

A Functional Approach to the 2009 Romanian Presidential Debates. Case Study: Crin Antonescu versus Traian Băsescu

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Abstract: *According to Philippe Braud ([1991] 1996: 221), a debate is a confrontation meant to enlighten the citizens upon the arguments delivered, namely upon the moral, political, and technical validity of the objectives presented. Political debates have specific features: the main participants (the candidates) seem to turn themselves into beggars (Braud [1991] 1996: 109) who appeal to luring promises in order to stage a convincing discursive show. Having Benoit's functional approach as theoretical background, we will focus our discursive analysis on the first debate that took place during the 2009 presidential campaign in Romania. The results prove that the Romanian presidential debate does not focus on acclaims and policies, as the functional theory applied to political debates from different countries showed, but, on the contrary, it is mainly focused on attacks and defenses.*

Politicians are forced to engage themselves in a continuous struggle against their opponents (...). Such an energy is a *sine qua non* condition of survival. But this hyperactivity (...) is usually accompanied by another type of emotion (...), namely aggression.
(de Sutter [2007] 2008:102, our transl.)

1. (Political) debates: the ritual of a discursive game

The survival and the aggression, that Pascal de Sutter talks about in his book, are the underlying forces for four types of relations that political candidates go through during election campaigns (Cmeciuc 2005: 293): *inclusion relation* (candidate – party); *conflict relation* (candidate – opponent); *legitimacy relation* (candidate – voters) and *identity construction relation* (candidate – (campaign staff) – voters). The most spectacular one is the second relation because it is based on discursive confrontations (Cmeciuc 2005: 293):

- 1. the disjunct stage:** $C_1/C_2 \dots C_n \cup O_p$ (the candidates (C) want to possess the object of power (O_p))
- 2. the confrontation stage:** $\leftrightarrow ED_1 \leftrightarrow ED_2 \leftrightarrow \dots \leftrightarrow ED_n \leftrightarrow$ (the “war” of election discourses (ED)/promises)
- 3. the legitimacy stage:** $E \rightarrow (C_1/C_2/\dots \cup O_p)$ (the legitimacy action performed by an election subject)

result: $C \cap O_p$ (only one candidate can become the possessor of the object of power)

The confrontation stage is the place where the syntagm “x President” might be turned into a real fact if and only if the respective x together with his/her campaign staff know how to “adorn” the candidate (non)verbally and place him/her on a visible stage through a mass-media discourse. The embellished object will thus gain the symbolic connotative veil of representing an ideal President/MP. Alongside radio ads, printed brochures, direct mail, world wide web sites, blogs, posters or television ads, political televised debates are considered by Benoit, Blaney, Pier (1998: 234) the most important discursive cues that voters should take into account in their decision-process of voting.

Debates, which, in democracy, take the place of physical violence (Braud [1991] 1996: 206), presuppose the active participation of at least two main performers, the moderator and the candidate(s) who do not appeal to coercion to win. This basic condition of a debate makes us interpret debates as rituals, which are defined by Eric W. Rothenbuhler (1998: 27) as “(...) the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life”. The emphasis that should be laid within the political context is the serious instance that debates are associated with, since they are not “(...) innocent acts if the pragmatic engagement is taken into account” (Sălăvăstru 2009: 27). Even if seriousness seems to be a necessary condition in the political life, we consider that a related term to rituals is that of games whose etymology (Lat. *ludus*, *ludere*) Johan Huizinga ([1938] 2007: 86) associates not only with the child play, competition or gambling, but also with the syntagm “to embody something”. It is clear that the features that many authors (Benoit, Blaney, Pier 1998; Charaudeau, Ghiglione [1997] 2005; Sălăvăstru 2009) mention in order to define (political) debates are to be found within the concepts of “ritual” and “game”:

- *a set of rules*. The moderator seems to play the most important role since (s)he imposes some basic variables (Charaudeau, Ghiglione [1997] 2005: 69-70) for “the expression space” (strategies of turn-taking) and “the issue space” (questions targeted on specific issues)
- *spontaneity*. It reveals the candidate’s control not only of some economic, social or cultural issues, but also his/ her mental ability to make interesting and quick connections.
- *direct confrontation*. Debates have been linked to the metaphor of a battle field since the studio seems to be the setting where there will be drawn the mental space of some relations between the candidates and all the other nonverbal participants (the campaign staff and the audience). The direct confrontation has a twofold function: on the one hand, it is a decisive factor within the comparative act that a vote presupposes (Benoit, Blaney, Pier 1998: 3) as it provides “(...) voters with the political information that helps them to decide on a rational basis whom to vote for” (Maurer, Reinemann 2004); on the other hand, it is an incentive to (non)verbal (polite) aggression.

