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Strategic Maneuvering in Presidential Debates. The case of Traian Băsescu vs Mircea Geoană

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to look at how language in discourse can be used strategically by the speakers in the construction of arguments. This particular research was conducted on a mediated presidential debate and focused on identifying how political figures can make use of different strategies and communicative competences in order to protect or advance their standpoints. Contextualizing the confrontational stage of a particular political discourse and looking at how speakers successfully and unsuccessfully employ strategic maneuvering when accused of inconsistency, are key elements of the current research.

Key-words: *strategic maneuvering, inconsistency, dissociation, standpoint*

1. Introduction

An irrefutable truth on evolution is that language can be perceived as being the main foundation of societal development. Communication changed the fabric of history through the power of meaning, a main catalyst in shaping opinions, ideas, values and belief systems. Throughout time, people in positions of power i.e. leaders, public figures, business tycoons, military personnel, made use of their communicative competences in order to convince, inspire, impress, motivate, criticize or discredit a particular target/group. The efficiency of these actions is given by the intrinsic features that accompany any form of communication. While the sole purpose of a public address is to send a message to an intended audience, the ways of achieving this task may vary.

The objective of this paper is to analyze the extent to which people employ different discursive strategies in order to influence how a message is perceived and to look at ways by which speakers can strategically use these competences for their personal/shared agendas. This linguistic particularity is known as strategic maneuvering, "the continual effort of maintaining the balance between aiming for rhetorical effectiveness and dialectical reasonableness". (van Eemeren 2010, 11)

The first part of the paper will deal with a theoretical description of the afore-mentioned concept. By underlining different instances in which such strategies may

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be employed, the analysis will be conducted from a twofold perspective: at a lexical level e.g. identifying patterns of argumentation and markers that stand for strategic maneuvering and by taking into consideration how the confrontational stage, more specifically, how an integral characteristic of political debates, is established by the speakers. The last part of the analysis will look at how strategic maneuvering can be identified in institutional settings and will focus on defining different processes and strategies that can be used by the speaker to his/her advantage. For this particular objective I have decided to look at a mediated presidential debate held between two political candidates, Traian Băsescu and Mircea Geoană in the 2009 elections and to discuss particular strategies used by the speakers. These aspects account for how a speaker can influence the ways in which a message is delivered and its potential effectiveness.

2. Strategic maneuvering: a theoretical outline

The term "strategic maneuvering" was first used in the field of Pragma-dialectics by Frans H. van Eemeren as a way of explaining the complex phenomenon of how the use and selection of arguments have the power to change the perception and efficiency of achieving a desired effect through communication. This process is not perceived as a unitary, well-bounded concept, but rather as having two analytical dimensions: a dialectical and a rhetorical one. As such, "strategic maneuvering manifests itself in the argumentative practice in the performance of speech acts embodying indivisible argumentative moves." (van Eemeren 2010, 93) The process, therefore, refers to the ways in which speakers choose to protect or advance their standpoints, in logical sequencing and in a relevant manner, and the ways through which they achieve their objectives, by making use of rhetorical strategies with the purpose of enhancing the effectiveness of their arguments and meeting the demands of the audience. It deals with the "arguers' effort to maneuver between making a reasonable contribution to the discussion and trying to do so in one's favor". (Andone and Gâță 2011, 13)

A better understanding of maneuvering in the field of Pragma-dialectics is provided by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002) who offer a categorization of the three essential elements integrated within the process. The strategic maneuvering triangle is only made possible by taking into account the following aspects: topical potential, audience demands and presentational devices (see Figure 1).

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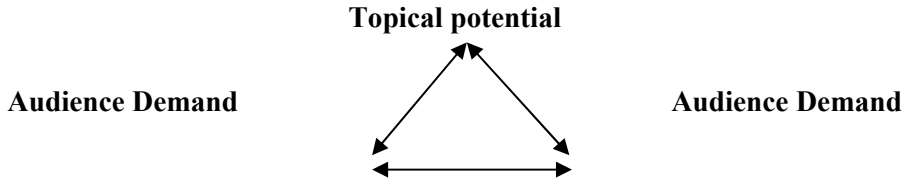

Figure 1. The Strategic Maneuver Triangle (in van Eemeren 2010, 94)

