**Cops, Popes, and Garbage Collectors: Metaphor and Antagonism in an Atheist/Christian YouTube Video Thread**

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**Abstract**

Using a discourse dynamics, metaphor-led analysis, this article investigates the use of metaphor in three YouTube videos made by two American YouTube users: one fundamentalist Christian and one atheist. The focus of the analysis is on how metaphor was produced dynamically in the interaction between the users as they discussed the appropriateness of user actions. Metaphorical language was of key importance to the discourse event, and was explicitly oriented to by the participants: The Christian user suggests an analogy between himself and a “cop,” the atheist retaliates that the Christian believes himself to be “the Pope of YouTube,” and the Christian resists this characterization, with other users leaving text comments that also directly respond to the “Pope of YouTube” metaphor. The analysis shows that YouTube users employed metaphors to describe and validate their activity on YouTube, and that although metaphor use did not differ depending on the user's ideological position, users reinterpreted and subverted the metaphor use of others to assert their own opinions about the community.

**Introduction**

In recent years, YouTube has grown into an important location for Internet content production and consumption, as well as for social networking and communication (Burgess & Green, 2009). YouTube users from diverse backgrounds engage one another on the site, arguing about issues such as religion and politics, and often bringing different perspectives and expectations to such interactions. In particular, discussions between atheists and Christians on the site provide an opportunity to observe how YouTube users with vastly different worldviews interact with one another and attempt to persuade others of their positions on controversial subjects. While such interaction has the potential to lead to positive understandings and constructive exchange of ideas, in practice, the discussions often become antagonistic. Users with differing worldviews attack one another and further exacerbate their points of disagreement. The antagonistic nature of YouTube communication has been well documented (Benevenuto, Duarte, Rodrihues, Almeida, Almeidia, & Ross 2008; Jones & Lange, 2007a; Moor, Heuvelman, & Verleur, 2010; Schieffelin, 2009). However, close analysis of antagonistic discourse on the site is rare.

This article takes a discourse analysis approach to YouTube data, investigating antagonism through the lens of metaphor emergence in a video thread between an atheist and a Christian. In the video thread analysed, a discussion regarding stem cell research between one atheist user, fakesagan, and a Christian user, jezuzfreek777, grows increasingly antagonistic, with fakesagan eventually accusing jezuzfreek777 of behaving like the “pope of YouTube.” The metaphor is subsequently taken up by jezuzfreek777 and by commenters on the videos and reinterpreted to entail different meanings, depending on who is using it. The focus of analysis in this study is how metaphor encourages or discourages understanding in the thread, its relationship to antagonism, and how interpretation of metaphor reveals individual user worldviews. In particular, I investigate how and to what effect users reinterpret and subvert the metaphor use of other users to assert their own opinions about the community, and whether users representing different ideological positions use metaphor differently.
A discourse dynamics approach to metaphor sees metaphor as emerging out of interaction among users and carrying with it evidence of how ways of talking and thinking about a topic have developed (Cameron & Stelma, 2004). By tracing metaphor use and analysing how metaphors develop over the course of discourse activity, a researcher is able to see how different interpretations of metaphor may lead to misunderstanding and disagreement, particularly in discussions where metaphor plays an important role in how users talk about their own or others’ activities, as in the case of the “pope of YouTube” thread. Metaphor analysis affords a close look at how different interpretations of the same metaphor or different systems of metaphor use may play a role in how disagreement develops, especially in dialogue between users with vastly different worldviews and, potentially, vastly different metaphorical understandings of the world. By investigating how metaphors are used to describe online activity and how these metaphors develop and are interpreted by users, insight can be gained not only into how users understand their roles on YouTube and negotiate what is and is not appropriate activity there, but also into how viewers interact with different elements of the video page.

Background

Research on YouTube

Since its founding in 2005, YouTube has become an increasingly popular site for social interaction, and scholarly interest has followed. Researchers have investigated YouTube from many different perspectives, including investigations into its educational potential (Snelson, 2008), the prevalence of YouTube in the life of youth (Madden, 2007), the social networking role of YouTube (Lange, 2007c), and the effect of YouTube on political process in the United States (Burgess & Green, 2009). On YouTube, video content is provided by the users, from individuals producing amateur content to corporate channels producing professional content. Related to this, there has been substantial interest in who YouTube users are and how they behave on the site. Maia, Almeida, and Almeida (2008) classified user behavior by group using an algorithm and a series of attributes of user behaviors. The researchers identified five groups of YouTube users: Small Community Members, Content Producers, Content Consumers, Producers & Consumers, and other (p. 5). They conclude that the “YouTube user” is not a monolithic category; individuals come to the site with different expectations and different goals in mind. Similarly, O’Donnell, Gibson, Milliken, and Singer (2008) found that reactions to videos on YouTube differed depending on the user group viewing the video, and that members of the same group tended to have similar reactions.

