A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POLITICAL POSTERS AND SLOGANS IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: Political posters constitute key elements in expressing identities and ideologies through visual communication with the purpose of influencing and/or manipulating target audiences to cast their vote for particular parties. The aim of this research paper is to analyse a selection of political posters and slogans from the most recent local elections in Romania in order to highlight the linguistic and visual strategies used, as well as their effectiveness and impact on their intended audience. To this end, the paper comprises a theoretical framework centred on multimodal strategies used in the political posters and a case study based on a questionnaire applied to 50 respondents. The study reveals the heterogeneity of political posters as multimodal constructs, which can unwittingly engender the opposite effect of that desired.

Keywords: multimodal analysis, political posters, political communication strategies, social actors, Romanian local elections

Introduction

The year 2016 was a local election year in Romania. Political campaigns are always designed to influence potential voters and to this end a plethora of political posters was made available to the general public. What attracted our attention was the heterogeneity of the posters with the only apparent conjoint feature being the voluntary or unintentional use of humour. This eclectic nature of the selected political posters which make the subject of our analysis engenders an overall impression of incongruousness, possibly generated by the mismatch between the candidate's intended self-representation and the actual perception from the audience.

We used the multimodal discourse analysis framework in order to investigate a selection of six political posters and their impact on a sample of respondents. In the first part of the paper we concisely delineated the theoretical background relevant for our study. The second part of the paper is dedicated to an extensive analysis of the posters combining our investigation of the multimodal features with the results obtained from a questionnaire designed within the same framework.

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2017, e-ISBN: 978-606-8624-01-3

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Theoretical Framework: Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Political posters are multimodal texts as they are combinations of different modes of communication (visual elements as well as written text). The most salient feature of political posters are the photographs of the politicians running for a particular position as the poster's aim is to familiarise the viewers with the candidate and to construct a positive social image for the politicians so that they obtain a high number of votes.

The multimodality of political posters is a ubiquitous and necessary feature of a successful campaign as it presents strategic elements that increase the chance of impressing and even manipulating the viewers. Multimodal texts are re-conceptualised and re-contextualised by each viewer in accordance with their background, education and knowledge. Hence, the construction of the multimodal text of a political poster is based on the assumptions made regarding the identity of the target audience in order for the poster to appeal to them.

Our multimodal analysis takes into account the following features of the political poster (see Lirola, 2016: 251): the 'information value' or the way in which the poster is organised (centre/margin, top/bottom or left/right); 'salience', or the elements that catch the viewers' attention (objects, size, colour or sharpness, background and/or foreground); and 'framing', the connection of the various elements of a poster. The interplay between the various elements of a multimodal text of a political poster offers the viewers a multimodal message with explicit and implicit meanings with the overall aim of convincing the viewers to cast their vote for a particular candidate.

Hypotheses

Given the Romanian socio-cultural and political landscape, we started from the assumption that all political posters have the underlying intent of creating a sense of identification of the viewer with the depicted candidate. From our initial multimodal analysis, the selected posters seemed to counter their purpose and as such our aim became that of investigating to what extent the posters would have the desired effect on different categories of viewers.

In terms of multimodal features, political posters should be unitary constructs comprised of text, colours, images, symbols, postures and other objects working together to express the intended message. We aim to explore the degree to which our selection of posters fulfils the aforementioned definition.

Research Methodology

The main research instrument employed for data collection was a paper-based questionnaire designed by the authors. The questionnaire consisted of four questions addressed from a quantitative point of view and two intended to measure the qualitative aspects. The quantitative questions targeted firstly the reliability of the candidate, secondly the reliability of the written message, thirdly the relevance of the background and other graphic elements included in the posters and finally the overall impression created by the posters. In terms of qualitative questions, one of them invited the respondents to state whether they would cast their vote in favour of the candidate and to support their choice by briefly motivating it. The other question focused on the most conspicuous element from each poster.

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The questionnaire was applied to a heterogeneous group of fifty respondents, with different socio-cultural and educational backgrounds. The characteristics of the group were: 13 males and 37 females, with ages between 18 and 70. The results were interpreted using the quantitative method and a selection of graphic charts. The respondents' occupations ranged from students up to and including sales assistants, office managers and teachers.

Results

The questionnaire was based on six political posters taken from the 2016 local elections in Romania. Although the questionnaire was applied to a number of fifty respondents, the diverse range of their ages and occupations allowed for a micro-representation of the target audience of the political campaign, as it included people with various educational backgrounds, interests, life experiences, political preferences.

We started from the supposition that the subliminal effect of emulating a familiar context for the audience by means of identification with the political candidate would determine a positive reaction to the poster from the viewers. Surprisingly, none of the six posters had the intended effect. On the contrary, the respondents used some of the following negative adjectives to characterise the posters: "unreliable", "untrustworthy", "inadequate", "illogical", "irrelevant", "vague" and "incoherent".