The first category, described as topical potential, derives its meaning from the Greek word *topoi* and represents "repertoire of options in making an argumentative move that are available for the arguer. (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, 143) This category refers to the array of topics available to the speaker that he can deliberately choose to speak about. However, the *topoi* are culturally-bound and context dependent. If we take, for example, political discourse, the range of topics available for the speaker are restricted by the institutional settings as well as by the matter at hand for which the meeting/ discourse takes place. As such, the speaker is free to construct arguments that appeal to the audience and work in his/her favor by choosing "the best line of defense" (Andone and Gâță 2011, 13) in order to protect/advance his standpoint. The next step is to maneuver efficiently by taking into consideration the audience's demand, more explicitly, by understanding the needs, wants and the issues that would appeal to the receiver and by selecting arguments that would suit or please the audience. From a dialectical point of view, meeting the demands of the audience can be achieved by formulating logical, relevant and reasonable arguments that appeal to them and at the same time, avoid the emergence of counter-arguments. Another theoretical component of strategic maneuvering relates to presentational devices i.e. "how argumentative moves are presented in the way that is strategically efficient/most acceptable." (van Eemeren 2010, 12)

As suggested by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002), the strategic construction of arguments has the purpose of influencing public opinion. Protecting or tarnishing the image of a speaker/group is dependent upon the topics chosen deliberately by the speaker to achieve his objectives, by the audience demands, expectations and by the ways in which different rhetorical strategies are utilized in order to establish an efficient way of presenting the arguments i.e. protecting or advancing a particular standpoint as to avoid other critical responses.

3. Stages and characteristics of strategic maneuvering

In the next part of the paper, I will elaborate upon the concept of strategic maneuvering in argumentation and discuss different pragma-rhetorical components that occur in speech acts. As previously mentioned, when talking about this process,

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it is imperative to take into consideration the range of topics (often restricted by the type of interaction, context and subjectivity), appealing to an audience in a manner that works in the favor of the speaker which makes use of well constructed arguments.

When looking at how strategic maneuvering functions within the confines of a specific type of discourse, we must take into consideration that the factors previously described are in constant change. Take for example a presidential mediated debate. The activity types and the topics approached by the speaker are subject to restrictions given by the type of institutional settings in which the speech act occurs. These can be perceived as the *preconditions* that set up a potentially strategic approach. In the case of televised political discourse, 'the interviewer is constrained to question the politician on matters of (major) public importance, and he turns this into an opportunity to choose matters which pose difficulties for the politician.' (Andone and Gâță 2011, 15) This generates the next step which is called *the confrontational stage* in which the interviewer raises an issue in regard to a specific candidate that relates to his/her standpoint. In this particular case, a mediated debate leaves room for interaction between the two candidates with specific objectives in mind. Oftentimes, the relation between the protagonist (P) and antagonist (A) shifts from the interviewer towards a dispute between the interviewees. The preconditions are influenced by the type of discourse and the main issues which are addressed. Through interaction in communication, different speakers can protect or bring forth particular standpoints i.e. issues in which they believe based on real or normative arguments. The discussion moves towards the confrontational stage in which a particular standpoint is challenged or criticized by the opponent. P will respond to A by employing different activity types as it best suits his/her defense by taking into consideration the *topoi*, the demands of the audience and the most efficient ways of presenting his arguments in order to obtain a favorable outcome.

In some cases, however, moving beyond the confrontational schemata of Pragma-dialectics, a speaker (which may act individually or as an agent for a group of people with similar interests) may choose to strategically maneuver upon a standpoint advanced by himself with the sole purpose of enhancing or obtaining a desirable effect which targets the audience. In order to better understand the structure of argumentative constructions, I propose the following categorization (see Figure 2).

