Positioning PR: an Analysis of the Representation of Public Relations in Australian Political Speeches

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Abstract

In Australia, as in many nations, each of the major political parties fully understands the importance of effective public relations strategies in gaining public acceptance of their policies. Indeed, public relations specialists playing a key role in managing and shaping political debates. Yet, in 2011, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) Government were repeatedly positioned by the Liberal National Party (LNP or Coalition) Opposition as using ‘spin’ and ‘PR stunts’ to promote its policies in relation to a proposed price on carbon pollution. In this study the speeches of then ALP Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, and then LNP Opposition leader, Tony Abbott, were examined over a three-month period using a new provisional conceptual intentional positioning framework for public relations. The study specifically tests the framework’s applicability as a method for conducting a positioning discourse analysis of public relations texts. Using the positioning framework to conduct a discourse analysis encouraged a systematic analysis of these texts, as well providing a firm theoretical basis from which to analyse the texts in terms of their discourses. Findings suggest that the positioning of public relations in this context was an intentional self-positioning strategy by the LNP, and that the goal was to position the LNP and Abbott as taking the moral higher ground (relative to Gillard and the ALP) by inferring that they (the LNP) were exemplary and ‘above’ using similar public relations strategies and tactics. This positioning strategy arguably feeds into popular (mis?) conceptions of public relations in Australia as lacking an ethical basis, and as being, at best, a semi-profession. It is anticipated that the results of the study will add to current knowledge about positioning strategies in political contexts, and will provide fresh insights into how public relations is represented in Australia.

Key Words: public relations, positioning theory; discourse analysis; political speeches
Introduction

This paper reports on a surprising positioning strategy that emerged as part of a larger research project that analysed the positioning of controversial carbon pricing policies in Australia. Public relations itself was being positioned by a political leader. This strategy allowed the positioner (or illocutor) to self-position as more ethical, and thereby more legitimate, by implying that they (and their party) were not using public relations. This is despite ample evidence to suggest that each of the major Australian political parties relies on public relations for the day-to-day running of their respective organisations. It was also found that the use of this particular positioning strategy was intended to draw on broader societal discourses about the unethicalness of public relations as a professional field, discourses that were then tied into positioning the opposing party and leader as similarly unethical and therefore illegitimate in their role. Interestingly, the positioned entity did not respond to this deliberate positioning. This begs the question concerning why one political party/leader could apparently position in this way while the other could not. The success of this positioning strategy arguably lay in the fact that the party/political leader so positioned had not discursively constructed the right to reposition as trustworthy, thereby calling into question her/their legitimacy as Prime Minister and the Government of Australia. To examine this phenomenon the paper used a positioning discourse analysis (PDA) framework that potentially offers a more systematic examination of discursive constructions of positioning.

Background

The role of public relations in Australian politics

State and Federal politics in Australia is dominated by two major parties: the Australian Labor Party (ALP), and the Liberal Party of Australia. At the Federal level the Liberal Party has formed a coalition with the Australian National Party and is commonly referred to as The Coalition or the LNP. Australia is unusual in that voting is compulsory and this means that government communication is especially important in terms of providing information for voters to make informed political choices (Young, 2007). Various factors, including the need to continuously campaign and plan “for the next election campaign” (Young, 2007, p. xxvii) as well the need to stave off an often-critical mass media (Ward, 2007), have led to each of the major political parties investing heavily in media relations, public relations, and advertising (Ward, 2007). Consequently political public relations strategies and tactics are highly influential in managing and shaping political debates (Young, 2007), with each of the major political parties fully acknowledging the importance of effective public relations strategies in gaining public acceptance of their policies (Young, 2007). Indeed, such is the reliance on this “apparatus of spin doctors” that some claim that Australia has become a “PR State” (Ward. 2007. p. 3).

Suspicions about the role of public relations within the Australian political
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sphere are often reinforced by media reports that play into the conception that "the consumer of mass culture stereotype is more likely to think of PR ethics as an oxymoron" (Brown, 2003, p. 496, cited in Tilley, 2012). Glenny (2008) argues that in Australia "misdirected expenditure on government advertising, spin and obfuscation have resulted in perceptions of public relations as a tool for hiding the truth and misleading the public for the purpose of achieving a particular political agenda" (Glenny, 2008, p. 152). Public relations tactics are seen as a misuse of government resources, and this misuse is seen as being at their (taxpayers’) expense (Young, 2007, p. xxvii). Politicians are also tainted by their close association with public relations; the broad view being that politicians have become “more professional and calculating”, and possibly more unethical, because of this relationship (Savage and Tiffen, 2007, pp. 81-91).

