Political talk: wearing a face or a mask?

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Résumé: L'article présente le passage en revue des marques modales qui jalonnent le discourse politique des candidates Traian Basescu et Adrian Nastase lors de la campagne présidentielle de 2004. Le corpus est essentiellement constitué des discourse politiques présents dans l'émission televisée *Seara presedintilor – Le Soirée des presidents* (chaîne Antena 1, novembre 2004), et il est complété de quelques fragments de discourse ou déclarations du candidat à la présidence de USA, George W. Bush. L'analyse a surtout en vue de mettre en évidence les clichés linguistiques qui placent les candidates sur le territoire linguistico-pragmatique de la politesse positive ou négative.

'Politics is talk'.
(Bell, 1975)

'A discourse is a thematically and ideologically structured, self-referring progression of communications (messages, texts) circulating within a definable community of communicators and receivers over a specified period of time.' (Biocca, p. 46). The boundaries of the discourse are commonly defined by the community of speakers (thus, we can speak about a 'discourse of medical experts') or by the dominant themes or preoccupations that characterize the discourse (e. g. the 'discourse of science', the 'discourse of politics' etc.)

Discourses are the exercise of power. 2004, a year which proved as fatidical as George Orwell's 1984 on a

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world-wide scale and in more than one way, remains inscribed in the memory of the Romanian society as a period of political effervescence and turmoil, a period in which DISCOURSE could not be but political. Fortunately or not, LANGUAGE has become the main weapon that political opponents use against one another in their political duel. Any political campaign can be quite easily reduced to a mere battle of words.

The present article deals with the 'battle of words' that took place in a TV show entitled *Seara presedintilor* organized by Antena 1 on the eve of the presidential elections, which brought together four of the candidates who ran for presidency: Traian Basescu (D.A. = PNL + PD), Marko Bela (UDMR), Adrian Nastase (PSD) and Corneliu Vadim Tudor (PRM), with the main focus on Traian Basescu's political discourse (which, surprisingly, proved to have an efficient perlocutionary effect) as opposed to Adrian Nastase's discourse (inefficient perlocutionary effect) and compared to G. W. Bush's discourse (only a few weeks before the above-mentioned show, G. Bush had been re-elected: auspicious 'American' perlocutionary effect). Paradoxically, in a political campaign, persuasion could be considered part of the hidden agenda and still it is known and thoroughly exploited by each of the candidates.

Presidential candidates use language (more or less masterfully) in order to persuade the audience to vote them. Apparently, what makes a political speech efficient from this point of view is a meaningful, relevant message. Nevertheless, not only the content, but also the form can be decisive, especially in the case of a TV show with such a format as *Seara presedintilor*. The four candidates were supposed to take turns and answer a series of questions or comment on a series of statements in one-minute or two-

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minute sessions. These rather limiting conditions for self-expression proved to be a wonderful opportunity for the moderator (Gabriela Vrânceanu-Firea) to unveil the 'politeness phenomena' by making the four candidates display their 'faces'.

All normal adult members of society have, and recognize that other members have, what is known as FACE (a term borrowed from the English folk usage). 'Face' is defined as the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself. Traditionally, there are two related types: *positive face* (the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' – including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of – claimed by interactants) and *negative face* (the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, i. e. to 'freedom of action and freedom from imposition' (Brown and Levinson, q. in Partington, p. 125). Broadly speaking, *negative face* is the desire to be left in peace to 'mind your own business', while *negative politeness* is attention paid by others and yourself to such a desire. Also, an interesting semantic contradistinction between the two types of politeness is that *negative politeness* has in view the litotization of rude demeanor, *positive politeness* contributes to the hyberbolization of polite behavior. Although it is generally acknowledged that the precise characteristics and delimitations of both types of face will differ from culture to culture and from a type of intercourse to another, 'face' remains a universal phenomenon, 'consequence of the need for the human animal to cohabit with other similar animals in society and to cooperate with them in order to protect and pursue its interests' (Partington, p. 125).