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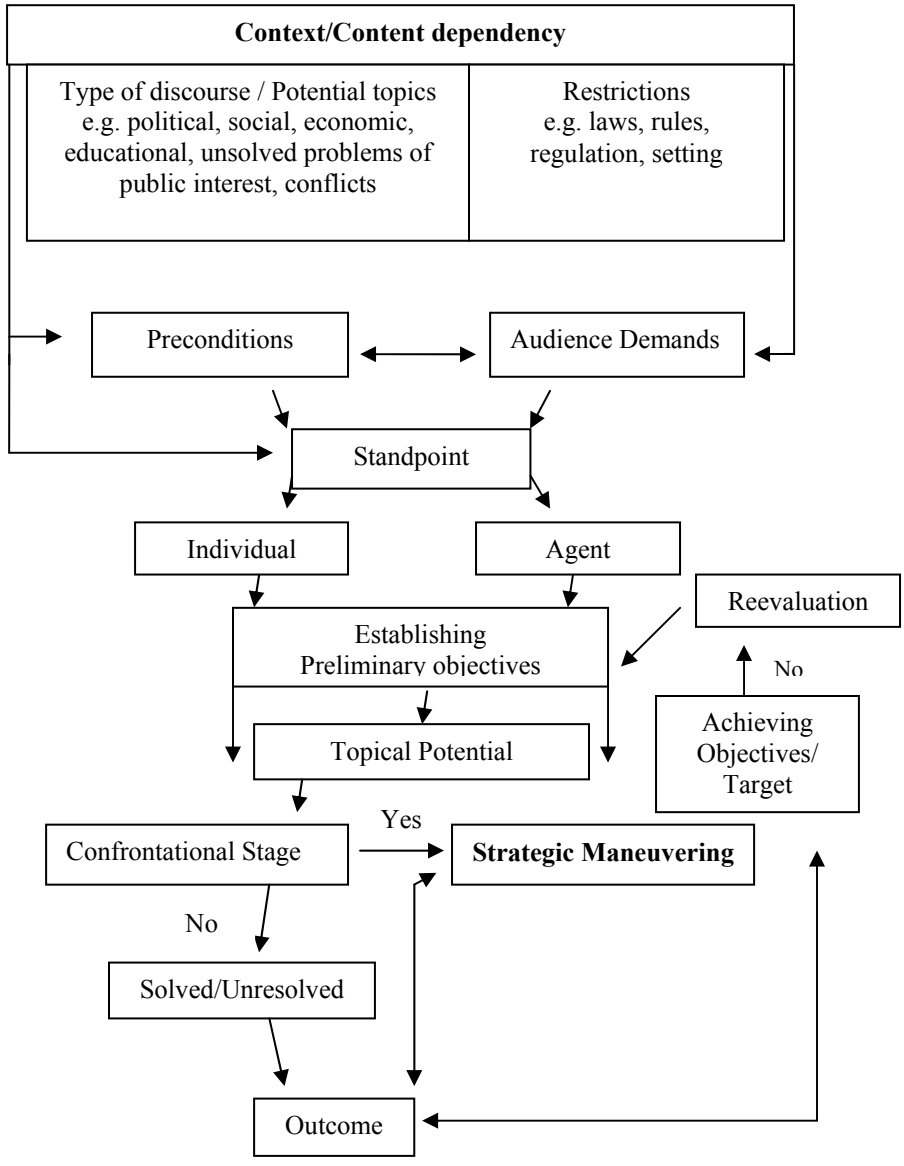

Figure 2. Stages of strategic maneuvering

In conclusion, different stages and characteristics may be identified when dealing with strategic maneuvering. Oftentimes, an efficient argumentative exchange between a sender and a receiver would consist of an opening stage (preconditions followed by stimuli), an argumentative stage (confrontation followed by strategic

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maneuvering) and a concluding stage in which the argument is resolved. The use of strategic maneuvering can be perceived as a rhetorical ploy used to shift attention from an ongoing issue (a formulated argument or an initial standpoint) and to achieve a favorable outcome.

4. Topical selection in strategic maneuvering

One of the crucial aspects when dealing with strategic maneuvering relies on the importance of topic selection. The options of topics available for a speaker in a specific type of interaction and at a specific time, help him choose the best solution for achieving the desired effects by offering the speaker a vast array of choices e.g. viewpoint, angle, perspective. The topical potential is defined as 'a range of topical options available at a certain point in the discourse' (van Eemeren, 2010:102) and gives the speaker solutions for maneuvering through the use of speech acts. This potential often occurs at the confrontational stage. Achieving strategic maneuvering is dependent upon following a specific logical sequencing (see Figure 3)

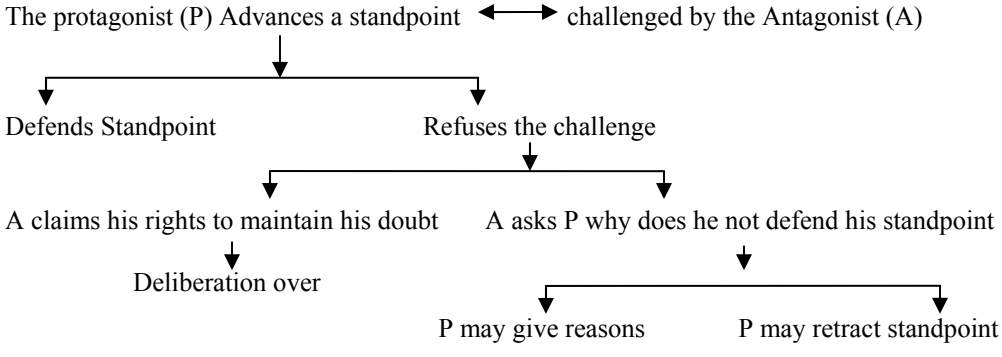

Figure 3. Confrontation in argumentation (Andone and Gâță 2011, 14)