As regards anti-social behavior on YouTube, Benevenuto et al. (2008) employed a complex algorithm to deduce whether users were engaged in spamming other users. Although this research is useful in painting a broad picture, as in the case of Maia, Almeida, and Almedia’s work, descriptions of actual anti-social behavior are understandably missing from large-scale quantitative descriptions of the site. Moor, Heuvelman, and Verleur (2010) used questionnaire research to investigate the issue of “flaming” (a term for uninhibited, often antagonistic online behavior) on YouTube. Participants were asked a series of questions about their experiences of flaming on the site and their perception of flaming. Rather than being rejected completely as negative activity, Moor et al. found that some users found flaming to be amusing, an accepted part of interacting on the site, and an activity they occasionally engaged in themselves. To simply label any antagonistic interaction as flaming would be misguided, it seems, especially when considering interactions among users that occur continuously over time.
Jones and Schieffelin (2009) employed local-level analysis in their investigation of language use in text comment interaction, focusing on reactions to particular video advertisements about texting posted on YouTube. Their study of how interaction developed in the comments section showed that commenters mocked one another, consistent with other reports about the antagonistic nature of YouTube user comments. They characterized the YouTube comment section as “inherently dialogic” (p. 1075), in that it invites interaction among commenters. The study did not address the potential effects of this dialogic affordance on the development of ideas or arguments, however.

Lange’s (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) studies of YouTube interaction and user experience adopted an ethnographic perspective, investigating user interpretations of YouTube interactions and limits on participation in the YouTube “community,” as well as the antagonistic nature of YouTube interaction. With regard to the latter, Lange (2007a) argued that it is necessary to distinguish between different forms of criticism on the site, from “hating” or flaming to genuinely constructive criticism, a differentiation, she observes, that is made by YouTube users themselves. Although not necessarily a welcome part of YouTube discourse, participants in her study indicated a desire for antagonism to be allowed on the site in the spirit of freedom of speech. Thus attempts to include different types of antagonistic activity as one monolithic activity ignore some potentially important nuances of YouTube comments and interaction. A nuanced understanding of how users deal with negative comments on their content is particularly important in looking at atheist-Christian dialogue, where the interactional goals of users may be quite different. Coupled with differing worldviews, what is or is not antagonistic behavior could differ, depending on which users are being investigated.

Video page and video content analysis is absent in most of the studies mentioned above. Benevenuto et al. (2008) illustrate how “video interaction” can be extracted numerically by analysing video view and comment statistics; however, empirical research analysing the discourse content of YouTube video pages is lacking. Moreover, close analysis of actual antagonism on YouTube is lacking. Descriptions have tended to be limited to users’ reported feelings about videos and interactions (as in interviews) and statistical descriptions of negative interaction. To understand how antagonism works on the site, longitudinal observation of users and close discourse analysis of interaction is needed to identify not only the immediate manifestations of the interaction, but how antagonism influences interaction over time. This is attempted in the present study through the lens of metaphor analysis.

**Metaphor Research**

Substantially different frameworks are available to analyse metaphor. Over the past 30 years, Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) has played a key role in motivating much metaphor research. Lakoff and Johnson were the first proponents of conceptual metaphor theory, which holds that metaphor is fundamental to human cognition, with more abstract concepts typically being understood in terms of more physical ones. Basic conceptual metaphors such as ARGUMENT IS WAR are held to find expression in common turns of phrase (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). While the specific claims of conceptual metaphor theory have been debated (e.g., Glucksberg & McGlone, 2001; Goddard, 2000; as mentioned in Steen, 2007), key elements of conceptual metaphor theory have remained influential, for example the idea that “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another” (Steen, 2007, p. 5).

However, two elements of Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor theory limit the value of this approach for research on dynamic interaction on YouTube. First, conceptual metaphor
theory suggests that metaphor begins at the cognitive level and is produced from underlying conceptual structures. However, it is important to distinguish research on metaphor in cognition from metaphor in language use. Steen (2007) argues that the two research areas are motivated by fundamentally different research questions and that careless application of evidence from one area to another can lead to unreliable results. Second, in those cases where conceptual metaphor theory has been applied to language in use, the focus has usually been on how conceptual metaphor supposedly shapes language. However, with naturally-occurring discourse data, the analyst may have no information about the minds of those who produced the discourse, apart from the discourse itself. To infer conceptual metaphors from discourse and then posit the metaphors as the explanation of the discourse would be circular.

In contrast to the conceptual approach, which views metaphor as a conceptual phenomenon that is instantiated in language, the discourse dynamics approach views metaphor not as “a static, fixed mapping, but a temporary stability emerging from the activity of interconnecting systems of socially-situated language use and cognitive activity” (Cameron, Maslen, Maule, Stratton, & Stanley, 2009, p. 64). According to this view, metaphor is a phenomenon that emerges out of the complex system of language—something that develops naturally in the course of language being used (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). This approach has produced empirical evidence supporting the claim that metaphorical language emerges from language in use (Zanotto, Cameron, & Cavalcanti, 2008). Cameron et al. (2009), for example, investigated metaphor in focus group discussions about the perceived threat of terrorism and showed how metaphor in the complex system of interaction among participants is “processual, emergent, and open to change” (p. 67). For example, speakers may employ the same metaphor vehicles in a stretch of talk or draw upon the same metaphorical systems as they speak together. I suggest that this approach is appropriate for studying language in use in YouTube interaction, given its complex, dynamic nature.

