

A semio-functional approach of relationship attacks-defenses for Presidential debates in Romania, from November 2014

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Abstract: *This paper examines the relationship between two important discursive functions of televised debates (attacks and defenses) for presidential elections in Romania, in November 2014, from the perspective of functional theory of political campaign discourse. Tensions of discursive exchanges attack-defense type invite the public, beyond the cognitive processes which they initiate, to participate affective in the construction of the decision on preferences for one of the candidates. Functional theory makes some predictions about the discourse functions of political campaign. All five predictions of functional theory were tested in the two televised debates for presidential elections in Romania: 11 and 12 November in Realitatea TV station, B1 TV respectively. The study shows the similarities with the results obtained in other states, but also reveals the significant differences that change the structure of the functional theory predictions. We tried to explain the relatively high percentage of televised debates defenses in Romania as compared with the results in the other countries. The differences can be explained if we take into account the qualitative content of the two discursive functions and the role of communication culture in the metabolism of the televised debate.*

Keywords: *presidential debate; functional theory; political communication culture; political semiotics.*

Introduction

The political televised debate is a complex television genre (Charaudeau & Ghiglione, 1997/2005) which contributes to the deliberative construction of political communication (Beciu, 2009). It is considered "superior to other communication forms" (Pfau, 2002, p. 251), the media event of political confrontation (Dayan, 2010) and a key element of the election campaign (Benoit, Hansen & Verser, 2003).

Mass-media primarily exploits the televised debate's spectacular dimension and is more interested in candidates' performance (Lemert, *et al.*, 1991). Candidates perform the role of 'President' in a more or less credible way. They are 'characters' in front of a large public, attending *mise en scène* of especially political event (Leon, 1993; Schwartzberg, 1995). According to Fortin (2006), paradoxically, the tendency of transforming the televised debate into a show could represent a threat for the democracy. The effect of such a mediating approach is the decrease of the citizens' interest towards politics. Fortin explains this effect throughout the decline of argumentation speech in favor of a type of seducing speech. However, the televised debate remains one essential form of communication for democracy (Coleman, 2000; Beciu, 2009) and could be an important opportunity for candidates to establish an interpretation of reality, to impose control and symbolic representations of the situation in the political field. Therefore, stimulating debates is related to the freedom of speech in a society (Wachsmann, 2003). Therefore, TV debate is considered a symbol of democracy (Lochard, 1995).

Candidates have the opportunity to support their position on issues of public interest in a particular situation of communication. Compared to other forms of electoral communication, the debate facilitates conflicting interactions, expressing views, and to unfiltered access to the public. Televisual device configuration allows a certain freedom of speech construction, which indicates the speaker's aggression for the audience. Thus, the public has a clearer picture, better defined portraits than those proposed by other forms of communication campaign, such as campaign speeches or TV spots (Schrott, 1990). Therefore, televised political debates represent the ideal communication place where the public can deconstruct candidate's aspects which could indicate new ways of social reality construction.

The *reality effect* (Fiske & Hartley, 2002) is amplified by television deliberative appearance, and the conflictual nature of televised debate. It is just one of the possible explanations for which the debates are among the few television formats which attract large audience (Carlin, 1994), and can help voters to get more insights related to candidates (Pfau, 2003) by stimulating acquisition of political information among the mass public (Holbrook, 1999). On one hand, the TV debates allow the public to observe the ideological conflict between candidates (Rowland, 2013) directly, unfiltered, and on the other hand to engage actively in debate

through televisual environment, or other means of communication (new media). Also, the debates can affect the image of the candidates (Maier & Faas, 2003), more important than ideological message (Pop, 2000). Nevertheless, TV debates could increase efficiency in policy and promote civic engagement (Chaffee, 1978). Prominent themes from the public sphere (e.g. the topic of elections in diaspora) may constitute serious constraints in elections, running and performing discursive scenario of candidates (Boydston, Glazier & Pietryka, 2013). The ability of the candidates to focus on the strategic dimension of the political themes messages is tested. This may be one of the reasons for which the influence of the TV debates is defined by the “contextual dynamics of the campaign” (McKinney & Carlin, 2004, p. 210). Voters seem to assess candidates by updating with new information revealing during the campaign (Lodge, Steenbergen & Brau, 1995).