While P advances a standpoint, A may choose to challenge him. As a response, P can accept the challenge or refuse it. In the first case, P will defend it while in the second case, he will have two options: (a) he can refuse the challenge thus making A claim his rights to maintain his doubts and ending the deliberation or (b) the protagonist may be asked why he refuses to defend his standpoint. If this is the case, P may give various reasons or he can retract his initial standpoint.

The next part of the paper will deal with the practical approach of strategic maneuvering in the field of political discourse by analyzing the 2009 mediated presidential debate between Traian Băsescu and Mircea Geoană.

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5. Mediated political debate: Traian Băsescu vs Mircea Geoană

In order to approach this subject, I have decided to select a mediated and televised presidential debate held in 2009 by the Institute for Public Politics, at the Palace of the Parliament in Bucharest, between two candidates: Traian Băsescu and Mircea Geoană. The analysis was conducted through the selection of various excerpts from the interview televised on B1TV channel in Romania and I intend to look at different lexical and rhetorical aspects that have the potential of influencing public opinion in the favor of the speaker and of enhancing the ways in which his messages are perceived and accepted by the audience.

The relevance of this particular analysis for identifying the use of strategic maneuvering is given by the way in which the emotive/expressive component of discourse is constructed by the speakers. By using specific aspects that address the audience demands, the presence of subjectivity plays an integral role in how speakers choose to create their standpoints and have the potential of influencing the topical selection in a particular verbal interaction.

An important problem in analyzing instances of self-expression in political discourses can be identified in the relationship between expressing personal opinions as a form of subjectivity and using them as rhetorical strategies.

I have decided to look at such instances in order to establish a better contextualizing of the relation between the *antagonist* and *protagonist*, integral elements in determining the topical potential, the construction of arguments and counter-arguments. Throughout the political debate, both candidates use this strategy in order to improve their image or to tarnish the image of the political opponent. The confrontational structure of this debate often fails to respect the preconditions set by the moderator at the beginning of the broadcast. Both Geoană and Băsescu underline the negative qualities of their opponent by using strong words that have the potential of affecting the image of the candidate, thus helping the politician fulfill his own political agenda. The candidates present in the debate interchange their roles from protagonist to antagonist throughout the verbal exchanges. They establish a background through the use of their communicative competences by tarnishing the image of the opponent. These arguments can be identified at a linguistic level in instances of self-expression. The purpose of these particular choices is to influence public opinion. The politicians use their communicative abilities and construct normative arguments to demolish the credibility of their opponent.

An important component in establishing the confrontational stage was provided by the particular settings of the political debate. After a short introduction provided by each candidate, the moderator asks the political opponents to argue why their opponent is not a viable option for presidency. I will provide some examples of

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what candidates select from the topical potential in their argumentative constructions.

A. Geoană (about Băsescu):

(1) (...) Dar de ce sunt convins că românii nu-l vor vota pe Traian Băsescu: *în primul rând, pentru că a fost* ***o sursă permanentă de scandal şi dezbinare****. Pentru că* ***a eşuat în toate promisiunile făcute naţiunii Române****.* A promis acum cinci ani că vom trăi bine şi economia este pe butuci.

"(…) Why I believe that the Romanian people will not vote for Traian Băsescu: first of all, because he was a permanent source of scandal and disunion. Because he failed in fulfilling all of the promises made to the Romanian nation. He made a promise five years ago that life would be good and nowadays, the economy draws its last breath.

(2) *Oricând a fost într-o guvernare şi într-o alianţă, cel care cere astăzi un nou mandat* ***şi-a înjunghiat pe la spate partenerii*** *(...) de aceea* ***un om care nu are cuvânt şi un om care îşi trădează alianţele şi prieteniile nu poate să fie un conducător al acestei ţări.*** *Şi mai ales pentru că nu s-a ridicat o clipă deasupra* ***interesului propriu de putere şi asupra interesului de partid****.*

"Every time he was in governance or in an alliance, the one who asks today for a new mandate, stabbed his partners in the back (…) this is why a man who isn't trustworthy and betrays his alliances and his friends cannot be the leader of this country. And, most of all, because he never rose above his personal interest of power and above the interests of the party."

