘there is no greater example of this than our **leadership** of the Government’s ‘Buy Kiwi Made’ campaign’ (Green Party, 2006b) [Emphasis added].

A basic syntactic analysis reveals that in this excerpt the Green Party asserted itself as the subject actor who actively performs an action (‘champion’) to its object (‘manufacturing sector’). Such syntactic structure functions to place an emphasis on the energy of the agency in projected actions through which the Green Party established itself as an active and responsible agent. In such discursive practice then, the Green Party legitimised itself as the leader who supports trade and economic policy that benefits New Zealand manufacturers and retains jobs for New Zealanders.

Another interesting strategy employed by the Green Party, in promoting a ‘buy local’ initiative, was drawing analogies between supporting local business and supporting things that New Zealanders are familiar with and proud of. This was most evident in a quote from Rob Donald: ‘It is time we showed the same loyalty to Kiwi-made products as we display towards the All Blacks, the Black Caps and the Silver Ferns’ (Green Party, 2005b). In this excerpt, identification was established between kiwi-made products and three famous brands that are proudly owned and valued by New Zealanders. Through this identification, New Zealanders were prompted to show loyalty to kiwi-made products. In order to turn this sense of loyalty into action, Rod Donald added the catalyst of political empowerment by pointing out: ‘shopping is a political act’ (Green Party, 2005b). By constructing ‘Buy Kiwi Made’ as a

political action with powerful effects, the campaign envisioned and empowered people to purchase local products in support of the New Zealand economy and employment.

Through its discursive practice, the Green Party provided a strong rationale for supporting New Zealand local business. At the level of social practice, the 'Buy Kiwi Made' campaign created public awareness of the benefits of purchasing locally produced goods and, in doing so, encouraged the voting public to support local business by 'buying local'. The Green Party thus further strengthened its role as a legitimate leader for building a 'Green' economy for New Zealand and prompted the public to identify with a clear 'Green' vision and ideology.

Discussion

In analysing the key themes that emerged in the 'Buy Kiwi Made' campaign we argue that the Green Party presented a strong rationale for its 'buying local' initiative through various discursive strategies, such as the construction of antagonism and identification. This rationale that included moral concerns about trade and the environment, as well as a social conscience, prompted the public to *identify* with the Green Party's position and vision. This identification was achieved specifically through the Green Party's discourse practice which facilitated the process of meaning creation. An emphasis on meaning creation, according to Motion and Leitch (2007), affords an understanding of public relations from a discourse perspective and lends weight to the key relational, ideational, and identity functions of public relations. In political public relations then, these key functions are particularly evident when a political party presents a certain issue through the creation of meaning in mediated communication. For example, rather than discussing trade as an economic issue, the Green Party presented trade as an ethical issue, assuming a leadership position on high moral grounds.

In providing a strong rationale for 'buying local', the Green Party communicated a distinct position on issues regarding trade, the environment, and local communities. For example, environmental issues are presented as an urgent matter, capable of producing catastrophic consequences. By demonstrating a strong passion for, and commitment to, protecting the environment, the Green Party constructed a strong 'Green' identity, thus legitimising its role in leading New Zealand to build a 'Green' economy. This 'Green' identity was reinforced by other discursive strategies employed in the campaign; for example, through differentiation from other political parties and identification with other favourite New Zealand icons. In the political arena, therefore, as Roper (2005) pointed out, it is through political discourse that

identities are constructed. Through the use of various discursive strategies, the Green Party justified a strong political position and advocated for the key values of its political ideology. The 'Buy Kiwi Made' campaign clearly demonstrates the use of language as an exercise of power. Through the discourse practices in this campaign the Green Party contested the dominant discourse of the global market order and the free trade regime. The Green Party positioned itself in opposition to other political parties, hence declaring its distinct political goal in resisting the dominant neoliberal economic policy consensus in New Zealand. The economic policy transformation was presented by the Green Party as a matter of necessity, which further justified the legitimacy of the party's role in leading New Zealand towards a better alternative. As Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000) pointed out, interests cannot be assumed to pre-exist agents because they are politically and discursively constructed; thus identities and the interests that are relative to those identities are strategic outcomes of discourses. The Green Party's interests in contesting the current economic order indicated its political ambition to play a leadership role in shaping New Zealand economic policy. The use of language in the 'Buy Kiwi Made' campaign, therefore, is an exercise of power where the Green Party contested the hegemonic discourse order in the New Zealand economic policy debate and constructed a strong 'Green' identity through strategic discourse practice.

Conclusion

The 'Buy Kiwi Made' campaign communicated a strong rationale for the Green Party's 'buy local' initiative through three central themes – promoting 'fair trade', considering environmental issues, and supporting local business. Our analysis suggests that these key themes were specifically constructed, using various discursive strategies, to build and reinforce a 'Green' identity through a process of meaning creation that enables the public to identify with the Green Party's philosophy and ideology. This is especially achieved by making the principles of sustainable development relevant to the public at a local level through fair trade and the importance of environmental issues to New Zealand. The analysis further demonstrates how language use is an exercise of power where the dominant discourse order is contested through discursive struggles. In this case, the Green Party, through its discourse practice in the campaign, communicated a distinctive identity to the public and positioned itself as the leader for building a sustainable economy as opposed to the mainstream, free trade economic order in New Zealand.

Developing the work of Motion and Leitch (2007), this study contributes to the field of political public relations by incorporating a critical discourse perspective into understanding the communication process of political public relations. A critical discourse perspective puts an emphasis on issues of power, specifically, how power struggles are realised through the process of meaning creation in language use. We argue such a perspective is particularly useful to political public relations because it can provide valuable insight into how political interest groups use various mediated communications to foster positive attitudes towards certain political goals through specific discourse practices. In this study, for instance, we note that the Green Party advocates for 'buying local' through a specific process of meaning creation by presenting this as a moral and ethical issue rather than an economic issue. The key focus in understanding political public relations from a critical discourse perspective, then, is to understand how political identities are constructed and how power struggle is facilitated through the process of meaning creation in language use.

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