2. The context of the 2009 romanian presidential debates

The year 2009 in Romania could be labeled as a year of political aggression which was basically focused on polemical discourses. First of all, it was the first year when the Parliament dismissed a government. The Romanian government fell in October in a confidence vote (254 to 176) and it went through this state for two months.

Secondly, it has been the year of “dirty games” (the video, which, later on, proved to be a fake, showing Traian Băsescu, the Romanian incumbent president, hitting a child five years ago). The video was provided by Dinu Patriciu, a member of the National Liberal Party.

Thirdly, it has been the year when the campaign staff played an important part within the process of debates. Being experts in the candidates’ shortcomings and in the emotion-control (Pleșu 2009), the campaign counselors have managed not only the level of content (downplaying the candidate’s weak points and intensifying the candidate’s strong points), but also the level of form in terms of the spatial and temporal setting of the debates. It has been the first year when there were only three presidential debates for a twofold reason:

- on the one hand, apparently the campaign staffs of the candidates did not decide upon the temporal and spatial settings of the debates. Beyond these disagreements, Geoană’s lack of courage to stand up against Antonescu and Băsescu has been evoked, or the lack of desire to share the debate with Corneliu Vadim Tudor.
- on the other hand, some of the candidates who wanted to join the debate were not allowed to attend (for example, Remus Cernea at the debate on the 14th of November, at Cluj).

Our paper will focus on the first debate which took place at Cluj, at the Babeş-Bolyai University, on November, 14. The main participants were Crin Antonescu (the National Liberal Party – PNL) and Traian Băsescu (the Liberal Democratic Party – PD-L). It should be mentioned that Mircea Geoană (the Democratic Social Party – PSD) had launched the invitation to a debate to the incumbent president two days. But Băsescu was the one who finally imposed the spatial setting (Cluj, within the premises of the University) and the number of participants (besides Băsescu and Geoană, Antonescu was also invited). Apparently, Geoană did not approve with these conditions, invoking that he had two election meetings to attend.

The format of the debate on November 14 focused on the following elements¹:

1. *a threefold implicit confrontation*: Traian Băsescu, Crin Antonescu and Mircea Geoană, who, despite his physical absence, was implicitly present 17 times in the statements of the main participants;
2. *equal and adequate time*: the moderator allowed each candidate 1 minute for 7 questions, 3 minutes for 1 question. Out of these 8 questions, two were based on different issues taken from the candidates' platforms, five questions were common to both candidates, and one question was addressed by Antonescu to Băsescu. This debate followed the cross-examination format (Hellweg, Pfau, Brydon 1992: 25) which presupposes that the candidates offer their opinions in turn on similar issues.
3. *matched contestants*: both candidates were running for the position of President of Romania and they were on the first and third positions² in four surveys. The turn-taking was established on the alphabetical criterion, and not on coin-tossing.

3. The theoretical and methodological background

The level of content plays an important role within the confrontation stage since the candidate might appeal to different discursive strategies in order to stir a feeling of (self)-esteem in the voters' mental representations, which will finally lead to the legitimacy stage. The functional theory provided by William Benoit, Joseph Blaney and P.M. Pier (1998) is the theoretical background that we will use within our content

1 We have adapted the traditional debate elements mentioned by J. Jeffrey Auer (1977 *apud* Hellweg, Pfau, Brydon 1992: 21) to the Romanian context.

2 Four institutes of opinion surveys ranked Traian Băsescu, Mircea Geoană and Crin Antonescu as the most preferable candidates, according to Romanian voters:

The institute of opinion surveys	Traian Băsescu (PD-L)	Mircea Geoană (PSD)	Crin Antonescu (PNL)
CURS	33%	30%	18%
CCSB	35%	31%	18%
INSOMAR	31%	32%	18%
GALLUP ROMANIA	32,5%	21,5%	21,5%

(Source: <http://alegeri.ziare.com/alegeri-prezidentiale-2009/sondaje/>)

analysis. According to the three authors, candidates seek to appear preferable to other candidates in order to position themselves as superior in the process of value-judgment performed by voters. Being or not preferable is to be rendered in three types of discursive functions:

- *acclaims* – positive statements whose purpose is to the candidate’s qualities and good deeds.
- *attacks* – discursive statements whose purpose is to highlight the opponent’s weak points.
- *defenses* – discursive statements whose purpose is to refute an attack made by the opponent.