This study takes a social constructionist view of public relations wherein public relations practitioners are viewed as “discourse technologists” who, through their deployment of public relations texts, “seek to achieve change by transforming discourses, which involves changing established ways of thinking about particular objects, concepts, subjects, and strategies” (Leitch & Motion, 2010, p. 103). In politics, these practices are assisted by the use of social science research that is used to “strategically modify the discourse practices of targeted discourse consumers” (Roper, 2005, p. 141). From a public relations perspective, the transformation of a discourse is successful when it succeeds in shifting or changing established ways of thinking, and whereby the discourse succeeds in assuming a taken for granted or ‘truth’ status (Leitch & Motion, 2010). However, struggles over discourse transformations are not always easily achieved. One “limit of spin” is the idealised notion that public relations transcends “all other political resources” and assumes that a politician/political party has perfect control over events (Savage & Tiffen, 2007, p. 91). A further limit is that all of the political parties use public relations, and consequently there is an ongoing conflict as each party engages in a “mutual puncturing” of one another’s efforts (Savage & Tiffen, 2007, p. 92). In this study a positioning discourse analysis is offered as a potential method for mapping the mutual positioning of opposing political sides in relation to the introduction of a controversial carbon price or tax in Australia in 2011.

The carbon price/tax debate in Australia

The reasons for political debates over action on climate change in Australia are complex. Australia is the fifth largest producer of coal and Australians are the highest consumers of coal per capita globally (Next 10, 2015). As the Australian Climate Council (2015) notes, “the pollution from Australia’s coal resources alone could take us two-thirds of the way to a two-degree rise in global temperature”, meaning that Australia’s climate change policies are vital to world outcomes. Australia’s geography and climate also means it is likely to experience severe impacts from climate change “across a number of sectors, including water security, agriculture, coastal communities, and infrastructure” (Department of the
Environment, n.d.). In 2013, numerous Australian temperature records were broken, with sophisticated climate models indicating that these temperatures could not have been reached in the absence of human emissions of greenhouse gases (Lewis & Karoly, 2014). Nevertheless, how to reduce Australia’s carbon emissions has been, and remains, politically contentious. The issues came to a head in 2007 when, in “the world’s first climate change election” (Burgmann & Baer, 2010, n.p.) the (then) Australian Labor Party (ALP) Opposition leader, Kevin Rudd, and the (then) Coalition Prime Minister, John Howard, both took an carbon emissions trading scheme (ETS) to the 2007 Australian Federal election. Although Rudd (arguably) copied Howard’s election policy pledge to act on climate change, he also declared climate change as “the greatest moral challenge of our time” (Taylor & Hoyle, 2014, n.p.). It was this, together with the positioning of the ALP as the party of reform “willing to take climate change seriously…and to place global interests above short-term national ones” (Macintosh, Wilkinson & Dennis, 2010, n.p.) that ultimately led to a convincing win for Rudd and the ALP. In so doing Rudd not only ended eleven years of conservative government in Australia, he also had a clear mandate to act on climate change.

Then Prime Minister Rudd immediately declared his government would address climate change by introducing an ETS. Rudd also made Julia Gillard his deputy and, in so doing, ensured that for the first time in Australia’s history a woman held the nation’s second highest office. Within the Coalition there were also leadership changes, with Malcolm Turnbull elected as the new LNP leader upon Howard’s resignation post-election. Like his predecessor, Turnbull was in favour of action on climate change and, when Labor was forced to negotiate a deal with the Coalition to get the ETS passed through the Senate, Rudd and Turnbull struck a deal. However, not all Coalition Members of Parliament agreed (Coalition MP’s reportedly voted 47-46 against such a deal). In December 2009 political infighting over the ETS led to a leadership ballot that resulted in Turnbull being ousted by a single vote. The new Coalition leader Tony Abbott immediately declared a secret ballot with the motion that the ETS legislation be delayed for three months, and if this was not tenable that the legislation be defeated. The motion was carried by fifty-five to twenty-nine and, as a result, the ETS was defeated both in 2009 (when Rudd was forced into striking a deal with Turnbull) and also again in April 2010 when the Senate once more blocked the Bill. Rudd subsequently announced that the ETS would be delayed for at least three years - a move that resulted in Labor, and Rudd personally, taking a substantial dive in the polls, with a Nielsen poll placing the Coalition ahead of Labor for the first in more than four years by 53-47 per cent.

