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Lecture 9

Political Linguistics: The Application of Cognitive Linguistics to Political Analysis in America

It is a great privilege to be at this well-known, world famous university, and an especially great privilege to be at the cradle of the democracy movement in China. I come from the University of California at Berkeley, which started the free speech movement in America back in 1964, very much like the democracy movement in China, somewhat more successful in some ways, but still very much in the same spirit. What I'd like to do today is talk about the relationship between academic pursuits like cognitive linguistics and politics.

What is happening in America right now is probably very confusing to Chinese students. The reason is this: Right now, America is politically divided right down the middle—almost fifty-fifty. George Bush did not get the most votes in the last election. Al Gore got the most votes by 500,000, but Bush won in a critical state where his brother was governor. There was a contested election about whether the vote was legal. He won because the Supreme Court, with justices appointed by his father, chose him in a decision which it said was unique and could not be used as precedent for any other decision. In short, there was a lot of political corruption in the choice of this unilateral election. It is remarkable that there was no protests in the streets and so on in America. I think the reason for that is that America tries to be peaceful even under the worse conditions.

Right now America is divided almost fifty-fifty between two utterly different views of politics and with them utterly different views of what morality is. This is something that is not widely known around the world, and it is not widely understood. What I’d like to do is give you some understanding of what politics in America is like today and what kinds of issues are at stake there and why it is that a minority party has been running the country. The conservatives are a very wealthy organization. They are the Republicans there. They have become radical conservatives and they are running America right now. They have all the branches of government—minority, majority, and the Supreme Court, and both the Congress and the Senate, and the White House. It’s a very slim majority, barely a majority, very close, even though the majority of voters are on the other side. The question is how have they done this. Moreover, the form of conservatism has become more and more right wing. It is more and more radical as time has gone on.