These functions could be analyzed at the level of two topics: *policy* (governmental action set on a temporal axis: past deeds – PAD, general goals – GG, future plans – FP) and *character* (three main categories: personal qualities – PQ, leadership ability – LA, and ideals – I).

In order to identify these functions within the Antonescu-Băsescu debate, the categorical analysis focused on three steps:

- (1) the pinpointing of the themes that have been tackled upon by the candidates;
- (2) each theme was categorized as policy (P) or/and character (CH), each of these being characterized within its frame;
- (3) each policy and character was assigned one of the three functions – acclaim (AC), attack (AT), defense (D).

The themes to be analyzed are to be found in the statements uttered by the two candidates. A remark should be made upon the structure of the statements. According to Foucault ([1969] 1999: 121), a sentence or a series of (non)verbal signs form a statement if they enter into an associated field which will allow them to have a determined context and a representative context. It is obvious that the statements to be analyzed through a functional theory appeal to a semantic theory which, due to discursive cotexts, imposes clear conditions of production and formation. We will provide some examples of our coding process which proves that one discursive function can be found even in one mere reply, such as “Thank you”:

Crin Antonescu (CA): “(...) I consider that the practical steps to be taken imply, at a legislative level, the coming back to what the Romanian legislation (the Public Officers Law) succeeded in 2005, namely the depolitisation of the administrative offices” [T1 = depolitisation, P, FP, AC] “– and, unfortunately, by the Ordinance 37, together with the Democratic Social Party and the Democratic Party, Mister Băsescu and Mister Geoană, forced us to return, exactly in 2009, to an unimaginable state of politisation” [T1 = depolitisation, P, PAD, AT to TB, MG]. (our transl.)

Traian Băsescu (TB): “(...) I talked with the Prime Minister, at the beginning of his term, about the initiative to improve the Uninominal Vote Law and the elimination of the compensation system.” [T3 = the state reform, P, FP, AC]. “This is meant exactly because, as we can easily notice, there are many persons in the Parliament who come

from the 2nd or 3rd position, but this does not mean that the majority does not come from the 1st position.” [T3 = the state reform, P, PAD, D] “but, there are also people from the 2nd or 3rd position, if I am not mistaken, Mister Antonescu himself comes from the 2nd position. In his election collegium, he lost, but...” [T3 = the state reform, P, PAD, AT to CA].

CA: ...thank you ... [T3 = the state reform, P, PAD, ATT to TB].

TB: ... but this does not solve the core of the problem [T3 = the state reform, P, PAD, D].

CA: I appreciate that you provide information that is exact [T3 = the state reform, P, PAD, AC] unlike some other ...[T3 = the state reform, P, PAD, AT] (our transl.)

Following the main hypotheses that the authors of functional theory propose, we will offer four hypotheses for the debate on November, 14:

H1: Acclaims will occur more frequently than attacks.

H2: Policy will be a more common topic than character.

H3: Traian Băsescu will acclaim more, and attack less, than Crin Antonescu.

H4: Future deeds will be more frequently used than past deeds.

H5: Ideals will be less frequently used than personal qualities.

4. A functional discursive outline to the presidential debate (Antonescu versus Băsescu)

We have identified ten main themes which could be divided into two:

- a) themes reproducing the chronology of the verbal setting imposed by the moderator (Mihnea Măruță): depolitisation, the state reform (these first issues were to be found in the candidates’ platforms), education, economy, the governing process, agriculture, the candidate’s cultural profile;
- b) themes brought up by the candidates: media moguls, presidential responsibilities, and the women’s role in politics.

The following table will provide the distribution of the ten themes according to the topic of policy and character. We consider that, both these topics could be categorized according to the discursive functions of acclaims (AC), attacks (AT) and defenses (D.)

Table 1.