Disillusionment with both the ALP and the Coalition also led to more voters supporting the Australian Greens Party, with the Greens recording a poll-record primary vote of 15 per cent (Coorey, 2010). On 24 June 2010, Deputy Prime Minister Gillard challenged Rudd for the leadership of the party and won unopposed. In so doing Ms Gillard became Australia’s first female Prime Minister, and later that year narrowly led the ALP to win the 2010 Federal
elected. Labor’s narrow win was only achieved after Gillard gained the support of the Australian Greens Party and several Independent Members of Parliament. At the core of Gillard’s deal with the Greens was the securing of numerous concessions sought by the Greens that included the formation of a climate change committee (Rodgers, 2010) and acknowledgement that “reducing carbon pollution by 2020 will require a carbon price” (Agreement, n.d.). On 12 July 2011, Julia Gillard announced that, “for the first time in Australian history, we will put a price on carbon pollution” (Gillard, 2011a). The following day Tony Abbott stated the Coalition’s opposing position that a carbon tax was a ‘bad idea’. Over the following three months, and the timeframe in which this study is set, both leaders engaged in an extended debate over the merits or otherwise of such a scheme, with Abbott arguing that Gillard had lied to the Australian people because she had apparently broken her pre-election promise to not introduce a carbon price. Crucially, during the lead-up to the election, Gillard made a commitment that she would not price carbon pollution vowing that, “there will be no carbon tax under a government I lead” (Channel Ten, August 16, 2010).

On 14 September 2011 the “Clean Energy Bill 2011” was introduced to the Australian Federal Parliament. Abbott immediately vowed that should he be elected Prime Minister the first priority of his Government would be to repeal the Carbon Tax legislation. In October 2013 Abbott achieved the first part of this goal when the Coalition, with Abbott as leader, convincingly won the 2013 election. Almost immediately, in November 2013, the Government introduced legislation to repeal the carbon price/tax and, on 17 July 2014, after three attempts, they finally secured enough Senate support to fulfil Abbott’s election promise (Griffiths, 2014). Consequently, as it stands in 2015, Australia has become the first developed nation to repeal its carbon pricing legislation that prices carbon emissions, and Australia’s unconditional greenhouse emissions target of 26-28 % is well below the 40-60% target recommended by the Australian Climate Change Authority. Most recently, at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris, Australia was rated third last out of the 58 countries assessed in the latest Climate Change Performance Index (Australian Conservation Foundation, 2015). And while the majority of Australians now consider global warming to be a “serious and pressing problem”, 35% of Australians say that the Government “should not make significant commitments on emissions reductions ahead of other countries” (Oliver, 2015).

**Research approach**

This paper seeks to contribute to the emerging literature on this phenomenon through the application of the intentional positioning framework for public relations proposed by James (2011, 2014), and tests its applicability as framework for conducting a positioning discourse analysis. This hybrid methodology was applied to the speeches of the former ALP Prime Minister Julia Gillard, and former Coalition Opposition Leader Tony Abbott, during a three-month period in 2011. Specifically the study sought to explore why the
Positioning strategies of one political party (the Opposition) seemingly gained much greater traction in the minds of the electorate than the positioning strategies of the Government. One of those strategies, the positioning of the Government by the Opposition as illegitimate, and the supporting position that the Government’s carbon pricing campaign was little more than spin and PR stunts, is the focus of this research paper.

Positioning has been historically associated with military campaigns (Baert, 2012) and is often referred to in marketing literature where it is used in connection with the four ‘P’s’ of price, product, placement and promotion (see for example McCarthy, 1960). Positioning theory differs by having a social constructionist ontology (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Slocum-Bradley, 2010, Wood & Kroger, 2000). Originating with Foucauldian influenced feminists who were concerned with “altering the positions of women in society” (Boxer, 2003), more recently the social psychological research of Harré and van Langenhove (1999), Harré (2009, 2012), Moghaddam, Harré and Lee (2008), Slocum-Bradley (2008, 2009, 2010), and James (2010, 2011, 2014) have been influential in furthering understanding of positioning in social interactions between individuals, groups, and even nations. At the core of positioning theory, and central to these authors’ understanding, is the concept of a dynamic positioning triangle as an analytical framework from which to map the transient nature of positioning in terms of the “actors positions, the social force of what they say and do, and the storylines that are instantiated in the sayings and doings of each episode” (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 10). James’ (2011, 2014) conceptual framework for intentional positioning in public relations similarly adopts a positioning triangle model, but the framework has been developed to take into account the strategic intent inherent in public relations campaigns.