Following on the ideas of Metaphors We Live By, Lakoff has continued to argue for a conceptual view of metaphor, including a suggestion that metaphor is produced differently by individuals of different ideological positions (Lakoff, 1996). In particular, he has argued that U.S. liberals appeal to a nurturant parent metaphor while conservatives favor a strict parent metaphor in thinking and talking about social and political norms. For Lakoff, the difference is not only that liberals and conservatives have different socio-political agendas, but that they also fundamentally think and talk about the world using different metaphorical mappings. Although there is empirical evidence to counter this claim (Ceinki, 2004), the notion that users with different worldviews and ideological positions may talk about their understandings of the YouTube community using different metaphorical models is important to investigate. If YouTube users do have different metaphorical ways of understanding the world, this should be evidenced in their talk, through appeal to different metaphors and metaphor scenarios.

In this article, I investigate two specific metaphor phenomena that have been observed in previous studies: vehicle development and metaphor appropriation. In the metaphor “jezuzfreek777 is the pope of YouTube,” for example, jezuzfreek777 is the topic and “the pope of YouTube” is the vehicle. In vehicle development, the vehicle term of a metaphor is repeated, relexicalised, explicated, and/or contrasted in the course of the discourse (Cameron, 2010a). This can happen, for example, when one speaker refers to life as a “journey” and a second speaker repeats the metaphor, builds on it, or manipulates it in his or her talk. Metaphor appropriation occurs when “a participant [begins] to use a metaphor that had, until that point, been the discourse “property” of the other speaker” (Cameron, 2010b, p. 14). Cameron observes the constructive effects of this practice in reconciliation discourse in which one speaker “owns” the
metaphor of “healing” in a conversation, but the term is eventually appropriated by another speaker. When this happens, the metaphor becomes the shared property of both speakers. As demonstrated below, vehicle development and metaphor appropriation can be important processes in YouTube video threads.

In an earlier article, I analysed YouTube data to show how metaphor use can lead to misunderstanding between Christians and atheists (Pihlaja, 2010). The goal of the present article is to investigate how this occurs by tracing metaphor appropriation and vehicle development in a single video thread. First, I investigate whether there is evidence that users holding different worldviews produce different metaphors and metaphorical systems to support their arguments. Second, I investigate how metaphor encourages or impedes antagonistic interaction, particularly when the same metaphors and/or metaphor vehicles are present in more than one users’ video speech and/or comment text.

Methods

YouTube invites user response both in video and comment form (Burgess & Green, 2008); this can lead to back-and-forth debates between users, especially when core members of the YouTube community become involved. Controversial subjects (such as religion or politics) often lead to drama or “flame wars”, a phenomenon “that emerge[s] when a flurry of video posts clusters around an internal ‘controversy’ or an antagonistic debate between one or more YouTubers” (Burgess & Green, 2008, p. 13). In these cases, serious ideological disagreements become entangled with interpersonal drama, complicating description of the interaction. Drama plays a key role in the YouTube community by providing subject matter for videos, encouraging creative ways to insult other users, and providing a chance for users to form groups either supporting or opposing other users. As the research questions of this article relate to investigating the potential role played by metaphor in disagreements, I set out to gather data in which antagonism and prominent metaphor use co-occurred.

Data collection began as part of a systematic observation of selected YouTube users for a larger project investigating atheist and Christian YouTube communities (Pihlaja, forthcoming). This project involved continuously observing a group of about 20 Christian and atheist users who frequently interacted with one another both in video responses and text comments. Potential video threads for analysis in the larger project were identified based on several criteria: The thread had to include one primary video and at least one response; video responses had to be made by members of opposing groups (i.e., an atheist and a Christian) in antagonistic interaction; and initial analysis should suggest that metaphor played a role in the development of the video thread. The video thread in the present analysis was chosen because the final videos revolved around the prominent, explicit use of metaphor (“pope of YouTube”) in an antagonistic exchange between two users, fakesagan (an atheist and anarchist) and jezuzfreek777 (a fundamentalist Christian).

