Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 9 (58) No. 2 – 2016

Strategic positioning of social actors in the semiotic act of TV debate

Nicolae-Sorin DRĂGAN[1]

This paper proposes a comparative analysis of final televised debates for presidential elections in Romania, in December 2009 and November 2014, from perspective of functional theory of political campaign discourse (Benoit 2014). In this article the functional theory of political discourse is seen as strategic positioning of social actors in the semiotic act of televised debate. The results obtained in this study could suggest a political communication culture focused more on attack rather than on defense strategy. In the metabolism of debate we can see discursive behaviour models that generalise in the verbal interactions in the public space. Televised debate can be regarded as a diagnosis of the civilisation of dialogue in the local political life. From this standpoint, the work is a plea for the reconfiguration of dialogue in dialogic interactions in the Romanian public space (particularly in televised political debates), for the construction of an authentic dialogue, where normality and the deliberative aspect should be considered discursive rules.

Keywords: *presidential debate, functional theory, discursive positioning, political semiotics, political communication culture*

1. Introduction

The televised debate is considered "superior to other communication forms" (Pfau 2002, 251; Jamieson, 2011). Diana B. Carlin (2012) claims that debates are the most valuable form of communication in the presidential campaign. Also, for Amber E. Boydstun *et al*. (2013) debates are the most significant experiences of the campaign. The main arguments are not necessarily related to the huge audience, not only in USA[2], but in all countries where such events occur. In Romania, changing proportions, things are similar.

The last televised debates for presidential elections in November 2014, also involved a large number of viewers in our country. The first of the two final debates,

[1] National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (NUPSPA), Bucharest, sorin.dragan@comunicare.ro.

[2] Nielsen Media Research recently published (2016) a study showing that approximately 84 million Americans watched the first of the three final debate for the United States presidential election, in November 2016. It is a record of audience registered in the history of television from across the ocean.

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dated November 11, 2014, at the RealitateaTV station, was watched live by 3.5 million viewers, while the second debate of the following day, at the B1 TV station, recorded only at this station an audience of nearly 1.8 million viewers (Mediafax 2014; Beciu 2015, 273). Impressive figures of audience were also gathered at the final debate of December 3, 2009. About 4.9 million viewers watched the media event live (Corbu and Boțan 2011, 92-93; Mediafax, 2014).

The huge figures of audience interested in the televised debates employ indeed in this form of communication an enormous potential for influencing voters (Benoit *et al*. 2003: 336). In this context, we are witnessing a shift in form of political discourse towards a show-type politics, media events (Dayan and Katz, 1992 apud Beciu 2009, 116) or infotainment. In such a paradigm of current political communication, *the act of observation* tends to replace the *act of participation* (Swanson 1992 cited by Erickson 1998, 145). It is just one of the consequences of political discourse turned into a show[3].

In an article recently published (Drăgan, 2016a), we emphasize that beyond the *spectacular dimension* of the debate, for which media show a natural affinity, one should not neglect the *generative dimension* of this discursive genre. In the metabolism of debate we can see discursive behaviour models that generalise in the verbal interactions within the public space and become experiences that build public culture of society at a time: "electoral debate (or any other mediatic product) is a relevant communicational space for the public culture of society" (Beciu 2015, 262).

Viewers have the opportunity to benchmark both candidates' position on a topic of interest and personality traits and the character of political actors involved in the debate. The benefits of such direct confrontation between the candidates are also found in the possibility of deeper understanding of the pros and cons of government policies and related issues (Benoit 2007, 319).

However the televised debates remain essential forms of communication for the functioning of democracy (Coleman 2000, 1; Beciu 2009, 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. In this article we consider that televised debate is a special form of communication that reveals, on the one hand, the relationship of social actors with the language, and on the other hand, it expresses their capacity of understanding otherness. From this standpoint, the work is a plea for the reconfiguration of dialogue in dialogic interactions in the Romanian public space (particularly in televised political

[3] In such a paradigm the media rather values the image of political actors to the detriment of the content of messages (Postman 1985; Hellweg *et al*. 1992: 79). Keith V. Erickson (2000) calls the media propensity to image to the detriment of the content of messages, the "*visual turn*" in presidential rhetoric. Umberto Eco (2005) sees in this reality a border between *neo-television* preoccupied with *personalization* of social actors, public image and relations to public, and *paleo-television*, focused on the content of messages, the audience being positioned in a generic reference (Beciu 2009: 109), without interactional valences.

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debates), for the construction of an authentic dialogue, where normality and the deliberative aspect should be considered discursive rules.