James’ (2010, 2011, 2014) definition of positioning in public relations contexts, then, focuses on the strategic attempts by an entity to “stake out and occupy a site of intentional representation in the contested space where meanings are constructed, contested and reconstructed” (2010, p.7). In addition to the positioning framework, positioning theory also stresses how individuals or individual exemplars have rights and duties that are jointly constituted through discourse (James, 2011; Wise & James, 2013). Discourse in this sense is taken to mean “the use of language and other symbols and signs to generate meaning, such as through talk, gestures and images” (Slocum - Bradley, 2009, p. 80) and is related to public relations in that an entity undertaking a public relations program must have the right, or construct the right, to discursively take a particular position (Wise & James, 2013). From a public relations perspective this concept is critical as it suggests that an individual (or an individual speaking on behalf of an organisation) must first construct the right to position in a particular way if the positioning strategy is to succeed (James, 2011).
Data sample

The sampling procedure used in the larger study was purposive in that the samples were selected on the grounds they were illustrative of the phenomena the researcher was seeking to examine (Silverman, 2011; Daymon & Holloway, 2010). Specifically this was the public relations positioning of a carbon price/tax by the two main Australian political leaders at the time, Prime Minister Julia Gillard (ALP Government), and Federal Opposition Leader Tony Abbott (LNP Opposition). Using a new strategic positioning framework for public relations (James, 2011, 2014) and positioning discourse analysis (Wise & James, 2013), the study analysed a data set of speeches delivered by Prime Minister Gillard and Opposition Leader Abbott, in which they specifically discussed an Australian carbon price or tax. The speeches were selected on the grounds that, as a primary form of public communication widely used to communicate the policy positions of both Gillard and Abbott, it is likely a public relations specialist would have played a key role in their construction. The data sample consisted of nine speech transcripts (n=9) delivered by Gillard during a three-month period in 2011, and fourteen speech transcripts (n=14) delivered by Abbott during the same timeframe. The study was guided by the following over-arching research question:

How was the Australian carbon price/tax positioned, from a public relations strategic positioning perspective, in the speeches of former Opposition Leader Tony Abbott, and former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, during the three-month lead up to the introduction of the Clean Energy Bill 2011 to the Federal Parliament?

Positioning discourse analysis

Positioning triangle domain

The first core domain is the positioning triangle domain, consisting of the actual and the desired position(s) of an entity and its stakeholders; the speech act/action used to declare a desired outcome; and the narratives or storylines used to support and achieve the position declared in the speech acts/actions. The position pole is the expression of an entity’s, and its stakeholders, actual and potential positions. The speech acts/action pole draws on the work of Searle who proposed there are a limited number of basic things that individuals do with language: “we tell people how things are” (assertives); “we try to get them to do things” (directives), “we commit ourselves to doing things” (commissives); “we express our feelings and attitudes” (expressives) “and we bring about changes through our utterances” (declarations) (1979, p.29). Moreover, individuals “often, we do more than one of these at once in the same utterance” (Searle, 1979, p.29). The third storyline pole refers to meanings constructed through storylines, “that the entity has chosen to promulgate through its public relations activities” (James, 2010, p. 133). When used by public relations practitioners, storylines are congruent with key messaging. If all three poles of the triangle fail to align (i.e.
are inconsistent) the positioning will likely fail, resulting in a loss of believability of key messages (James, 2010).

Findings

The findings suggested there were multiple positions and multiple, often overlapping, storylines at play in the multiple sites in which the speeches were enacted. For example, Gillard’s position that a carbon price was good for Australia was primarily enacted through economic discourses, and economic opportunity storylines, that discursively positioned her, and her Government, as economic visionaries. At the same time, the Opposition were discursively positioned as lacking vision. Abbott’s position, conversely, that a carbon tax was bad for Australia, similarly relied on economic discourses, but these were underpinned by risk storylines that positioned Gillard and the Government as economic risk-takers, and the Opposition as economically responsible in contrast.