After the videos were identified, they were transcribed, and metaphor was identified using the “Pragglejaz” method. This process involves marking potential metaphor in texts by identifying lexical units, determining if they have “a more basic contemporary meaning in other contexts than the one in the given context,” and deciding “whether the contextual meaning contrasts with the basic meaning but can be understood in comparison with it” (Pragglejaz group, 2007, p. 3). The texts were input into the qualitative analysis software program Atlas.TI, where metaphor use by particular users and commenters could be traced using the code and search functions.
The video thread that is the focus of analysis in this article began on December 2, 2007 with fakesagan’s posting of “fake hips and hippy Christians (part 1 of 3).” This was the first part of a three-part video series asking two moderate Christian users who frequently commented and responded to his videos for their opinions on stem cell research. jezuzfreek777, who was not mentioned in the first three videos, made a response video addressing the issue of stem cell research. fakesagan’s response, “moderate* christian stem cell responses - jezuzfreek777,” did not specifically address the issue of stem cell research, and in subsequent videos the two users dealt mainly with the issue of interpersonal conflict between them, focusing on an instance some time in the past when jezuzfreek777 had commented on the video of another atheist, anangel13, and suggested that she change her video style (which involved focusing the camera on her breasts). The thread ended on January 1, 2008 with jezuzfreek777’s posting of “Am I the Pope of YouTube?” The entire video thread is summarized in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video Title</th>
<th>Date Added</th>
<th>User</th>
<th>Length (min:secs)</th>
<th>Text Comments as of 26 Nov 08</th>
<th>Main Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. fake hips and hippy Christians (part 1 of 3)</td>
<td>2 Dec 2007</td>
<td>fakesagan</td>
<td>9:13</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Discussion of stem cell research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. fake hips and hippy Christians (part 2 of 3)</td>
<td>2 Dec 2007</td>
<td>fakesagan</td>
<td>8:03</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Discussion of stem cell research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. fake hips and hippy Christians (part 3 of 3)</td>
<td>2 Dec 2007</td>
<td>fakesagan</td>
<td>10:05</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>Discussion of stem cell research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Is stem cell research wrong</td>
<td>4 Dec 2007</td>
<td>jezuzfreek777</td>
<td>3:07</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>Discussion of stem cell research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. moderate* christian stem cell responses - jezuzfreek777</td>
<td>18 Dec 2007</td>
<td>fakesagan</td>
<td>8:38</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>Response to jezuzfreek777’s argument, with mention of past, negative interaction between users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. jezuzfreek777 video</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>jezuzfreek777</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Response to fakesagan*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. jezuzfreek thinks he's the pope of youtube (part 1 of 2)</td>
<td>30 Dec 2007</td>
<td>fakesagan</td>
<td>10:05</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>Accuses him of acting inappropriately in a past interaction with anangel13, focusing on the negative aspect of jezuzfreek777’s piety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. jezuzfreek thinks he's the pope of youtube (part 2 of 2)</td>
<td>30 Dec 2007</td>
<td>fakesagan</td>
<td>9:07</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>Discussion of YouTube censorship of atheists, not addressed to jezuzfreek777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Am I the Pope of YouTube?</td>
<td>1 Jan 2008</td>
<td>jezuzfreek777</td>
<td>6:40</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>Response to fakesagan focusing on the value of piety and the need to “clean YouTube up”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Video 6 appears to have been removed by jezuzfreek777 after fakesagan’s response.

Table 1. List of videos in the full ‘Pope of YouTube’ thread

YouTube provides users two options when they post a video: They can keep the video private and only viewable to friends, or they can publish the video openly on the site, allowing for access by anyone at any time. Although the distinction between private and public space in social networks has been problematized, most notably by Lange (2007c) in discussing how users present themselves in YouTube videos, in terms of the technical function of the site, YouTube is clear about the implications of posting videos publicly. Its user policy states explicitly: “Any videos that you submit to the YouTube Sites may be redistributed through the internet and other

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media channels, and may be viewed by the general public” (YouTube, n.d.). Because of this, informed consent to use the videos was not obtained.

Analysis

In this article, close textual analysis focuses on videos 7-9, in which the “pope of YouTube” metaphor emerges, along with increasingly antagonistic interaction between fakesagan and jezuzfreak777. A description of the videos leading up to the final antagonistic interaction is provided first to contextualize this interaction.

“fake hips and hippy christians” (videos 1-6)

fakesagan’s initial videos in this thread appear to be a genuine appeal to engage two “moderate Christians” in the community (godusesamac and togetherforpeace) about the issue of stem cell research. In the videos, fakesagan discusses how he has recently been made aware of the importance of the stem cell research issue, as his girlfriend is in need of an operation to replace her hip. fakesagan claims that stem cell research is being held up by Christians and implores two moderate Christians, asking them, “Do you condemn that uh kind of ignorance or are you part of it? Do you guys believe that clumps of cells in a Petri dish have a soul?” (fakesagan, 2007a). At this point, fakesagan’s tone is generally respectful, and little antagonism occurs in the comments.

The discussion centers on the topic fakesagan has brought up: whether stem cell research is appropriate. There is no discussion at this point of appropriate or inappropriate activity on YouTube.

Although he is not one of the named “moderate Christians” in fakesagan’s initial series of videos, jezuzfreak777 posts a video response to fakesagan’s question. In his response, he also initially shows respect, stating: “As a matter of fact, I seldomly [sic] even address you because I find you to be one of the most articulate and reasonable atheists here on YouTube” (“Is stem cell research wrong,” jezuzfreak777, 2007). He states his opposition to stem cell research and, in defense of his position, reads part of a news article that claims that scientists have been able to replicate the benefits of stem cell research without the use of embryonic cells. jezuzfreak777 makes no disparaging comments about fakesagan and continues to praise him at the end of the video. The commenters also focus on the topic of stem cell research, although a few post negative comments about jezuzfreak777, including insults.

