FINAL DEBATES LIKE A NEW BEGINNING
A FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF TELEVISED DEBATES FOR THE
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN ROMANIA, FROM NOVEMBER 2014

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Abstract: This study proposes an analysis of televised debates for presidential elections in Romania, in November 2014, from the perspective of functional theory of political campaign discourse. This study shows similarities with the results obtained in other countries, and highlights potential differences, which challenges the functional theory assumptions. The variability of the results can be explained if we consider some cultural particularities of the civilisation of dialogue in the local political life.

Key words: presidential debate; political televised debate; functional theory; political communication culture; political semiotics.

Political debates as a symbol of democracy

The political televised debate are the most significant experience of the electoral campaign (Boydstun, et al.). Diana B. Carlin claims that debates are the most valuable form of communication in the presidential campaign. According to Michael Pfau, televised debate are “superior to other communication forms” (251). Considered the media event of political confrontation and a key element of the election campaign (Benoit, Hansen, and Verser 335), the political televised debate is a complex television genre which contributes to the deliberative construction of political communication (Beciu 139-140).

Such forms of communication have always drawn huge numbers of viewers, which suggests an enormous potential for influencing voters (Benoit, et al. 336). In this context, we are witnessing a shift in the shapes of political discourse towards a show-type politics, media events or infotainment (Beciu 116). Mass-media, primarily exploits the spectacular dimension of a televised debate and is more interested in candidates performance media show than the position on a topic of interest (Lemert et al.). Leon stated that candidates perform the role of ‘President’ in a more or less credible way. In conformity with Schwartzenberg there are characters in front of a large public, attending the mise en scène of a special political event. According to Fortin (63), paradoxically, the tendency of transforming the televised debate into the practice of social spectacle could represent a threat towards the democracy. The effect of such a mediating approach is the decrease of the citizens’ interest towards politics. The author explains this effect throughout the decline of argumentation speech in favor of a type of seducing speech.

However the televised debates remain essential forms of communication for the functioning of democracy (Coleman 1; Beciu 139-140) and could be an ideal opportunity for candidates to establish an interpretation of reality, to impose control and symbolic representations of the situation in the political field. Therefore the stimulating debate is one of the freedom of speech functions in a society (Wachsmann). In this way, TV debate is considered to be a symbol of democracy (Lochard 9). Prominent themes from the public sphere (e.g. the topic of elections in diaspora) may constitute serious constraints in elections, running and performing the discursive scenarios of candidates (Boydstun, Glazier, and Pietryka 28). It is a test of the ability of the candidates to focus on the strategic dimension

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of the political themes messages. This may be one of the reasons why the influence of the TV debates is defined by “contextual dynamics of the campaign” (McKinney, and Carlin 210). In the local public sphere discussions on the usefulness televised election debates targeted, on the one hand, fears that the debate focuses attacks rather than exchanging ideas (the excess of conversational violence), on the other hand, the fact that the formal structure of the context of the debate could lead to self-censorship discourse of candidates (Beciu 139).

**Functional theory of political campaign discourse**

This article examines the way in which social actors position themselves discursively during final debates for presidential elections, both one toward the other, and toward the content of communication, from the perspective of functional theory of political campaign discourse. Obviously, political messages and declarations aim to win the election. This article is based on the premise that televised political debates are conflictual, competitive verbal interactions. Starting from this premise, a functional approach to analyze political debates appears appropriate. We depart from the five axioms formulated by Benoit (*Political Election Debates* 9-19):

- Vote is a comparative act.
- Candidates must be distinguished from other opponents.
- Political campaign messages allow the candidates to distinguish themselves (to assert their identity).
- Candidates set up desirability (are positioned on preferability scale) by three discursive functions: acclamations (A1), attacks (A2), defenses (A3)
- Election campaigns discourse is targeting two main themes: policies (P) and character (C).

The first axiom implies a certain competence of the citizens, which guides and makes decisions on preference of a particular candidate in a comparative way. The following two axioms include candidates’ identity construction. The fourth axiom concerns discursive tools available for the candidates to position favorably on the audience preferences scale. The last axiom proposes two types of associations: one on “Character” and references to assertions concerning candidate image and another between the theme “Policies” and references to political issues under discussion.