The structure of this paper is as follows: in the next section we present a brief introduction to the functional theory of political discourse as strategic positioning of social actors in the semiotic act of televised debate. Section 3, Research Methodology, contains the research design. I have used functional theory as an analytical instrument that we can use to diagnose the discursive behaviour of social actors during televised debates. The next section (4) contains results of research. Section 5 is dedicated to discussion and the last part of the paper (section 6) is dedicated to conclusions.

2. Functional theory of political campaign discourse

This article examines the way social actors position themselves discursively during final debates for presidential elections, both one toward the other, and toward the content of communication. From this standpoint, we will see that functional theory of political discourse can be regarded as strategic positioning of social actors (semiotic practices) in the semiotic act of televised debate.

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 analyse political debates appears appropriate. This kind of approach for political campaigns discourse allows recovery the *strategic dimension* of any act and communication form (Beciu 2015, 260), even more so in the situation of televised debates. As in previous research (Drăgan, 2016a; 2016b) we set out from the five axioms formulated by Benoit (2014, 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 targets 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 the candidate's image and another between the theme "Policies" and references to political issues under discussion.

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In the functional theory of political discourse, candidates are positioned on the preference scale by three discursive functions: acclamation, attacks and defenses. 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, used to reduce candidate's social desirability (Benoit 2011). Defenses are statements which reject the opponent's attacks and which could influence candidate's level of preference (Benoit 2014). The three discursive functions are mutually stimulated and conditioned (Benoit and Wells 1996: 112). Benoit and Airne (2005: 226) 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". 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 favour (Hinck and Hinck, 2002).

3. Methodology

This paper proposes a comparative analysis of final televised debates for presidential elections in Romania, in December 2009 and November 2014, from perspective of functional theory of political campaign discourse (Benoit, 2014). Practically, we extend the previous research studies (Drăgan 2016a; 2016b) for the situation of final televised debate for presidential elections in Romania, on December 3rd, 2009.

As in previous research, we set out from Benoit (2014) 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 acclaim than in 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 televised debate for the presidential elections in Romania, from 3 December 2009, broadcast simultaneously at RealitateaTV channel, and Antena3 channel respectively. The results were compared with those obtained in the situation of the debates from November 2014.

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Candidates who took part in the debate from 3 December 2009 were Mircea Geoană (PSD, Social Democratic Party leader, candidate of PSD + PC Alliance) and Traian Băsescu, candidate for second mandate (supported by Democratic Liberal Party, PDL). Along with the two final debates in November 2014, they 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" 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).

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 (Victor Ponta) and 211 of the opposition candidate (Klaus Iohannis). For the third televised debate analysed, in 3 December 2009, we have identified 564 assertions concerning the candidates: 299 assertions of the opposition candidate (Mircea Geoană) and 265 of the President in office at that time (Traian Băsescu).

4. Results of research

The results for the first two debates, in November 2014, have been detailed in other studies (Drăgan 2016: 37-38). In this article we present, in a comparative manner with the results from November 2014, the results for the final televised debate on 3 December 2009.

The first hypothesis is partially confirmed (we have more attacks than defense, acclamations occupying intermediate position). For the first two debates, from November 2014, analysed in previous studies (Drăgan 2016a; 2016b), the frequencies for each type of discursive function were: A2 (45.9%, respectively 45.8%) >A1 (34.5%, respectively 36.7%) >A3 (19.6%, respectively 17.5%) (see Table 1).

	Acclaims (A1)	**Attacks (A2)**	**Defenses (A3)**	**Total**
First Debate - *Nov. 11, 2014* -	163 (34.5%)	217 (45.9%)	93 (19.6%)	**473**
Second Debate - *Nov. 12, 2014* -	170 (36.7%)	212 (45.8%)	81 (17.5%)	**463**

$\chi^2 = 20.09$, $p < .01$, for the first debate; $\chi^2 = 13.59$, $p < .01$, for the second debate

Table 1. Frequency distribution for each discursive function, in the first (11 November 2014, RealitateaTV TV) and in the second debate (12 November 2014, B1 TV)

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For the debate on December 3, 2009, the distribution of discursive functions frequency is similar to that determined for the discussions in November 2014 (even orders of magnitude are similar): A2 (44%) >A1 (38.7%) >A3 (17.3%) (see Table 2 below).

The candidate of the Democratic Liberal Party, PD-L, Romania's President in office at that time, Traian Băsescu, used mainly offensive-type statements on "Policies" sub-theme "Media Moguls", focusing in particular on the *episode of nocturnal visit* of Mircea Geoană, Social Democratic Party leader at that time, to Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, the main shareholder at the time of the RealitateaTV station. Mircea Geoană used offensive type statements especially on "Character" and also on the category of past actions (AT) on "Policies".