These opposing storylines/discourses can be further conceptualised as ‘good versus bad’ storylines/discourses. Gillard’s enactment of ‘good’ storylines through assertive speech acts championed the ALP’s (good) history of ‘visionary’ policies and projects. For example in her “Address to the Nation” she asserted that,

“How having led the nation through the biggest global downturn since the Depression, Federal Labor now gets to govern in times of hope. To be the “navigators to the future” we have always wanted to be” (Gillard, 2011b).

In another speech, delivered to the Australian Steel Convention, Gillard asserted that:

“Australia will be able to seize a competitive advantage in developing and applying the cutting edge technologies of the clean energy future” (Gillard, 2011a).

Abbott’s storylines were primarily about ‘their bad things’ and, on several occasions, and somewhat surprisingly, this included the use of assertive speech acts that positioned the Government, but also public relations. For example Abbott asserted,

“Why should we trust this government with a new tax when we know where it will all end: with more spending, more waste and more spin” (Abbott, 2011b).

Of particular interest is the context in which these particular speech acts were enacted. Recent work on positioning theory by Slocum-Bradley (2009) incorporates the social force of speech acts or “the meanings of words, gestures, symbols, and other discursive tools” that are “the social tasks they accomplish…in specific social contexts” (p. 82). In public political discourse, the social force of discursive acts includes meanings “conjured among third party
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publics, whom the contesting parties wish to win over in a power game of discursive influence” (Montiel & Guzman, 2010, p. 96).

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) is Australia’s national broadcaster and they filmed Gillard’s “Address to the Nation” (Gillard, 2011b) which was televised nationally at 6.30 pm Australian Eastern Standard Time (AEST) on Sunday 10 July. In Australia this timeslot is prime time viewing and those channels that screened the broadcast included two free to air television channels (Seven and Nine), subscriber TV channel, ‘Sky’, and three federally funded public television channels. Abbott’s decision to also give an ‘Address to the Nation’ (Abbott, 2011b) resulted from Gillard’s decision to give a televised address, with Abbott demanding that he be given equal television airtime immediately following Gillard’s address (Hurst, 2011). It is difficult to retrospectively ascertain which channels aired Abbott’s address or if this Address received airtime equivalent to that given to Gillard (for example no information could be found about whether the subscriber TV channel Sky aired the Address). What is known however, is that the free-to-air Nine Network agreed to give Abbott a right of reply, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (the ABC - Australia’s public broadcaster) screened an hour-long carbon tax special at 7.30 p.m. that included interviews with political leaders. Presumably this included Abbott’s Address. It is also known that the Seven Network – the other free-to-air channel that had earlier screened the Prime Minister’s Address - declined Abbott’s request and instead screened the final of it’s ratings hit “Dancing With The Stars” (Hurst, 2011).

The other two political addresses analysed as part of this paper took place during the Australian Steel Convention, and at The Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA). Both Gillard and Abbott gave addresses at the Australian Steel Convention, which was held for the first time in Canberra, Australia’s capital. The audience at this event included a “record number of members” including “over 70 small to medium enterprise (SME) company members from across Australia “concerned at their businesses’ future” (OneSteel, 2011). The Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) is a non-profit independent member-based organisation that holds forums and events and influences policy making on “economic and social issues affecting Australia” through an “evidence-based research agenda” (Committee for Economic Development of Australia [CEDA], 2015). CEDA’s membership is made up of 700 “unique, influential...leaders from business, government, academic and community organisations” who attend events “to be informed...and to discuss the economic development of Australia” (Committee for Economic Development of Australia [CEDA], 2015).

Gillard’s use of this (assertive) speech act (see above) delivered within the context of giving a nationally televised ‘Address to the Nation’ (Gillard, 2011b), has the social force of reassuring/assuring a national audience about the legitimacy of her/ her Government in terms of leading the country forward. In the second example (Gillard, 2011a) this speech act similarly has the social force of
assuring/reassuring, but this time the target audience is the Australian Steel Industry. Abbott’s use of ‘spin’ and ‘PR stunts’ also has a social force. Maloney (2002) suggests that “spin” is one of the most recognised words of the century and has been popularised in high-rating television series such as ‘Spin City’, a comedy about the use of ‘spin’ in U.S. politics. The use of ‘spin’ by Abbott to a broad audience in his Address to the Nation, is not only a reference to popular culture using the same medium (television) to connote particular meanings, it has the social force of warning people about the ‘bad things’ of the government by linking their use of ‘spin’ to pre-existing and negative perceptions many people have about the influence of public relations in politics. In the second example (Abbott, 2011a), the intentional use of “PR” to this business audience is reflective, again, of the intention to construct particular meanings using a term that is commonplace in professional business contexts. The use of ‘stunts’ further implies actions that are underhanded and/or being undertaken to gain attention. The additional force, then, of this speech act is to warn audience about the (bad) ‘underhandedness’ of the Gillard Government and their (bad) carbon tax. It also has the social force of reinforcing the popular notion that PR is, likewise, bad.