According to William L. Benoit, in the functional theory of political discourse, candidates are positioned on the preferability scale by three discursive functions: acclamation, attacks and defenses (*Political Election Debates* 13-18). Acclamations are positive statements aimed to promote self-image, and to increase the desirability candidate. Benoit states that attacks are discursive interventions targeting weaknesses and limitations of the opponent, used to reduce a candidate’s social desirability (“Content Analysis in Political Communication” 45). Defenses are statements which reject the opponent’s attacks and which could influence the candidate’s level of preference (*Political Election Debates* 15). The three discursive functions are stimulated and mutually conditioned (Benoit, and Wells 112). In 2005, Benoit and Airne noted that “these three functions work together as an informal form of cost-benefit analysis: acclaims increase benefits, attacks increase an opponent’s costs, and defenses reduce a candidate’s alleged costs” (226). This suggests a strategic approach of discursive exchanges during the televised debate. In Romania, the functional theory of political debate was tested in the case of televised debates for the 2009 presidential elections (Cmeiu, and Pătruț).
Methodology

This paper proposes an analysis of televised debates for presidential elections in Romania, in November 2014, from the perspective of functional theory of political campaign discourse (Benoit, *Political Election Debates*). Benoit makes some predictions regarding functions of the discourse in political campaigns (*Political Election Debates* 18-26):

**H1:** Candidates use acclamations more frequently than attacks; and attacks more often than defenses.

**H2:** Comments on the policy themes are much more common than those relating to the character of the candidates.

**H3.** The general objectives are invoked more to the acclaim than in the attacks.

**H4.** Candidates use values more to acclaim than to attack.

**H5.** Candidates attack more and acclaim less on future plans than on general objectives.

All five hypotheses of functional theory were tested in the two televised debates for presidential elections in Romania: 11 and 12 November in RealitateaTV station, B1 TV respectively. Candidates who took part in the two debates were Victor Ponta (PSD, Social Democratic Party leader), the prime minister at that time, and Klaus Iohannis (PNL, National Liberal Party chairman), former mayor of Sibiu at that time, who is of Saxon origin. Note here that Klaus Iohannis is currently the president of Romania.

The two debates constituted the corpus for our analysis.

In order to test the hypothesis of the functional theory, we used the content analysis techniques, mainly thematic content analysis. The three discursive functions we discussed above were grouped around two main themes: policies and candidate’s character – suggesting a categorical scheme of content analysis. The first theme, “Policies” consists of three categories, distributed based on the temporality criterion: past actions (achievements) (PA), future plans (FP) and general objectives (GO). The second theme, “Character” consists of three categories as well: personal qualities (PQ), leadership skills (LS) and ideals/values (I). Registration units were considered assertions, claims, statements, and arguments of candidates (themes), and each theme was coded for one out of the three discursive functions: acclaims (A1), attacks (A2), defenses (A3). For the first televised debate, RealitateaTV channel, 11 November 2014, there have been 473 assertions concerning the candidates: 259 assertions of the governing party’s candidate (Victor Ponta) and 214 of the opposition candidate (Klaus Iohannis). For the second debate, B1 TV channel, 12 November 2014, there have been 463 assertions, 252 of the governing party’s candidate and 211 of the opposition candidate.

Results

The first hypothesis has been partially confirmed (we have more attacks than defenses, acclamations occupying intermediate position). In the first televised debate, the frequencies for each type of discursive function were: A2 (45.9%) > A1 (34.5%) > A3 (19.6%) (see Table 1). The descending order in the distribution of frequencies is maintained in the second debate as well: A2 (45.8%) > A1 (36.7%) > A3 (17.5%) (see Table 2). Only in the case of the opposition candidate, Klaus Iohannis, during the second debate, the relationship between the three discursive functions is consistent with the first hypothesis: A1 (46.4%) > A2 (44.6%) > A3 (9%).

Klaus Iohannis used particularly offensive enunciations (attacks) on issues related to corruption in the presidential elections and diaspora vote: “You have suppressed the right to vote of such citizens in the diaspora” (11 November 2014, RealitateaTV).
Victor Ponta used offensive enunciations much more on Policies theme than on Character theme: “Yes, that's why, I ask you to treat us with respect. You have an attitude of landlord, with all the Romanians and I want to treat us with respect” (11 November 2014, Realitatea TV).