Research highlights in particular the *learning effect* of the public debates (Racine Group, 2002; Holbrook, 1999; Lemert *et al.*, 1991; Drew & Weaver, 1991). Voters learn more about candidates' position on the subjects of interest (Doerfel & Marsh, 2003; Benoit, McKinney & Holbert, 2001; Best & Hubbard, 2000; Lanoue & Schrott, 1989; Pfau, 1987; Yawn, *et al.*, 1998), about party's policies (Blumler, 2011), as well about the leadership style. These allow voters' evaluation based on a comparative, simultaneously act (Chaffee & Dennis, 1979).

Within the local public sphere, discussions on the utility of televised election debates tackle, on the one hand, the fact that debate focuses on attacks rather than exchanging ideas (the excess of conversational violence); on the other hand, on the fact that the formal structure of the context of the debate could lead to self-censorship discourse for the candidates (Beciu, 2009). Indeed, discursive function of the attack takes the form of conversational violence. However, the idea of violence in speech acts should not surprise us. From the semiotic perspective there are mythological fundamentals, a natural presence of violence in language (Eliade & Culianu, 1993). Acts of conversational violence are predictable and are part of the televised debate show, are similar to conversational games (Luginbühl, 2007), or “political games” (Bourdieu, 1991/2012). Each discursive strategy chosen by the speakers during televised debates comprises a single strategic goal, which is “simply to win the dialectic struggle” (Luginbühl, 2007, p. 1385).

Functional theory of political campaign discourse

This article is based on the premise that televised political debates are conflictual, competitive verbal interactions. Obviously, political messages and declarations aim to win the election. Starting from this premise, a functional approach to analyze political debates appears appropriate. Such an approach ensures understanding of the *symbolic topology*, the relative position of the candidates in the po-

litical field of confrontation. We depart from the five axioms formulated by Benoit (2013, pp. 9-19):

1. Vote is a comparative act;
2. Candidates should distinguish themselves from other opponents;
3. Political campaign messages allow candidates to distinguish themselves from others (to assert their identity).
4. Candidates set up desirability (are positioned on a preferences scale) by three discursive functions: acclamations (A1), attacks (A2), defenses (A3)
5. Election campaigns discourse targeting two main themes: policies (P) and character (C).

The first axiom implies a certain competence of the citizens, who have to have to decide on preference of a particular candidate in a comparative way. The following two axioms include candidates' identity construction; and the last two concerns discursive tools available for the candidates to position favorably on the audience preferences scale.

In the functional theory of political discourse, candidates are positioned on the preference scale by three discursive functions: acclamation, attacks and defenses (Benoit, 1999, 2007a, 2013). Acclamations are positive statements aiming to promote self-image, and to increase the social desirability of the candidate. Attacks are discursive interventions targeting weaknesses and limitations of the opponent (Benoit, 2011). Attacks are used to reduce candidate's social desirability. Defenses are statements which reject the opponent's attacks and which could influence candidate's level of preference (Benoit, 2013). The three discursive functions are mutually stimulated and conditioned (Benoit & Wells, 1996). Benoit and Airne (2005) 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" (p. 226). The two authors suggest a strategic approach of discursive exchanges during the televised debate. The three discursive functions - acclamation, attacks and defenses- work together and are complementary instruments in the construction of the candidates' discursive strategy. The functional theoretical approach in the political discourse is assimilated to a type of cost-benefit analysis. Candidates engage in polemic discursive exchanges "peeking" at the audience, trying to persuade the public to act in their favor (Hinck & Hinck, 2002).

Research studies indicate there is a correlation in the two out of the three discursive functions between the number of attacks and number of defenses aimed at a candidate (Benoit, 2007b): "being the target of an attack gives a candidate a clear opportunity to defend" (p. 321). This occurs in situations in which candidates have the ability to transform a vulnerable defensive position into an opportunity. Candidates can build on their argumentation using any of the three discursive func-

tions, according to the context of the debate, the topic of discussion, the position of the opposing candidate or to other elements of that particular communicational situation. From the beginning, participants of a debate assume certain discursive positions. A discursive position is to the audience and transparent to social reading. Therefore, during a televised debate, candidates are in a special communicational situation, constitutively polemic, which they have to manage appropriately.

The three discursive functions - acclamation, attacks and defenses – can be used strategically (Benoit *et al.*, 2011) with the potential to emphasize both communicational skills and the leadership qualities of candidates in front of the audience.

In Romania, the functional theory of political debate was approached in the case of televised debates for presidential elections from 2009 (Cmeciu & Pătruț, 2010).