In his response, fakesagan addresses jezuzfreak777 in a generally respectful and polite way, with some humorous insulting at the end of the video. However, fakesagan shifts his comments away from the topic of stem cell research and begins to criticize jezuzfreak777’s interaction in 2007 with anangel13, with whom fakesagan claims to have had a brief romantic relationship. fakesagan also criticizes part of jezuzfreak777’s argument, arguing in particular that Christians should not take credit for scientific achievements. The comments on this video also shift away from the topic of stem cell research and onto the topic of Christianity, particularly the role of men and women in the church. jezuzfreak777 is not generally the topic of discussion, but rather Christianity in general.

“jezuzfreak thinks he’s the pope of youtube” (videos 7 & 8)

By the final three videos (a two-part video made by fakesagan and a response by jezuzfreak777), the initial pleasant atmosphere of discussion has eroded. Vehicle development begins to play a key role in the first part of fakesagan’s final, two-part video, which is titled “jezuzfreak thinks
he’s the pope of youtube.” This title uses the metaphor vehicle “pope” as a negative evaluative statement about the action that jezuzfreek777 took in commenting on anangel13’s video and implying that she should change her behavior, although this must be deduced from watching the video. The following stretch of transcript from this video makes explicit fakesagan’s evaluation of jezuzfreek777’s actions.

And you made the analogy, “Well isn’t that like being pulled over and telling the cop, you know, why are you givin me a speeding ticket when this guy’s getting murdered over here.” Here’s where that analogy breaks down, jezuzfreek. Um, you’re not a cop. It’s not your place to tell anyone how to make their fucking videos! Or question what they do with parts of their body. Alright, that's not your- you’re a pious asshole. It was out of line. You know, your relationship to angel is nothing beyond that of fundamentalist jackass to atheist. (“jezuzfreek thinks he's the pope of youtube (part 1 of 2),” fakesagan, 2007b)

In this excerpt, fakesagan addresses the key issue of contention in the last three videos of the thread: Was it appropriate for jezuzfreek777 to suggest to or tell anangel13 that her style of making videos was unacceptable? fakesagan makes reference to an analogy that jezuzfreek777 apparently made in the video (which he eventually removed without comment), in which Jezuzfreek777 could appear (either intentionally or unintentionally) cast in the role of a police officer stopping someone for doing something illegal. As the original video no longer exists, it is difficult to know what exactly jezuzfreek777 claimed in this video; it is possible, given the interaction between the two antagonists, that jezuzfreek777’s claim is at least partly misrepresented by fakesagan. However, fakesagan’s response to the analogy suggests that jezuzfreek777’s use of metaphor (a cop?) to talk about the situation primed fakesagan’s subsequent use of metaphor (the “pope of YouTube”). fakesagan explicitly contests jezuzfreek777’s analogy related to his position on YouTube, calling him not a “cop” or even a “pope,” but instead “a pious asshole.”

fakesagan’s opinion about what is and is not appropriate behavior on the website is expressed in the following extract:

So lets try to keep the discussion on issues. Alright. And- and not bring it to where somebody focuses the camera. What they’re doing with donations that they solicit on the internet. You know, what the fuck does that have to do with the issues at hand? Questions of theology. My point is you make ad hominem fucking attacks and not phony ad hominems like calling someone an asshole. Real ad hominems where you try to call somebody’s character into question rather than addressing their fucking beliefs. (“jezuzfreek thinks he's the pope of youtube (part 1 of 2),” fakesagan, 2007b)

In these comments, fakesagan makes clear that he does not feel it is appropriate for jezuzfreek777 to criticize “how people make their videos” or “what they do with parts of their body;” rather, users should engage other users on (what fakesagan feels are) substantial issues (“questions of theology” and user’s individual “beliefs”). This suggests that there is a fundamental disagreement between the two about the role one user can or should play on the website, and specifically, that they disagree about jezuzfreek777’s role on YouTube. This disagreement is encapsulated in the two antagonists’ differing metaphorical descriptions of jezuzfreek777’s actions.
fakesagan's description of jezuzfreek777’s actions sheds light on what he means by “the pope of youtube.” fakesagan implies that jezuzfreek777 has adopted the stance of a moral authority, something that fakesagan seems to reject in principle as a possible role on the website. For fakesagan, jezuzfreek777 has acted inappropriately by imposing his own moral standard on another individual on the site. Thus in fakesagan’s video, the vehicle “pope” stands not just for acting inappropriately, but for having an unacceptable attitude in his interaction with anangel13. fakesagan implies that jezuzfreek777 is unable to argue substantive points with anangel13 and has, therefore, resorted to personal insults, or “ad hominem attacks.” fakesagan eventually states outright, “You didn’t want to tackle anangel13, so you just insinuated that she was a shameless harlot” (“jezuzfreek thinks he's the pope of youtube (part 1 of 2),” fakesagan, 2007b). This allegation invokes the archaic “harlot” metaphor, which is itself taken from the religious or moralistic register.

Although fakesagan does not use the term “the pope of youtube” in either part of his two-part video, the presence of “pope” in the title draws some response in the text comments on the videos. One viewer commented as follows. (All typographical errors in comments are the users and are represented as they appeared on the video page.)