Image 1



In terms of multimodal analysis, the candidate is sitting in an up-right position with her upper body slightly turned towards the viewers and displaying a tight-lipped smile. In the left upper-corner we can read the slogan "Evolution, not change!", followed by the candidate's name which is marked by a tick sign as if to suggest that the candidate meets the necessary criteria for the intended position. The candidate is wearing a black and white outfit against the half white, half violet backdrop. The prevalence of white creates the illusion of honesty and purity, with this being the most prominent feature of the poster.

When asked if they would vote for the candidate in Image 1, the vast majority of the respondents (72%) claimed they would not. Among their reasons, they included not being able to understand the message promoted, the slogan being too harsh or meaningless, aversion towards a negation which appears in the text, intrinsically contradictory message (evolution implies change), unknown candidate, unconvincing facial expression. Towards the more politically incorrect end of the spectrum, the remark that the candidate is a woman was made.

Concerning the perceived reliability of the candidate based on the poster, 52% considered her to be not at all convincing, with 24% appreciating her to be convincing enough or convincing to a certain degree and only 8% stating that she is very convincing. Similarly, the written message of the poster failed to make a positive impression on the audience, with 74% of the respondents declaring it not at all or slightly convincing and a mere 6% deeming it very convincing. The background of the poster was also rated irrelevant by 78% of the respondents. With regards to the

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2017, e-ISBN: 978-606-8624-01-3

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most eye-catching element of the poster, the majority (52%) preferred the candidate's stance. Finally, the overall impression created by this political poster was a negative one, with 72% of the respondents stating that it has nothing or little to do with how a political campaign should be designed.

Image 2

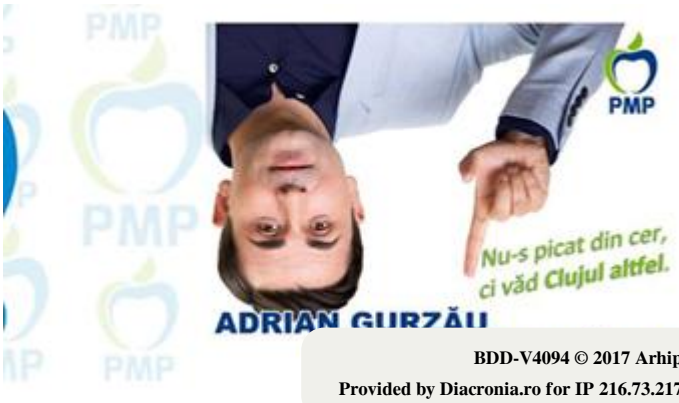


The multimodal features of the poster combine in this case a longer text with the image of the candidate in the forefront. The candidate is introduced to the audience by means of a humorous strategy making reference to his proper name, which in Romanian is homonymous with *dumb: The dumb one [MUTU] is speaking*. The written message expresses the candidate's interest towards elderly people and people with disabilities. The reiteration of his name is followed by a mission statement of inclusion. The focal point of the poster is the candidate himself who exudes reliability by displaying a large confident smile and a professional attitude. The background is monochrome, properly framing the candidate.

As was the case with the previous image, the respondents reacted negatively to this poster, with 70% of them being unwilling to vote for the candidate, largely motivated by his unconvincing message which addresses only a small part of the population.

A percentage of 58 deemed the candidate not at all or slightly convincing, while the rest of the respondents (42%) rated him convincing enough or very convincing. In a similar manner, the written message managed to meet the expectations of 36% of the respondents, with only 4% of these considering it very convincing. Concerning the background of the poster, 70% of the people surveyed declared it irrelevant. The most conspicuous element of the poster as described by the respondents is the posture of the candidate (38%), followed closely by the written text from the point of view of the message it expresses (34%). Overall, 68% of the respondents concluded that the poster failed to measure up to their expectations regarding an election campaign poster.

Image 3



This poster draws the viewers' attention as it presents the candidate upside down. The candidate's position is reinforced by the slogan which is written in a colloquial manner, suggesting a close

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relation with the audience. The background contains the symbol of the party which the candidate represents.

In the case of this poster, 68% of the respondents stated that they would not vote for the candidate. Some of the arguments mentioned by them made reference to the bad humour used to convey the message, others to the candidate being inexperienced or even to the political affiliation and the candidate's misleading and disingenuous features.

The candidate was presented as being not at all convincing by 46% of the respondents, with only 8% arguing in favour of his perceived trustworthiness. In terms of written message, a majority of 68% considered it unconvincing. In line with this, the background was deemed irrelevant by 60% of the respondents, while 8% argued the opposite. There was agreement between 64% of the people surveyed in what concerns the aspect of the poster with the biggest visual impact, namely that of the candidate's posture. The overall impression of the poster was unfavourable, with 68% of the respondents saying that it bears little to no comparison with their expectations relating to political posters.

Image 4



Central to this poster is the candidate's stance framed by the written message and by the name of the affiliated party. The intended undertone of the message is a humorous one, starting from a popular Romanian saying of mutual help and deviating to a self-centred discourse by requesting unilateral help.