In any kind of encounter that supposes social interaction, and all the more in a carefully thought-out and strategically staged political debate, 'faces' become extremely vulnerable.

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The linguistic exchanges that take place in *Seara presedintilor* are a permanent negotiation of 'faces' and a permanent threat to either or both the speaker's and hearer's 'face'. In this particular situation, each of the four candidates is, in turn, in a vulnerable position. The flow of information being asymmetrical, each of the participants risks his own 'face' the very moment he takes the floor. The questions coming from the moderator, no matter how simple or unexpected, represent a direct attack on the interviewee's negative 'face' and, therefore, meet with various responses. Even though a TV show with such a format supposes a convention accepted beforehand (if not implicitly) by the participants – that of being publicly questioned on a certain topic and therefore defusing temporarily their negative 'face', not all the candidates put up with the pressure very well (C. V. Tudor, for instance, constantly refuses to answer the questions, accusing Antena 1 of conspiracy).

Basescu's syle of speaking stance is sprinkled with *thinking and speaking verbs* and enumerations. At the very core of his speech lies the anaphoric parallelism. The overall impression is that of a balanced discourse which relies haevily on a limited number of landmarks or key-words and expressions such as: SIGURANTA NATIONALA, GUVERNARE DEZASTRUOASA, ADERARE, SEMNIFICATIV etc. Basescu uses a fairly simple vocabulary, adjusted to the target he addresses, much less colorful than that of his opponents, almost bland if compared to to C. V. Tudor, for instance. By means of enumerations, he tries to reveal various facets of the ideas he states in order to persuade his listeners, not so much of the complexity of his ideas but of their importance, truthfulness and propriety. Furthermore, parallelisms are always at hand whenever he intends to

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stress on a particular set of ideas or when he directly attacks Adrian Nastase. He also often makes use of *thinking and speaking verbs* and *hedges.*

Broadly speaking, hedges are supposed to either strengthen or soften the modality of an utterance. In Basescu's case, hedges are very rarely an expression of modesty or an attempt to avoid arrogance. Far from expressing mitigation and understatement, those hedges function like an extra-politeness technique which proves to be extremely useful in particularly 'face-threatening'questioner turns, as well as a tactic to impose his positive 'face' to the listeners: CRED, DUPA PAREREA MEA / NOASTRA, ÎN OPINIA MEA / NOASTRA, VA POT SPUNE, VA VOI SPUNE, VREAU SA STITI, O SPUN CU TOATA CONVINGEREA, O SPUN FARA NICI O RETINERE etc.

Significantly, a macrostructural analysis of G. W. Bush's political discourse during the 2004 electoral campaign reveals the same propensity to use syntactic parallelisms and thinking verbs, along with strong deontic modals. The major difference between the two political discourses lies in the formulation of *ad hominem* arguments (attacking a specific candidate or party). Basescu's attacks are blunt, direct, most often bringing about a boomerang or backlash effect, whereas Bush's attacks are much less incisive, full of indicators of verbal restraint, euphemisms, understatement or periphrasis. He makes constant use of *ad hominem* arguments to directly question the opposition candidate's fitness for office.

While ruthlessly attacking his political adversary, Basescu shrewdly seeks for the complicity of his audience and that of the moderator in order to preserve his face. He repeatedly attempts to blandish and conciliate the press by means of playful compliments, not forgetting though that a politician is concerned primarily with getting his message across.

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Mention must also be made of another strategy (conscious or not): the so-called *'possessive' psychology* (psihologia adjectivului posesiv) – a great number of AL NOSTRU, A NOASTRA, even or mostly when unnecessary.

While violating Grice's maxim of quantity, Basescu remains loyal to that of relation, permanently refiguring his face to avoid suffering the enormous symbolic defeat which would be losing his 'face'.