	Acclaims (A1)	**Attacks (A2)**	**Defenses (A3)**	**Total**
Mircea Geoană	106 (35.5%)	142 (47.5%)	51 (17%)	**299**
Traian Băsescu	112 (42.2%)	106 (40%)	47 (17.8%)	**265**
The Third Debate - Dec. 3, 2009 -	218 (38.7%)	248 (44%)	98 (17.3%)	**564**

$\chi^2 = 3.51$, p (=.172) > .05

Table 2. Frequency distribution for each discursive function, in the third debate (3 December 2009, RealitateaTV and Antena3)

If we graphically represent frequencies of discursive functions for all three debates analysed, one can clearly see a *pattern* of their distribution being set up (see Figure 1) other than that suggested by the first hypothesis of functional theory, respectively: A1 > A2 > A3.

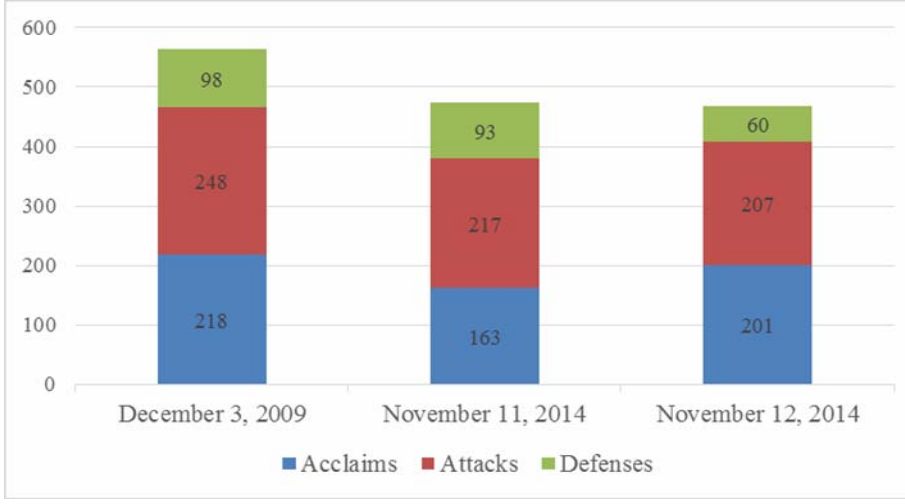


Figure 1. The distribution of discursive functions for final televised debates for presidential elections of December 3, 2009 and November 11 and 12, 2014

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Regarding the second hypothesis, the results show that the debate focuses on discussion related to political action rather than on issues related to candidates' character (H2 was verified).

In the final televised debate in December 2009, there were no surprises, politicians have talked more about the "Policies" (60.6% of statements) and less about "Character" (39.4% of statements) (see Table 3). For this situation, the chi-squared test was insignificant (χ^2 =.159, p =.69 > .05). The trend of the results is similar to that obtained for the debate in November 2014. Moreover, the order of magnitude is very similar to that obtained for the first final debate, on November 11, 2014, at the RealitateaTV station (Drăgan 2016a: 38).

	Policies (P)	**Character (C)**	**Total**
Mircea Geoană	179 (59.9%)	120 (40.1%)	**299**
Traian Băsescu	163 (61.5%)	102 (38.5%)	**265**
The Third Debate - Dec. 3, 2009 -	342 (60.6%)	222 (39.4%)	**564**

χ^2 =.159, p (=.69) > .05

Table 3. Enunciations in the third debate (3 December 2009, RealitateaTV and Antena3)

Table 4 present results for testing the last three hypotheses. Similar to the results obtained for debates from November 2014, H3 and H4 hypothesis are totally verified (Drăgan 2016a: 38-39). We noticed that both candidates used general objectives to acclaim rather than to attack.

	Policies									**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
Mircea Geoană	9	60	21	23	15	0	47	3	1	0	21	3	11	34	24	16	9	2
Traian Băsescu	39	47	20	22	4	2	25	1	3	2	13	3	8	39	17	16	2	2
TOTAL (*category*)	196			66			80			42			133			47		
TOTAL (*themes*)	342									222								

Table 4. The structure of main topics by discursive functions, in the third debate (3 December 2009, RealitateaTV and Antena3)

The last hypothesis, H5, is not verified, both candidates using offensive statements more on general goals (15, respectively 4) than on future plans (3, respectively 1) and acclaim more on future plans (47, respectively 25) that on general goals (23, respectively 22).

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5. Discussion

The results obtained allow us to analyze and compare the candidates' distribution of enunciations on general topics and discursive functions, for each of the third debates, in a comparative way.

For debate in November 2014, the data show that Victor Ponta, the candidate who represents power, uses the strategy of defences more intensely than the opposition candidate Klaus Johannis, in both debates: 26.6% of statements versus 11.2% of statements in the first debate, the difference thereby increasing during the second debate: 24.6% of statements versus 9% of statements. The situation is similar for the debate in December 2009, this time, the differences are not significant between the two candidates (17% versus 17.8%).