The debate themes	TRAIAN BĂSESCU						CRIN ANTONESCU					
	POLICY			CHARACTER			POLICY			CHARACTER		
	AC	AT	D	AC	AT	D	AC	AT	D	AC	AT	D
T1 = the state administration depolitisation	1						5	1				
T2 = the education reform	16	2	3	5	2	6	12	12	3	1	5	3
T3 = the state reform	2	1	5	2	4	10	4	6		3	10	6
T4 = economic issues		2	1				1	2	1			
T5 = Government & the governing process	1	2	1				2	2			3	
T6 = agricultural policies and the rural development	2	3	3		2	2	2	3			3	

The debate themes	TRAIAN BĂSESCU						CRIN ANTONESCU					
	POLICY			CHARACTER			POLICY			CHARACTER		
	AC	AT	D	AC	AT	D	AC	AT	D	AC	AT	D
T7 = presidential responsibilities	5	4	4	4	11	15	1	8	2	6	32	9
T8 = the women's role in politics			3		4	4	2	6			4	3
T9 = the media moguls		4	2	1	2			1				
T10 = cultural profile				3	2	1				3	1	1

4.1. Results

The first hypothesis predicted that the frequency of the three discursive functions will be the following: acclaims would be the most frequent ones, followed by attacks and defenses. This prediction was not confirmed, as attacks (42.4%) and defenses (32.6%) were almost three times higher than acclaims (25%).

Table 2.

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses
Traian Bănescu	37 (46.9%)	41 (30.6%)	72 (69.9%)
Crin Antonescu	42 (53.1%)	93 (69.4%)	31 (30.1%)
Total	79 (25%)	134 (42.4%)	103 (32.6%)

Actually, the third hypothesis (Traian Bănescu will acclaim more, and attack less, than Crin Antonescu) is partially confirmed, as Traian Bănescu used acclaims (46.9%) less than Crin Antonescu (53.1%). Bănescu's major acclaims focused on education (subthemes: competence-based education, salaries paid on grounds of performances, means of preventing valuable young people from working abroad) and past and future presidential responsibilities (subthemes: reforming the Parliament, the freedom of the press, the integration of Romania into the EU, the ending of the Romanian troops' mission in Iraq, the NATO summit which took place in Bucharest, the signing of the Nabucco agreement), whereas Antonescu's acclaims were also focused on education (subthemes: the naming of school heads regardless of their political orientation, education – a national priority, the equality of chances to education) and on one of the issues in his election platform, namely the depoliticisation of the state administration (subthemes: the promotion of the true professionals, the Law of the public officer and the plea for an impartial president). But most themes, that were acclaimed, also incorporate polemical discourses, as instances of attack. Such an example could be noticed in the statements about the agricultural policies and their implications on European investments:

CA: (...) I think that this all we can say about this theme, as it also involves elements of foreign affairs policies. The president has the obligation and, somehow, the possibility of managing these aspects, the rest of this issue being, of course, in the hands of the Government. (our transl.)

The interpretation of Antonescu’s statement might have the following coding: P, FP, AT to TB, T6 → T7. It could be noticed a gliding of the themes (agricultural policies → EU problems → presidential responsibilities), the last theme providing the opportunity of implicitly attacking Traian Băsescu. But once this attack started, it continued with a firing of other attacks:

TB: I would like to thank you for having assigned me this mission of agriculture. [P, PV, AT to CA]

CA: No, you should know that you are not the point of my reference. [P, PV, AT to TB] (our transl.)

There are several discursive instances, as the one presented above, where there could be observed a play upon words, namely a discursive switching from the explicit type (the President) to the explicit token (Traian Băsescu) and then back to the type in order to finally reach an implicit token (Crin Antonescu).

The second hypothesis predicted that policy would be a more common topic than character. This is not confirmed as character (57.3%) outranked policy (42.7%).

Table 3.

	POLICY	CHARACTER
TRAIAN BĂSESCU	61 (45.2%)	89 (49.2%)
CRIN ANTONESCU	74 (54.8%)	92 (50.8%)
Total	135 (42.7%)	181 (57.3%)

As attacks were the most common discursive function, it is actually an obvious consequence that the character of the two candidates should be the main topic of this debate. One result, which might seem surprising, is the fact that Crin Antonescu used the topic of policy more than Traian Băsescu (54.8% to 45.2%). This has a twofold explanation: on the one hand, Crin Antonescu mentioned some policies that had actually been promoted during Traian Băsescu’s and Călin Popescu Tăriceanu’s tenures, such as the Law of the public officer (2005); on the other hand, he mentioned some policies twice, as it was the case of education as a national matter.