BASESCU	**BUSH**
• "Iar în aceste zile aflam ca s-a dat o ordonanta de urgenta prin care mafia din Bacau este scutita de plata a 18 000 de miliarde, inclusiv contributiile la fondurile sociale: fond de pensii, fond de sanatate, lucru care, ***dupa parerea noastra***, încalca foarte grav principiile de *aderare* la Uniunea Europeana. *Semnificativ* este ca aceasta ordonanta este semnata numai de premierul Adrian Nastase."	• 'I ***believe strongly*** in a teacher protection act.' (Final debate, 2000)
• "Este, ***cred***, un semnal apropo de constitutia... de proiectul de Constitutie a Uniunii Europene." ⇒ the hedge 'cred' betrays a certain degree of insecurity, especially when compared to Bush's 'believe'	• 'I ***believe*** that freedom is the deepest need of every human soul.' (Press Conference, White House, Tuesday, April 13, 2004)
• "De fapt, acesti bani s-au împartit, si ***o spun fara nici o retinere***, cu cei care le-au dat facilitatea."	

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• "Esential, ***în opinia mea***, este sa schimbam modelul de presedinte pe care ni l-a creat Ion Iliescu, dar si Emil Constantinescu, prin ne-implicare."	
• "***Vreau sa stiti*** ca nu a fost o guvernare dezastruoasa."	
• "Marea performanta a PSD-ului este, ***cred***, ca ne-a condus pe ultimul loc." ⇒ direct attack	• 'I ***believe*** that God has planted in every human heart the desire to live in freedom.' (State of the Union Address, 2003) • '***My opponent*** gives in to more powerful interests.' • '***The other side*** believes it's OK to spend more than the surplus.' (NBC, 30. 10. 2000) ⇒ attack softened by euphemisms (Bush does employ negative words but his vocabulary is by no means aggressive when he refers to his political opponents)
• "O sa ***raspund precis*** la întrebare."	
• "Va pot spune ca în momentul de fata eu ***apreciez*** coruptia ca fiind un element care-ncepe sa afecteze *siguranta nationala*."	

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• "***Un bun român este un om care***-si iubeste poporul lui. ***Un bun român este un om care***-si respecta simbolurile nationale si traditiile. ***Un bun român este un om care*** trateaza egal pe toti cetatenii români, indiferent de nationalitate, fie ca sunt unguri, tigani, ucraineni, cehi, slovaci, italieni. ***Un bun român este un om care*** are grija sa-si tina aproape diaspora, este România de peste mari si tari. ***A fi bun român*** înseamna sa respecti legile tarii tale." ⇒ anaphoric parallelism	• '***Let's help families*** pay for child care, health care and long term care. ***Let's make up to*** $10,000 of college tuition tax deductible. ***Let's offer families*** a new, tax-free way to save and build...' • '***This administration*** had its moments. ***This administration*** had its chance. And still ***this administration*** continues on the same old path.' • '***We know that*** dictators are quick to choose aggression, while free nations strive to resolve differences in peace. ***We know that*** oppressive governments support terror, while free governments fight the terrorists in their midst. ***We know that*** free peoples embrace progress and life, instead of becoming the recruits for murderous ideologies.' (Accepting candidacy, 2000) ⇒ anaphoric parallelism

Adrian Nastase's response to the same 'face-threatening' situations consists in answers that lack cohesion and are full of repetitions whose role is not to stress upon a certain idea that would otherwise pass unnoticed by the listeners but to approximately fill a lexical gap. This overlexicalization is unfortunately doubled by an overdose of amplifiers and boosters, such as: DEOSEBIT DE sau EXTRAORDINAR DE, and of a series of adverbs meant to

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emphasize a certain self-assurance: FARA-NDOIALA (5 times), ÎN MOD CATEGORIC (4 times), SIGUR (2 times), CU SIGURANTA (2 times), FIRESTE (2 times). Along with these hedges which are meant to enhance an impression of confidence and of being in charge but instead tone down the illocutionary force of the utterance by expressing a notion of imprecision and unvarying qualification, one may also notice the recurrent, almost obsessive use of meaningless verbal tags, such as: DE ASEMENEA, DIN ACEST PUNCT DE VEDERE, or words belonging to the semantic sphere of POWER (PUTERE, PUTERNIC) or KNOWLEDGE (SA CUNOASTEM, CUNOASTERE etc.). In his case, hedges are no longer meant to hyperbolize, as in Traian Basescu's electoral speech; not even to outline a cosy space for manoeuvre between categorical YES and NO; rather to fill a major semantic and ideatical gap.