I have yet to see anyone call jezuzfreak "The Holy Father" or "His Holiness.” I have never seen anyone kiss his ring, or grovel at his feet. If he is the youtube pope, he has a lot of work to do. Convincing Protestants to go back to the old days of Roman Catholicism will be tough. (Comment on “jezuzfreek thinks he's the pope of youtube (part 1 of 2)” by fakesagan, 2007b)

This is an example of metaphor literalisation (Low & Cameron, 1999), in which “pope” is related back to the literal meaning of “leader of the Catholic church,” in order, presumably, to point out that fakesagan’s use of the metaphor overstates what jezuzfreek777 did in commenting on anangel13’s video. Likewise, another user writes, “Honestly I think jezuzfreek is ashamed because he got an erection, and doesn't want to admit it. Since it would hurt His Holiness.” Finally, a user named popebenadict16 comments, “there is only one pope of youtube.”

In all these cases, the commenters extend fakesagan’s metaphor into a comical, fantasy scenario, wherein jezuzfreek777 as the pope of YouTube signs on to the site and chastises sinners. The question of whether it as an appropriate description of roles on YouTube does not come up, however. The metaphor itself does not become the topic of the conversation; subsequent commenters focus on fakesagan’s claim that jezuzfreek777 was aroused by anangel13’s video and was ashamed, rather than on the idea that jezuzfreek777 thought he was the pope of YouTube.

“Am I the Pope of YouTube?” (video 9)

jezuzfreek777’s video response “Am I the pope of Youtube?” also takes up and develops the “pope” vehicle from fakesagan’s video. The following is an extract from the transcript of jezuzfreek777’s video response.

I wanna make this video response concerning me being the self-appointed pope of YouTube. Now, I know retetto is the king of YouTube according to himself. He appointed himself the king of YouTube. And that’s fine. We all know Michael Jackson appointed himself the king of pop. Well, I’ve never appointed myself the king of anything or the pope of anything. I’m merely a Christian here, trying to make YouTube
a better place. What I’m trying to do is, I’m trying to save people from people like you, my friend. (“Am I the Pope of YouTube?,” jezuzfreek777, 2008)

jezuzfreek777’s use of the pope metaphor explicitly extends fakesagan’s use; fakesagan has, it seems, unintentionally created an affordance through his introduction of the “pope” vehicle. jezuzfreek777 begins his response to fakesagan’s video focusing on an aspect of the “jezuzfreek777 is the pope of YouTube” metaphor that is not explicitly present in fakesagan’s video, the “pope” as “self-appointed.” This phrase is new in the development of the vehicle and expands the meaning away from “someone who acts inappropriately by imposing their moral standards on others” to “someone who claims authority they are not entitled to.” He draws a contrast between himself and others who have claimed authority for themselves, such as Michael Jackson and renetto (another YouTuber who claimed to be the “king of YouTube”). He is not the “pope” of YouTube, because, in his mind, his actions did not involve taking on any authority. The key problem with behaving as a “pope,” as jezuzfreek777 presents it, is the “self-appointed” nature of these labels, something that fakesagan did not explicitly make an issue of in his video, but that jezuzfreek777 infers. This begins to show jezuzfreek777’s resistance to the metaphor.

For jezuzfreek777, commenting on anangel13’s video was part of an effort to “make YouTube a better place,” which he expands on in the following extract:

I’m here on YouTube trying to do good things. That doesn’t mean that I’m self-righteous. That I’m the pope of YouTube. It just means that I care enough about YouTube that I don’t want it to become coughs. Sorry excuse me. I don’t want it to become a cesspool of vulgarity and heathenism. I would think you would appreciate that. At least I’m trying to clean YouTube up and do the right thing. (“Am I the pope of Youtube?,” jezuzfreek777, 2008)

Here, jezuzfreek777 equates the “pope” of YouTube with “self-righteousness,” similar to fakesagan’s claim that jezuzfreek777 is a “pious asshole.” In rejecting fakesagan’s negative use of the pope vehicle, he counters with the metaphor of “cleaning YouTube up” to imply that his action was positive. Rather than claiming authority inappropriately, he was helping save the community from becoming a “cesspool of vulgarity.” This, in jezuzfreek777’s view, is a noble and honorable activity, and one that does not overstep his role as a YouTube user in the way that fakesagan implied in his video.

Near the end of the video, jezuzfreek777 again rejects the “jezuzfreek777 is the pope of YouTube” metaphor, engaging fakesagan’s comments and recasting them:

You know, I can say this concerning piety. It’s not usually that the person is acting holier than thou that bothers people. It’s not really the fact that the person clings to their faith that bothers people. What really bothers people the most in my opinion is that they realize that someone else has something that they don’t have. And they become upset that they can’t enjoy that same thing because they don’t understand it. So it’s easy to say, “Oh, you’re a Ned Flanders. You’re the pope of YouTube. Oh, you’re so pompous. You’re a jackass.” (“Am I the pope of Youtube?,” jezuzfreek777, 2008)

In this extract, jezuzfreek777 recognizes fakesagan’s intended use of the “pope” vehicle and rejects the implication that piety is a negative thing, as fakesagan suggests in his video. Instead, jezuzfreek777 argues that the problem is not a Christian acting “holier than thou,” but that the
accuser (in this case fakesagan) actually longs for the religious fervor that the Christian has. Thus, although jezuzfreek777 rejects the label of “pope,” he does not reject piety or his own moralistic behavior (which led fakesagan to use the metaphor in the first place); rather he rejects fakesagan’s concept of piety and what is and is not appropriate. “Pope” comes to stand for what the two believe to be inappropriate behavior, but the connotations of the vehicle are quite different for each.