Methodology

This paper examines the relationship between two important discursive functions of televised debates (attacks and defenses), in the Romanian presidential elections, 2014, using the functional theory of political campaign discourse (Benoit, 2013). We depart from Benoit (2013) hypothesis regarding functions of the discourse in political campaigns:

- H1: Candidates use acclamations more frequently than attacks; and attacks more often than defenses.
- H2: Comments on the policy themes will be 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 will attack more and acclaim less on future plans than on general objectives.

All five hypotheses of the functional theory were tested in the two televised debates for the presidential elections in Romania, 2014: 11 and 12 November at Realitatea TV channel, and B1 TV channel respectively. Candidates who took part in the two debates were Victor Ponta (PSD Social Democratic Party leader) and 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 tem-

porality criterion: past actions (achievements) (PA), future plans (FP) and general objectives (GO). The second theme, "Character" is 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). Following on the Benoit' approach, "only statements concerning candidates were coded" (2007b, p. 322).

For the first televised debate, Realitatea TV 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 (Victor Ponta) and 211 of the opposition candidate (Victor Ponta).

Results

The first hypothesis indicates the existence a descending order relationship in the frequency of using the three types three discursive functions - acclamation, attacks and defenses (descending order - $A1 > A2 > A3$). The hypothesis is partially confirmed (we have more attacks than defense, acclamations occupying intermediate position). In the first televised debate, the frequencies for each type of discursive function were: $A2 (45.9\%) > A1 (34.5\%) > A3 (19.6\%)$. The descending order in the distribution of frequencies is maintained in the second debate as well: $A2 (45.8\%) > A1 (36.7\%) > A3 (17.5\%)$. 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 our citizens in the diaspora (11 November 2014, Realitatea TV)

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 you 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 elections 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 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)

	Acclaims (A1)	Attacks (A2)	Defenses (A3)	Total
<i>Victor Ponta</i>	89 (34.4%)	101 (39%)	69 (26.6%)	259
<i>Klaus Iohannis</i>	74 (34.6%)	116 (54.2%)	24 (11.2%)	214
First debate (D1) - Nov. 11, 2014 -	163 (34.5%)	217 (45.9%)	93 (19.6%)	473

$$\chi^2 = 20.09, p < .01$$

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

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

$$\chi^2 = 13.59, p < .01$$

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) compare to the first debate (60% of the enunciations). Also, in the first debate they talked less about character (25% of the enunciations) compare to the first debate (40% of the enunciations).

Table 3. Enunciations in the first debate (11 November 2014, RealitateaTV).

	Policy (P)	Character (C)	Total
<i>Victor Ponta</i>	170 (65.7%)	89 (34.3%)	259
<i>Klaus Iohannis</i>	113 (52.8%)	101 (47.2%)	214
First debate (D1) - Nov. 11, 2014 -	283 (59.9%)	190 (40.1%)	473

$$\chi^2 = 8.03, p < .01$$

Table 4. Enunciations in the second debate (12 November 2014, B1TV).

	Policy (P)	Character (C)	Total
<i>Victor Ponta</i>	197 (78.5%)	54 (21.5%)	251
<i>Klaus Iohannis</i>	150 (71%)	62 (29%)	212
Second debate (D2) - Nov. 12, 2014 -	347 (75%)	116 (25%)	463

$$\chi^2 = .12, p (= .72) > .05 \text{ (non-significant)}$$

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 ($\chi^2 = 8.03, p = .005 < .01$) and non-significant ($\chi^2 = .12, p = .72 > .05$), for the second debate.

Table 5 and Table 6 present results from the testing of the third hypothesis. 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 values more for acclamation than for attacks, during both debates. Ponta used values for the acclamations 9, respectively 14 times; and for attacked 2 respectively 6 times. Klaus Iohannis used this strategy even more often than his candidate acclamations (12, respectively 16 times in the acclamations).

Table 5. The structure of main topics by discursive functions, in the first debate (11 November 2014, Realitatea TV).

	Policy									Character								
	AT			OG			PV			CP			AL			I		
	A1	A2	A3	A1	A2	A3	A1	A2	A3	A1	A2	A3	A1	A2	A3	A1	A2	A3
<i>Victor Ponta</i>	34	50	40	1	5	1	27	8	4	8	18	18	10	18	2	9	2	4
<i>Klaus Iohannis</i>	3	59	16	3	1	1	17	11	2	9	18	2	30	22	3	12	5	0
TOTAL (category)	202			12			69			73			85			32		
TOTAL (topics)	283						190											

Table 6. The structure of main topics by discursive functions, in the second debate (12 November 2014, B1 TV).