Two remarks should be made on the topic of the character: attack and defense were the discursive functions mostly used in portraying the Romanian candidate (TB – AT = 27, D = 38, CA – AT = 58, D = 22), and the personal qualities were more frequently used than ideals (see Table IV), thus confirming the last hypothesis. There were two types of discursive instances which laid an emphasis on explicit and implicit personal qualities, namely jokes (Traian Băsescu) and rhetorical questions (Crin Antonescu).

TB: (...) If you allow me a joke!

CA: Please!

TB: As we can see a lot of Romanians leave the country, but I believe that a lot of them ask themselves why it is not us who leave the country so they might get rid of us.

CA: I can see that ...

TB: I have just said that it is a joke, Mister Antonescu. Nobody can manage without us.

CA: It is a joke. But I am afraid that more and more Romanians wonder why it is not you who leaves. Maybe...

TB: I do agree that ...

CA: But both of us will stay here, won't we? (our transl.)

The persuasive outcome of jokes is humor, which is defined by Rod Martin (2007: 83) as “a form of play, comprising a social context, a cognitive process and an emotional response expressed through laughter”. In the case of Bănescu’s joke, the social context refers to the exodus experienced by the Romanians who are in search of some survival means. The play upon the switch of the participants within this act of leaving the country is the source of humor. As humor necessarily involves the presence of the third person capable of assigning meaning to the creative act, it will implicitly be the voter who will interpret Bănescu’s statement “Nobody can manage without us” as a sign of the candidates’ supremacy and competence.

Crin Antonescu used the discursive device of rhetorical questions when being invited to ask Traian Bănescu a question:

CA: I will not ask you how you felt when a counselor of yours, Mister Avramescu, told Andrei Marga that he was a good-for-nothing man and that he read not a book. How did you feel next to Solomon, at Craiova, on the stage, when you told Dinescu that he was not welcome in Oltenia if he did not come to his senses? (...) (our transl.)

Rhetorical questions (Tuțescu 1998: 249) dissimulate the freedom of answering, but actually they fire back by downplaying the personal qualities of the attacked one. In our case, Traian Bănescu is portrayed as an authoritarian person who promotes other politicians capable of insulting other human beings.

The fourth hypothesis was not confirmed as the prediction that future deeds will be more frequently used than past deeds seems to be ruled out (see Table IV).

Table 4.

	POLICY			CHARACTER		
	Past deeds (PAD)	Future plans (FP)	General goals (GG)	Personal qualities (PQ)	Leadership abilities (LA)	Ideals (I)
TRAIAN BĂNESCU	27	23	11	56	29	4
CRIN ANTONESCU	35	27	12	49	31	12
Total	62 (19.4%)	50 (15.6%)	23 (7.8%)	105 (33.2%)	60 (19%)	16 (5%)

Future deeds and past actions are the discursive signs of promises and attacks, two important elements in an election campaign. A promise, which imposes a compulsory control over its subject/political candidate (Searle 1972: 105), feeds on future deeds

which might bring forth “insincere public performance” and “empty convention” (Rothenbuhler 1998: 30-32). These two shortcomings of every promise could have been the reason for which Traian Băsescu and Crin Antonescu chose a discursive reference to past deeds. As attacks were more frequent than acclaims (see Table II), then the logical conclusion is that past deeds prevail upon future deeds. This type of policy embodiment has the advantage of making a connection between one’s arguments and some actions which are well known by voters. In our case, both candidates were perfectly aware of the negative impact that themes, such as the media moguls (S.O. Vantu, Dan Voiculescu, D. Patriciu) and the women (Elena Udrea) promoted by Traian Băsescu, might stir within the Romanians’ mental representations.

5. Conclusions

The content analysis of the first Romanian presidential debate in 2009 proves that election campaign discourses are not consistent across borders and cultures. If Benoit’s most studies revealed a certain consistency among election messages within different countries, apparently this debate in Romania did not confirm three major hypotheses of the functional approach. In Romania, the political candidates preferred attacks to acclaims, unveiling some “language wounds” whose purpose is “to relieve the hands” (Braud [1991] 1996: 206) of the verbal aggressor. This main hypothesis brings forth some other discursive features of the first Romanian presidential debate: the topic of character was favored to the topic of policy, the opponent (Crin Antonescu) attacked more than the incumbent president (Traian Băsescu) and ideals were downplayed by negative personal qualities.

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