The “pope” vehicle also provides an affordance to commenters, and indeed many of the text comments orient to it. Even more than on fakesagan’s earlier video, commenters eagerly and creatively engaged the “pope” vehicle: “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, like the few commenters on videos 7 and 8, the phrase the “pope of YouTube” is creatively compelling in a way that other metaphors used in the video were not. The content of the two comments quoted above, however, shows little development or expansion of the ideas in either of the videos. Rather, it seems that some commenters simply responded to the title of the video “Am I the pope of youtube?,” rather than engaging the arguments that jezuzfreek777 makes in the video or fakesagan’s initial insult. In both of these comments, the “jezuzfreek777 is the pope of YouTube” metaphor (and jezuzfreek777 subsequently titling his video “Am I the pope of YouTube?”) affords a creative basis for mocking jezuzfreek777.

There is also some serious literalisation of the “pope” vehicle, as we saw in the comments on part 1 of fakesagan’s video. For example, “You and Pope? We Catholics find that more offending than the ’F’ Word which you demonize...” (Comment on “Am I the Pope of YouTube?,” jezuzfreek777, 2008). Similar is the following comment:

Christian? You presume to make yourself Pope! You are hardly worthy to kiss the papal foot! This is a sham of presumption. Who cares what the pagans think . . . ? but any self thinking christian should not presume to elevate themselves to pope. This is disgraceful. (Comment on “Am I the Pope of YouTube?,” jezuzfreek777, 2008)

This brings the topic of the vehicle back to “leader of the Catholic church.” jezuzfreek777 responds to the second comment, asking if the commenter has seen the video, to which the commenter responds: “It’s actually a general comment on the title,” suggesting that the commenter either did not view the video or did not view it in its entirety. If this is the case, the nuance of jezuzfreek777’s argument is wasted on this commenter, who seems to be relying simply on his assumptions about what kind of videos jezuzfreek777 generally makes.

One commenter mentions jezuzfreek777’s comment about cleaning up YouTube, writing: “Ah, so you're not the self-appointed pope, you're the self-appointed garbage collector? And somehow you've also appointed yourself the judge of what is and isn't moral on YouTube? Way to go on not being self-righteous.....” By making a connection between the different metaphorical statements that jezuzfreek777 made in the video, the commenter includes another inappropriate role for YouTube users to take on: “judge.” This user, like fakesagan, rejects jezuzfreek777’s metaphorical representation, saying that it is inappropriate for jezuzfreek777 to play the role that he has established for himself. In this commenter’s opinion, as it seems for fakesagan, there is no place for judges of the morality of other users on YouTube. Moreover, the commenter finds jezuzfreek777’s argument to be audacious; he is, in fact, asserting himself in a role similar to that of the pope, as one who may tell others what behavior is appropriate or not.
Discussion

I began this article asking how and to what effect YouTube users reinterpret and subvert other users' metaphors to assert their own opinions about the community; and whether or not users representing different ideological positions employ metaphor differently.

The use of the pope of YouTube metaphor by both fakesagan and jezuzfreek777 demonstrates that different users from different ideological positions do not necessarily employ different metaphors to describe or understand the YouTube community, but rather are able to extend, subvert, and reappropriate the same metaphors with different meanings to suit their purposes. The use and reappropriation of the pope metaphor reveals different moral standards and shows the strong opposing opinions the two video producers hold about what one should and should not do on YouTube. The two are not simply using metaphor to insult each other; rather each is attempting to assert his own moral standard for the site: fakesagan to remove moral judgment from YouTube and jezuzfreek777 to “clean up the cesspool of vulgarity on the site.” Metaphor plays a role in describing how the users describe their actions and YouTube as a site for social interaction. Thus it seems that discussing relatively abstract and novel activities (such as leaving comments on other user's channel pages) in concrete, offline terms is an important resource in this thread.

Rather than relying on different metaphorical systems, the two video producers (as well as those who produced text comments in response) employed the same metaphor to describe positions on the site, similar to the emergence of metaphor and shared use of the same metaphor identified in other forms of talk (Cameron, 2003). As such, the dynamic use of metaphor in this YouTube video thread challenges Lakoff's notion that ideologically opposed users have differing underlying metaphorical ways of thinking. This is not a novel finding; see Cienki’s (2004) study of metaphor use in U.S. Presidential debates and Hodsdon-Champeon's (2010) research showing that Usenet users holding ideologically-opposed positions on racism employed the same rhetorical devices. The worldviews of the users differ, and because of that difference, they understand the meaning of and use the same metaphors in different ways, rather than having completely different metaphorical understandings of the world, as Lakoff (1996) seems to suggest. Metaphor use, in this case, is not a fixed, cognitive mapping, but rather is fundamentally contextual and dependent on the use of others.