Also, the candidate Victor Ponta built his defensive statements on several discursive strategies. One strategy was to deny the failure of the election process in the diaspora and to attribute the responsibility to other institutions, strategy called minimum assumption report:

“The point is that people who could not vote, have a legitimate claim linked to those organizing elections - BEC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – to create the conditions for them to vote” (11 November 2014, Realitatea TV).

Another strategy used by Victor Ponta was to redefine the communicational situation through the discursive strategy of interpellation:

“Tell us, how did you organize the elections there - our ambassador in Germany asked us five voting points ... and you did not agree. What are you going to do next, for the second round? What's the solution?” (11 November 2014, Realitatea TV).

Table 1. Frequency distribution for each discursive function, in the first debate (11 November 2014, Realitatea TV).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Acclaims (A1)</th>
<th>Attacks (A2)</th>
<th>Defenses (A3)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Victor Ponta</strong></td>
<td>89 (34.4%)</td>
<td>101 (39%)</td>
<td>69 (26.6%)</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Klaus Johannis</strong></td>
<td>74 (34.6%)</td>
<td>116 (54.2%)</td>
<td>24 (11.2%)</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary debate (D1)</strong> - Nov. 11, 2014 -</td>
<td>163 (34.5%)</td>
<td>217 (45.9%)</td>
<td>93 (19.6%)</td>
<td>473</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\chi^2 (2) = 20.09, p < .01$ (significant test)

Table 2. Frequency distribution for each discursive function, in the second debate (12 November 2014, B1 TV).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Acclaims (A1)</th>
<th>Attacks (A2)</th>
<th>Defenses (A3)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Victor Ponta</strong></td>
<td>72 (28.6%)</td>
<td>118 (46.8%)</td>
<td>62 (24.6%)</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Klaus Johannis</strong></td>
<td>98 (46.4%)</td>
<td>94 (44.6%)</td>
<td>19 (9%)</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second debate (D2)</strong> - Nov. 12, 2014 -</td>
<td>170 (36.7%)</td>
<td>212 (45.8%)</td>
<td>81 (17.5%)</td>
<td>463</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\chi^2 (2) = 13.59, p < .01$ (significant test)

The chi-square test calculated for the three types of discursive functions, show significant differences in the way the two candidates used those functions in the two debates: $\chi^2 = 20.09, p < .01$, in first debate; respectively $\chi^2 = 13.59, p < .01$, in the second debate.

Regarding the second hypothesis, the results show that particularly in the first debate, candidates focused rather on discussion about policy actions than on issues of candidate’s character (H2 was confirmed). It was found that during the second debate politicians talk more about policy (75% of the enunciations) compared to the first debate (60% of the enunciations). Also, in the first debate they talked less about character (25% of the enunciations) compared to the first debate (40% of the enunciations).

Table 3. Topics for primary debate (11 November 2014, Realitatea TV).
Table 4. Topics for secondary debate (12 November 2014, B1TV).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Policy (P)</th>
<th>Character (C)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victor Ponta</td>
<td>197 (78.5%)</td>
<td>54 (21.5%)</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klaus Johannis</td>
<td>150 (71%)</td>
<td>62 (29%)</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary debate (D2) - Nov. 12, 2014 -</td>
<td>347 (75%)</td>
<td>116 (25%)</td>
<td>463</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(\chi^2(1) = 0.12, p = 0.727 > 0.05\) (insignificant test)

The chi-square test was significant, when we tested the differences between the way candidates used “Policy” versus “Opponent Character” enunciations in the first debate (\(\chi^2 = 8.03, p = 0.005 < 0.01\)) and non-significant (\(\chi^2 = .12, p = .72 > .05\)), for the second debate.

We noticed that both candidates used general objectives to acclaim more than to attack, with only one exception – Victor Ponta, during first debate, who used general objectives to attack (5 times), compare to acclamation (one time). Therefore we confirmed the third hypothesis.

The fourth hypothesis was confirmed as well by our data. Both candidates used the ideals rather for acclamation than to attack, during both debates. The fifth hypothesis was partially confirmed. Both candidates attacked more on future plans than on the general objective, in both televised debates, but acclaim more on future plans than on the general objectives: 27, respectively 17 times compared to only once respectively 3 times during first debate – for Victor Ponta; and, in the case of Klaus Johannis, – 13, respectively 30 times compared to 11, respectively 12 times during the second debate.