Positioning purpose domain

James (2010, 2011) proposes five positioning purpose classifications whereby positioning is variously undertaken for the purposes of ingratiation, intimidation, self-promotion, exemplification, facilitation or supplication. Exemplification refers to the desire by an entity to position as highly moral or of going above and beyond what would normally be expected in a particular context. The research indicated that while there were similarities inasmuch as both Gillard and Abbott positioned for the purposes of exemplification, this was discursively achieved through very different strategies. Whereas Gillard sought to self-position as exemplary through the enactment of ‘visionary’ discourses, Abbott sought to deliberately position Gillard and the Government as untrustworthy, and thereby self-positioned as exemplary in comparison.

However, there were also some problems encountered when applying this domain. As James (2010, 2011) argues, there may be slippage between classifications for example an entity may position themselves using self promotion discourses, but they may also support this with positioning for the purposes of exemplification. Arguably, each of the addresses delivered by both Abbott and Gillard could be further categorised as ‘self promotion’ in which the desire was to be perceived as competent, and undoubtedly they also wanted to be perceived as likeable and agreeable (i.e. an ingratiation positioning purpose). And, although there was no evidence of overt intimidation (for example through the use of threats or coercion); both Gillard and Abbott emphasized their “abilities and accomplishments” and wanted to be perceived as strong (James, 2011, p. 104). For example, Abbott’s use of speech acts (as cited above) about the Government’s use of public relations ‘spin’ and ‘stunts” could be categorized as being ‘intimidation’. The slippage between these various categorisations
suggests further work is required in terms of this positioning domain.

Positioning type domain

Positioning always involves both an agent (or a narrator) doing the positioning, and a positioned party (Baert, 2012). The success of a particular positioning goal or strategy therefore often depends on effectively contrasting the position of another party relative to one’s own position (Baert, 2012). In this respect the positioning goals of an entity are closely aligned with the positioning type domain (James, 2011, 2014) whereby an entity may deliberately self-position, deliberately position others, be forced into adopting a particular self-position or, alternatively, be forced into positioning others. The analysis found that both Abbott and Gillard used their respective speeches to deliberately self-position themselves, their respective parties, one another, and one another’s opposing political parties. For example, Abbott’s address to the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA), deliberately positions the government as untrustworthy in both examples, and pejoratively positions public relations as a profession at the same time. Although, as a further consequence of these positioning episodes, both Gillard and Abbott were variously forced into adopting different positions on different occasions, there was no evidence of Gillard responding to this deliberately positioning of her government as using PR stunts and spin. There was also no evidence of either Gillard or Abbott being forced into positioning others.

Positioning goal domain

When applying the intentional positioning framework for public relations to conduct a positioning discourse analysis (PDA) the final consideration concerns the goal(s) of the entity commissioning the public relations activity. The findings suggest that Gillard’s overarching goal was to retain power, and Abbott’s overarching goal was to gain power.

Table 1: Positioning framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positioning Triangle Domain: Position</th>
<th>Gillard/ALP Government</th>
<th>Abbott/Coalition Opposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We are visionary (the Coalition lacks vision)</td>
<td>The Government/Gillard can’t be trusted (You can trust us)</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positioning Triangle Domain: Speech/act action</th>
<th>Action (a) ‘Address to the Nation’</th>
<th>Action (a) ‘Address to the Nation’</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speech Act [Assertion]: “Friends, in a few hours time I will be introducing historic legislation to put a price on carbon and accelerate our transition to a low carbon”</td>
<td>Speech Act [Assertion]: “Why should we trust this government with a new tax when we know where it will all end: with more spending, more waste and more spin”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positioning Triangle Domain: meta-discourses used to support the position taken</th>
<th>(a) Neo-liberal economic discourses (i.e. economic growth imperative); economic opportunity storylines</th>
<th>(a) Neoliberal economic discourses (i.e. economic growth imperative); economic risk storylines</th>
<th>(b) Public relations as illegitimate discourses (i.e. underhanded, misleading, obscure the truth etc.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positioning Purpose Domain</td>
<td>Exemplification (primarily through self-positioning)</td>
<td>Exemplification (primarily through positioning of the Other)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positioning Type domain</td>
<td>Evidence of self positioning, deliberate positioning of the Other, and forced self positioning</td>
<td>Evidence of self positioning, deliberate positioning of the Other, and forced self positioning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Domain</td>
<td>To retain power</td>
<td>To gain power</td>
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</table>