Even though metaphor is employed to help explain and justify actions in the thread, it does not appear to have any intrinsically positive effects leading to empathetic responses from either the video producers or the commenters. Rather, metaphor in this thread obscures explicit meaning, allowing the participants to talk loosely about the actions of the others and their own goals on the site. Rather than being a locus of shared experience and understanding, as in Cameron’s (2010b) reconciliation data, metaphor in this video thread is simply another point of disagreement in the interaction. This suggests that metaphor use does not intrinsically benefit or hinder communication between users with differing opinions or worldviews. Further research is needed to identify YouTube communication in which positive interaction occurs and to analyse the role of metaphor in those interactions. Anecdotally, from my two years of longitudinal observation of Christian and atheist users on the site (see also Pihlaja, forthcoming), it seems that with rare exceptions, the interaction tends to be oppositional and antagonistic, but it also frequently employs metaphor, as users play with language and attempt to create videos that are interesting for other users to watch and interact with. Metaphor use, as in this context, seems to be a creative resource.
The discussion in the videos has the appearance of an argument in which two users take positions with the apparent goal of convincing one another of their respective beliefs about appropriate social roles on YouTube. However, given the humorous nature of fakesagan's pope of YouTube metaphor and the ensuing play that surrounds the talk, discussion of social roles on the site could be analysed as a simple by-product of a YouTube "drama" episode. Drama is a phenomenon "that emerge[s] when a flurry of video posts clusters around an internal 'controversy' or antagonistic debate between one or more YouTubers” (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 98). In this thread, drama overtakes what might otherwise be an argument about stem cell research and produces a kind of performative, antagonistic talk that is largely absent in the earlier videos in the thread. That is, the pope of YouTube metaphor seems to be a part of fakesagan's attempts to creatively "pwn" (or dominate completely as in an online game) (Pfannenstiel, 2010) jezuzfreek777. The fact that the topic of appropriate social roles on YouTube becomes a part of this discussion may be incidental, an artefact of the particular drama episode.

Conclusion

This article analysed how metaphor emerged dynamically in a YouTube video thread involving interaction between an atheist and a Christian, as well as in the comments by other YouTube users on their videos. Although the thread began with a positive interaction between the two video producers, when discussion about appropriate behavior on YouTube (and fakesagan’s perception that jezuzfreek777 had behaved inappropriately in the past) emerged, the thread turned antagonistic. There was no evidence that the users appealed to different metaphorical systems related to their ideological position, nor did shared use of metaphor necessarily have any positive effects on the tone of the discussion. On the contrary, the use of the metaphor “the Pope of YouTube” appeared to obscure potentially important nuance related to what the video producers believed to be appropriate activity on the site.

Discourse analysis of the videos and the interaction of spoken language from the video with the text comments shows promise for understanding how YouTube interaction develops. As seen above, there is a dynamic relationship among the content of the video, the text the author attaches to the video (in the description box and title), and how commenters interact with these different elements of the video page. The title of the videos, for example, played an important role in the thread analysed in this study in terms of how commenters interacted with the video content, at times overriding the actual message contained in the video. This suggests that analysis of interaction on YouTube should take into account all the elements of the video page. By focusing on only one element (video tags, comments, etc.), the dynamic interaction among the different forms of communication is lost to the analyst, and key elements in the development of the video page over time may be overlooked. Therefore, it is important for analysts to employ complementary mixed methods to investigate all elements of the page.

The small sample size of the dataset allowed close analysis of the interaction that occurred in the thread, but it necessarily limits the ability to generalize about the findings. As O'Donnell et al. (2008) suggest, how viewers perceive a video can differ greatly depending on which group of YouTubers one is discussing. Further close analysis of interaction among users, not only in situations where antagonism occurs, but also in threads where users with similar worldviews build rapport, is essential to understanding how YouTube interaction develops into oppositional or supportive relationships. This research should ideally involve a broad cross section of users, taking into account the diversity of the YouTube community. Research that is able to link large-scale studies of interaction among YouTubers with small-scale discourse analysis is also needed to providing a complete picture of user interaction on YouTube.
Future research might employ principled discourse analysis of drama episodes to investigate the effects of ongoing antagonism on YouTube and whether groups of users form on the site to provide some insulation from opposing viewpoints, or if antagonistic interaction is simply accepted, as Lange’s (2007a) research implies. Neither fakesagan nor jezuzfreek777 suggests that the other should be disallowed from making videos, in keeping with Lange’s (2007a) claim that YouTube users support the free expression of ideas on the site. Nonetheless, as in the offline world, users may still tend to group together with and support others who hold similar worldviews, as has been found, for example, in research about blogs (e.g., Adamic & Glance, 2005; Tremayne, Zheng, Lee, & Jeong 2006). If this is indeed the case, the extent to which groups are dynamic and the role metaphor plays in mediating interaction with others outside of one's own group and in defining group identity on YouTube would become important questions for further research.

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Note

1. "Pwn“ is a misspelling of the word “own,” conventionalized in hacker and gamer culture to mean “to defeat” (Wikipedia, 2010).

References


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