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, if we could draw an obvious conclusion for the debate in November 2014, namely that Victor Ponta, the candidate of power, was worse placed than his opponent, Klaus Iohannis (Drăgan 2016, 40), for the debate in December 2009 we cannot advance such a conclusion.

In a recent study (Drăgan, 2015), we tried to explain the relatively high proportion of the defensive type statements (defence) in televised debates in Romania (about 18% of all statements) compared with data obtained in other countries (5-10% of all statements). This should be correlated with the large number of offensive type discursive interventions (46% in 2014, respectively 44% in 2009), compared to an average of 35% of this type of intervention in other states (Benoit, 2014). The differences can be explained if we consider the quality content of the discursive functions and the role of political culture in televised debates mechanism. The data obtained in our study confirms the results obtained in other studies (Cmeciu and Pătruț, 2010) and may suggest a culture of political communication focused on the strategy of offensive statements (attacks) rather than that on the defensive statements.

Another conclusion is clear from the data presented in Table 2: Mircea Geoană, Social Democratic Party leader, uses offensive statements (40.1% of statements) to a greater extent than president Traian Băsescu (38.5% of statements). This result is also similar to that obtained in the debates of November 2014. The research indicates that voters tend to consider attacks on political issues more acceptable than attacks on the character of the candidate (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland 1989). From this point of view, although both candidates have used the strategy to attack more on "Policies" than on "Character", we note that Mircea

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Geoană, with 23 such offensive statements on the opponent's character) is poorly placed when compared to Traian Băsescu, with only 11 offensive type statements on the character of the rival.

The differences become significant if we analyse the distribution of attacks by candidates on specific topics. This is the only way to capture how some candidates, especially those who won in both situations the presidential elections, used offensive statements (attacks) on conjuncture topics (either on diaspora vote in the debates of 2014, or on media moguls in the debate of 2009). Therefore, most often, attacks are used *strategically* as criticisms in the primary debates are directed mainly towards the candidate leading in the polls, rather than to other candidates (Benoit et *al*. 2002).

Regarding the first discursive function – acclamations – we note that in the debate in December 2009, the candidate Traian Băsescu has used this positive discursive strategy more (42,2%) than candidate Mircea Geoană (35,5%). Data obtained for debate in November 2014 were different in this regard (Drăgan 2016a: 39-40).

As limitations of the research, we indicate some constraints related to: fidelity of the coding procedure, the adequacy of candidates' statements to moderator's style, the way cultural context defines the rules of political dialogue.

6. Conclusion

In this article we tried to reveal semiotic dynamics of the three discursive functions – acclamations, attacks, defenses – during the final televised debates for presidential elections in December 2009 and November 2014, from perspective of functional theory of political campaign discourse (Benoit 2014). The results obtained allow us to analyze and compare the candidates' distribution of enunciations on general topics and discursive functions, for each of the third debates, in a comparative way.

As can be seen from the results of research (see Figure 1), we have identified a certain pattern in the discursive behaviour of candidates during televised confrontations. It is a similar distribution of the three discursive functions in all three cases analysed, regardless of the fact that the discursive interactions took place in 2009 or 2014. The distribution obtained – attacks, acclaims, defenses (A2 >A1 >A3) – is not similar to that indicated by Benoit (2014) in the first hypothesis of functional theory (A1 >A2 >A3). We can say that such an outcome of research indicates a culture of political communication which is more focused on the strategy of offensive statements (attacks). Candidates' predisposition to offensive statements (attacks), targeted on "Character" in all debates analysed, regardless of the time at which they occurred, can be an indicator of how social actors intend to build a civilization of dialogue in the domestic public sphere. Social actors involved in the debate have no availability for more laborious and "orderly" building of positive statements of acclamations or defences type that involve more consistent and

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substantiated construction, but prefer the easier path of negative offensive-type statements strategy (attacks).

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 and 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 account for the cultural variability of the results (Holtz-Bacha and Kaid, 2011).

Still, our study shows similarities with the results obtained in other countries, and highlights on potential differences, which challenges the assumptions of the functional theory.

The differences can be explained, as mentioned earlier, if we consider the different cultural codes of Romanian communication culture. The three discursive functions contribute to the overall assessment of a candidate. The particular way in which social actors strategically use three discursive functions during the debate can be used by voters to decide which of the candidates is preferable. From this point of view, the theory of functional discourse of political campaigns can be considered an adequate tool for analysis of how social actors are positioned strategically (to each other, to the content of the communication, to the topics addressed) in one of the most important forms of political communication, the final televised debates for presidential elections.

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