### Discussion

For both Gillard and Abbott, equally, the over-riding goal of their respective political campaigns was to retain power (Gillard) and gain power (Abbott). As eventuated, Abbott was successful in his positioning of Gillard and her Government and this was borne out by his winning of the 2013 Federal election, and his subsequent demolition of the Gillard Government’s carbon pricing scheme. Both politicians supported their positioning goals through the enactment of economic discourses, and storylines about ‘our good things’ (Gillard) and ‘their bad things’ (Abbott). Specifically, in terms the carbon price/tax, this was
positioned as being good by Gillard, and as bad by Abbott. However, whereas Abbott’s economic discourses were enacted through speech acts that had the social force of warning targeted audiences about the economic risks of a carbon tax, Gillard’s economic discourses were enacted through speech acts that had the social force of assuring and/or reassuring Australians about the economic benefits of a carbon price.

Abbott’s positioning strategy also included storylines about the Government’s use of public relations spin and PR stunts. The social force of these (assertive) speech acts was likewise to warn targeted audiences about the government’s underhandedness in introducing a carbon tax, by linking this to public perceptions of public relations as unethical, untrustworthy etc. One possible reason for the success of this strategy, as Motion and Leitch (1996) argue, is that “in attempting to ensure that a particular image is held by an individual, public relations practitioners must articulate this image with a pre-existing attitude or experience which predisposes the individual to accept that image” (p. 300). The pre-existing attitudes or experiences that individuals have about public relations, and in particular the use of the terms ‘spin’ and ‘PR stunts’ in these contexts, calls upon wider and pre-existing socio-cultural discourses about the unethicalness of public relations as a professional field. The perceived lack of legitimacy of public relations as a profession arguably succeeded in positioning Gillard/the Government as also lacking in legitimacy, while contemporaneously positioning Abbott/the LNP as legitimate in contrast.

At the centre of most conflicts, then, "lies a discrepancy over which rights and duties should be accorded to which actors (Slocum Bradley, 2009, p. 101) and wherein a "change in the distribution of rights and duties will make different sets of discursive acts appropriate, or normatively accountable (Slocum Bradley, 2009, p. 100). While Gillard’s public relations advisors may have considered she had the right, and arguably even a duty in her role as Prime Minister to introduce a carbon price, the majority of Australians did not afford her these same rights and duties. Applying James (2010, 2011, 2014) intentional positioning framework for public relations it seems clear that Abbott’s positioning of Gillard/the Government as untrustworthy and as economic risk-takers, succeeded in undermining her ‘visionary’ and economic opportunity positioning strategy. The accordant shift of rights and duties that accompanied this deliberate positioning not only rendered Gillard’s introduction of a carbon price as 'not right' more broadly, on a personal level it also denied her the right to self-position as a ‘visionary’ as well. Ultimately Gillard/the Government were denied the legitimacy necessary to gain public acceptance of their policy, and this underscores the importance of an entity undertaking a public relations program either having the right, or constructing the right, to discursively take a particular position if the positioning is to succeed (Wise & James, 2013).
Conclusion

This paper is part of a larger study into public relations discursive positioning strategies in political contexts. Findings to date suggest that using the positioning framework for public relations to guide a positioning discourse analysis encourages a systematic analysis according to four core domains. Applying the intentional positioning framework for public relations (James, 2010, 2011, 2014) teased out how intentional meaning was constructed in different contexts, and underlines the importance of context to public relations positioning episodes. Adding the concept of social force proposed by Slocum-Bradley (2009) permitted a deeper analysis in terms of the discursive power of speech acts when used by political parties to legitimise their positions. However, further work is needed to determine if more categories should be added or if some domains should be further developed, particularly in terms of the positioning purpose domain. This study is also indicative of a snapshot in time in Australia only. Further work could examine how public relations is positioned in other nations, and could include examination of how pejorative views of public relations are discursively constructed in these, and other political contexts.

References