The basic flaw in the following speech, for instance, apart from inconsistency, lack of substance and redundancy, is that the promise of a good oratorical start is never fulfiled. In general, Adrian Nastase uses effective devices of *captatio benevolentiae,* usually finding the appropriate introductory words to draw attention (the noun phrases in the so-called *nominative of address*), just like Bush does, but afterwards his message gets thinner and thinner, and the seductive function of this rhetorical strategy shrinks back to the statute of a mere linguistic cliché.

NASTASE	**BUSH**
- "Dragi prieteni si dragi cetateni!"	- 'Dear friends and fellow citizens!'
- "Stimati concetateni!"	- 'My fellow citizens!'
- "Dragi compatrioti!"	- 'My fellow-countrymen!'

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– "Primul presedinte al României europene *va trebui sa cunoasca* ***în mod categoric*** si legile europene. Va fi ***deosebit de important*** *sa cunoastem* nu doar Constitutia României, *va trebui sa cunoastem* ce anume ne va oferi si ce ne va cere viitoarea Constitutie a Europei. ***Din acest punct de vedere***, Tratatul Constitutional semnat de curând aduce modificari ***deosebite*** pe care va trebui *sa le cunoastem, va trebui* sa le folosim. Personalitatea juridica a Uniunii Europene ne va permite ***în mod categoric*** sa reprezentam în lumea de asazi o *mare putere* economica, o *mare putere* politica. Modificarile sunt ***deosebite*** atât în ceea ce priveste sistemul de vot, în ceea ce priveste faptul ca va exista un presedinte practic permanent al Uniunii Europene. Competentele vor fi unele competente exclusive si în care numai Uniunea Europeana va actiona. Vor fi competente protejate si ***de asemenea*** unele dintre zonele în care interesele noastre proprii vor trebui sa fie aduse mai *puternic* în aceasta colaborare. ***Din acest punct de vedere***, (..) ne angajam sa rezolvam cât mai bine posibil aceasta coordonare a intereselor noastre. Este ***foarte important*** viitorul României. ***De asemenea***, este ***deosebit de important*** sa întelegem ca relatiile noastre cu tarile europene vor conta enorm în cadrul economiei globalizate."

– "Presedintele României are un rol ***deosebit de important***. Eu voi fi un presedinte ***puternic*** pentru o România ***puternica***".

– "***Din acest punct de vedere***, experienta mea de vicepresedinte a CSAT-ului îmi arata ca presedintele are un rol ***deosebit de important***. Presedintele actual al României a avut si are un rol ***deosebit***."

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If Basescu and Bush have in common the same propensity to 'slice' the discourse in meaningful, though redundant pieces of information, one might notice that Nastase's and Bush's discourses share the same obstinacy to tackle everything and nothing, thus illustrating Pierre Dac's paradoxical assertion in "L'os à moille" according to which a good political discourse needn't speak about anything in particular, and still it must leave the impression that it says it all.

Eight reactive responses have been enumerated (Copeland and Cartee, p. 221), by which a candidate hopes to weaken or destroy the effectiveness of the opposition's attacks: silence, confession / redemption, sanctimonious admission, denial / campaign attack, counterattack, refutation, obfuscation and counterimaging. Of these, Traian Basescu resorted mostly to counterattack, denial and refutation, while Adrian Nastase used obfuscation and confession. Apparently, not a very good strategy to preserve one's 'face'.

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