Discussion

The results allow us to compare the two candidates’ distribution of enunciations on general topics and discursive functions, for each of the two debates, in a comparative way. The results of the analysis point to a few conclusions:

The data show that the candidate who was already in power Victor Ponta (prime-minister at that time) uses the defense strategy more often than the opposition candidate Klaus Johannis, in both debates: 26.6% versus 11.2% of the enunciations in the first debate, the difference increased during the second debate: 24.6% versus 9% of the enunciations;

During the first debate, the opposition candidate Klaus Johannis attacked more (54.2%) than the candidate in power, Victor Ponta (39%);

The situation has changed during the second debate, where Victor Ponta attacked more (46.8%) than Klaus Johannis (44.6%);

During the first debate, both candidates have used acclamation in relatively equal proportions (34.5%), while during the second debate, opposition candidate Klaus Johannis has used the process of acclaim much more (46.4%) than the power candidate, Victor Ponta (28.6%).

Benoit indicated three reasons why candidates tended to limit the use of defensive enunciations (defenses) and to be rather offensive (“The functional theory of political campaign discourse” 321):
Defensive enunciations can keep a candidate “outside” of the message due to the fact that the attacks are most likely drawn to address the weaknesses of a candidate;

Defensive enunciations may create the impression that a candidate is reactive, rather than proactive;

Defensive enunciations have the potential to inform or remind voters of possible weaknesses of the candidates.

From this point of view, the candidate in power at that time, Victor Ponta, was worse placed than his opponent, Klaus Iohannis. The defensive enunciations of Victor Ponta focused on his past actions (40) and on his personal character (18) in the first debate; decreasing in frequency during the second debate (27) on past actions. In the second debate, Victor Ponta has slightly increased his enunciations on general objectives (5 to 1) and future plans (6 to 4), compared to the first debate.

It should be noted that Klaus Iohannis ability to attack on prominent issues, in the forefront of media agenda, but also on the public agenda, respectively on the elections issues regarding to diaspora, payed off for him. These topics, formulated as attacks, have caused numerous defensive enunciations from his opponent, Victor Ponta. During the first debate, the opposition candidate attacked mostly on past actions, on leadership skills and on personal character of the candidate who was in power. During the second debate, Klaus Iohannis has slightly decreased the attacks on past actions and increased the number of attacks on the opponent’s future plans. Ponta’s attacks focused on past actions of the opposition candidate, on personal character and his leadership skills, during the first debate; whereas during the second debate, his attacks intensified on personal character dimension, on past actions and faded personality of the opponent.

The data obtained in this study could suggest a political communication culture focused more on attack rather than on defense strategy. This could be considered an easier approach compared to more complex strategies such as acclamations

As a research limitation, we mention here constraints related to: fidelity of the coding procedure, adequacy interventions of candidates to the moderator style, and report of the contextual developments during the time the research was conducted.

Conclusion

The present study has its starting point in the Benoit’s functional theory, trying to reveal the semiotic dynamics of the three discursive functions – acclamations, attacks, defenses – during a Television political debate. Tensions of the attack-defense discursive exchanges, invite the public, beyond the cognitive processes, to participate in the construction of the decision on their preference for a particular candidate. The particular mode in which social players use the three discursive functions in the debate (strategic positioning) can be used by voters to decide which of the candidates is preferred. Researchers argue that the model of the functional analysis of the debates could be transferable between different cultures, because in their semantic spaces, the concepts of acclaim, attack and defend are isomorphic. The three types of discursive interventions may be slightly operationalized and defined in multiple languages and cultures. However, the present study, but like other studies conducted in Europe, such as the study of Isotalus (41) in connection with the debates in Finland, does not fully confirm the assumptions of functional theory. Some cultural particularities – how cultural context defines the rules of the political dialogue, particularities relating to types of acclamations, attacks or defenses in different cultures, the role of the moderator, the quality of the questions submitted to candidates and so on – may affect the cultural variability of the results (Holtz-Bacha, and Kaid 406).

Still, our study shows similarities with the results obtained in other countries, and highlights potential differences, which challenges the functional theory assumptions. The differences can be explained if we take into account the different cultural codes of Romanian communication culture.
References

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