	Policy									Character								
	AT			OG			PV			CP			AL			I		
	A1	A2	A3	A1	A2	A3	A1	A2	A3	A1	A2	A3	A1	A2	A3	A1	A2	A3
<i>Victor Ponta</i>	36	56	27	11	6	5	13	14	6	12	24	4	14	8	2	14	6	2
<i>Klaus Iohannis</i>	14	48	10	12	6	0	30	15	1	13	13	2	16	8	1	16	3	0
TOTAL (category)	191			40			79			68			49			41		
TOTAL (topics)	310						158											

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 Iohannis, – 13, respectively 30 times compared to 11, respectively 12 times during the second debate.

Discussion

The results allow us to compare the two candidate's distribution of enunciations on general topics and discursive functions, for each of the two debates, in a comparative way.

The data show that the candidate who was already in power Victor Ponta (prime-minister at that time) uses the defenses strategy more often than the opposition candidate Klaus Iohannis, 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. Another conclusion derives from data presented in the Table1: during the first debate, opposition candidate Klaus Iohannis attacked more (54.2% of the enunciations) than the candidate in power Victor Ponta (39% enunciations). Table 2 shows the how situation has changed during the second debate, where Victor Ponta attacked more (46.8%) than Klaus Iohannis (44.6%). Related to the first discursive function – acclamation – we observe that during the first debate, candidates have used acclamation in relatively equal proportions (34.5%), while during the second debate, opposition candidate Klaus Iohannis has used acclamation more (46.4%) than Victor Ponta (28.6%).

Benoit indicated three reasons for which candidates could limit their use of defensive enunciations (defenses) and be more offensive (Benoit, 2007). The first reason is that defensive enunciations keep a candidate “outside” of the message due to the fact that attacks are mostly drawn to address the weaknesses of the interaction partner. Second, defensive enunciations may create the impression that a candidate reactive, rather than proactive. Third, defensive enunciations have the potential to inform or remind voters of possible weaknesses of each candidate. 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), compare to the first debate. Those data show that Victor Ponta looked for an improvement in his discursive strategy from the first to the second debate.

It should be noted Klaus Iohannis ability to attack on prominent issues, in the forefront of media agenda, but also on the public agenda, respectively on the elec-

tions issues regarding to diaspora, payed off for him. These topics, formulate as attacks have caused numerous defensive enunciations from his opponent, Victor Ponta. During the first debate, 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 its 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.

In a recent study (Drăgan, 2015), we tried to explain the relatively high percent of defenses in Romanian televised debates (approximately 18% of the total enunciations) compared with the data gather in the other countries (5-10% of the total enunciations). This should be consider together with the relatively high number of discursive interventions which can be labeled as "attack type" (46%), compared with an average of 35% - such discursive interventions in other countries (Benoit, 2013). The difference could be explained when we take into account the qualitative content of the two discursive functions (defense and attack), and the role of political culture in the mechanism of Television debate.

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

The fact that Victor Ponta was placed in a defensive position (an average 25% of his total interventions during the two debates) compare to his opponent, Klaus Iohannis (10%) suggests a potentially more favorable position of Klaus Iohannis in the preference scale of the audiences. The large public could have perceived Klaus Iohannis as being more offensive, due to the continuous defensive position of his opponent. In the first debate, Klaus Iohannis really attacked more (54.2%) than Victor Ponta (39%); but in the second debate, the attacks were almost equal in percentages (45%) from the total number of enunciations.

As McLuhan (2011) claims, as cold medium of communication, television requires completion of a candidate image from the audience (McLuhan, 2011). Klaus Iohannis was, at that time, in the media view, a weaker candidate, compare o his opponent. He benefited from a less clear image in front of the audience, a more blurred image in the McLuhan terms – so completing was requested from the public. As 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 as a starting point in the Benoit's functional theory, trying to reveal semiotic dynamics of the three discursive functions – acclamations, attacks, defenses – during a Television political debate. Tensions of the discursive exchanges attack-defense, 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 other studies conducted in Europe, such as the study of Isotalus (2011) in connection with the debates in Finland, do not fully confirm the assumptions of functional theory. Some cultural particularities – how cultural context defines the rules of the political dialogue, particularities relating to type 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 the cultural variability of the results (Holtz-Bacha & Kaid, 2011).

Still, our study shows similarities with the results obtained in other countries, and highlights on potential differences, which challenges the functional theory assumptions. In further research we can analyze those differences, by taking into account particularities of the Romanian political communication, as the ideological-cultural dimension of meaning (Eco, 1976/2008) in televised debates.

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