When asked if they would vote for the candidate depicted in this poster, 88% of the respondents reported that they would not. Among the arguments supporting their decision were the self-centeredness of the candidate, the poor use of humour, the ridiculous slogan and the overall lack of trustworthiness expressed by the poster.

Relating to the candidate's perceived reliability, an overwhelming percentage of the respondents (82%) agreed that the candidate is not at all or slightly convincing. Likewise, the written message of the poster garnered a majority of 92% negative responses from the people surveyed, who stated that the text is not at all or slightly persuasive. The background of the poster was deemed irrelevant by 82% of the respondents. The most visible element of the poster as described by the respondents is the written text from the point of view of the message it expresses (44%), followed closely by the candidate's stance (40%). The poster made an overall negative impression on the respondents, with 84% of them claiming that it failed to meet their expectations concerning the design of a political campaign.



Image 5

In what the multimodal features are concerned, this poster presents the candidate in the left corner. An

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unexpected element is constituted by the grater that the candidate is holding in his hands and which complements the written text containing an aggressive message, thus encouraging the audience to take radical measures towards the previous generation of politicians who did not meet the people's needs. The poster also highlights the idea that, unlike these politicians, the candidate under focus is capable of offering a better future to the voters. The background is white and the font of the written text is blue and red, red being used in order to suggest the critical need for a change and making salient the strategy through which the campaign is attacking the rival political parties with the aim of weakening their power (see Devran, 2004). The audience can also see the name of the political party and their logo – a lion, which symbolises supreme power.

Similarly to image 4, in the case of this candidate, 88% declared that they would not cast their vote for him. The respondents considered that the image communicates the following messages: insidious politicians; illogical, radical and extreme political views; rough, cold, inappropriate way of addressing the target audience; incapability of providing a convincing professional identity; dislike for the poster itself; aggressive and exaggerated message; bad sense of humour.

In relation to the candidate's appearance, 82% of the respondents considered that he is not at all convincing or slightly convincing. Similarly, the written message of the poster was perceived as being not at all persuasive or slightly persuasive by 82% of the respondents. This is not surprising, as most of the arguments that they offered for not voting the candidate made reference to the written text of the poster. The same percentage of 82% also represented the number of respondents who considered the background to be irrelevant. The respondents stated that the most striking aspects of the poster were the message transmitted by the written text (40%) and the candidate's posture (26%). The overall impression created on the respondents was negative, 80% of them declaring that it is not a professional campaign poster.

Image 6



Regarding the multimodal features of this poster, the most visually striking element is the candidate himself, who is sitting in an upright stance with clenched fists. In terms of body language, clenched fists represent resolve and determination, but in the case of this particular political candidate the message enforced has a slightly aggressive undertone. The background of the poster is a scenic one, bringing together untouched nature and man-made buildings. In what concerns the written message, the text is very concise, reading "Professional. Defender of law. No politics." Supporting his slogan is the candidate's professional attire. However, the defining characteristic of the text is the absence of the name of the candidate, party or political affiliation. The text is written in white and superimposed on a red background which matches the colour of the candidate's tie.

As in the case of image 5, 88% of the respondents reacted negatively to this poster, stating that they would not chose the candidate to represent them. They motivated their position against this candidate by stating that he was not trustworthy and that he was arrogant. They also claimed that the poster presented an illogical, incoherent and inadequate argumentation. They also

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2017, e-ISBN: 978-606-8624-01-3

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underlined the fact that the old generation of politicians had to disappear, being too outdated to adjust to modern times. They also spotted the paradoxical message of the poster according to which he was running for the political position of mayor with "no politics".
A percentage of 82% perceived the candidate not at all or slightly convincing, while only a small percentage of 18% considered him to be convincing or very convincing. Similarly, only 14% of the respondents stated that the written message met their expectations, 64% considering it irrelevant. In what the background of the poster is concerned, 74% rated it as irrelevant and not convincing. The most noticeable feature of the poster as chosen by the respondents was the posture of the candidate (almost half of the respondents – 42%), followed by the background (36%). All in all, 82% of the respondents stated the political poster did not match at all their expectations regarding a political campaign.

Conclusions

In line with our first hypothesis, the interpretation of results obtained from the questionnaire indicates that our selection of political posters does in fact counter its purpose. In the case of each poster, an overwhelming majority reacted negatively to the message expressed, failing to identify with the proposed candidates.

In terms of multimodal features, these political posters were determined to be heterogenous constructs comprised of text, colours, images, symbols, postures and other objects acting incongruently and sending mixed messages to the viewers.

An overall conclusion of our study is that, despite the expectation of professionalism of the visual representation of political figures, political posters can sometimes work to the disadvantage of the candidates.

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Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2017, e-ISBN: 978-606-8624-01-3

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Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2017, e-ISBN: 978-606-8624-01-3

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