(3) *Sper în această seară ca cel care a intrat în finală alături de mine, domnul Băsescu, să nu apeleze la mijloace şi la atacuri personale şi la modul în care a conceput această campanie* ***care s-a bazat pe minciună, pe atacuri personale, pe atacuri la familie.***

"I hope that this evening, the one sitting next to me in the final round, Mr. Băsescu, will not appeal to means and personal attacks and to the way in which he conceived this campaign which was based on lies, personal attacks and attacks towards my family."

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B. Băsescu (about Geoană):

(4) **Moderator:** *Domnule Băsescu, vă rog să ne spuneți de ce nu l-ați vota pe domnul Mircea Geoană pentru a deveni Preşedintele României*?
Băsescu: *Nu l-aş vota pe Geoană dintr-un motiv simplu:* ***este un om slab****.(...)* ***Un om care nu este pe picioarele lui*** *nu poate fi partenerul poporului Român*.

Moderator: "Mr. Băsescu, please tell us why you would not vote for Mr. Mircea Geoană for becoming the President of Romania?"
Băsescu: "I wouldn't vote for Geoană for one simple reason: he is a weak man (…) A man that cannot stand on his own two feet cannot become the partner of the Romanian people."

(5) *Cred că Mircea Geoană nu poate fi preşedintele României şi din alt motiv:* ***nu este un om sincer****. (...) Dânsul* ***este ca un cameleon care se adaptează în funcție de cum bate vântul.***

"I believe that there is another reason why Mircea Geoană cannot be the President of Romania: he is not an honest man (…) He is like a chameleon, who adapts to the direction in which the wind blows."

The list of anti-qualities put forward by the political figures has the purpose of challenging the credibility of the opponent and of convincing the audience to support the speaker's claims and their political agendas. Words and expression like *totală subordonare* (total subordination) when describing the Prime Minister's role in the leadership of the country, associated with the emphatic construction such as *dominarea completă a Preşedintelui* (the complete dominance of the President) are used by Mircea Geoană as a way of describing a lack of equilibrium between state powers that can have negative influence on looking out for the primary interest of the Romanian people. As seen in the examples above, the participants in the debate deliberately use normative arguments as to discredit their opponent. When constructing arguments, they select from the topical potential, instances of speech that have the role of discrediting their opponents' personal image, professional accomplishments and political affiliations.

As such, emphasis plays a fundamental role in accompanying the speech act and contributing to the arguments brought forth by the candidates. Although the factual information and empirical evidence to support these claims is often inexistent, the potential of achieving a desired effect and the strategic use of these lexical markers should be taken into consideration.

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6. Inconsistency and dissociation in presidential debates

The last part of the paper will offer an example of how strategic maneuvering is successfully or unsuccessfully used by the participants. I have decided to look at some forms of strategic maneuvering that occur when the image or standpoint of the candidate is challenged by the opponent. In the case of political debates, one particular strategy is often used by speakers when responding to an accusation of inconsistency. The following sub-chapter lists two examples in which, when accused of inconsistency, both candidates made use of the available topical potential for the purpose of employing strategic maneuvering.

As such, one unsuccessful use of strategic maneuvering is provided by the following example:

(6) **Băsescu despre Geoană**: *Îşi afirmă principiile dar le încalcă imediat ce are ocazia să le încalce. Să vă dau un exemplu: a scris o carte acum câteva luni în care face praf cota unică la pagina 68. Iar zilele trecute a semnat cu Crin Antonescu un acord prin care menţine cota unică.*
Geoană (interevenind) [ironic]: *Şi când am semnat cu PDL şi am păstrat cota unică nu era scrisă cartea?*
Moderator: *Domnule Geoană vă rog să vă abţineţi! Domnule Geoană, vă rog!*

Băsescu about Geoană: "He affirms his principles but defies them as soon as he has the chance. Let me give you an example: several months ago he wrote a book in which he tears down the quota at page 68. A few days ago he signed an agreement with Crin Antonescu in which he maintains the quota."
Geoană (interevening) [ironically]: "And when I signed with PDL and maintained the quota, wasn't the book already written?"
Moderator: "Mr. Geoană, please restrain yourself! Please, Mr. Geoană!"

In this particular situation, Traian Băsescu (who in this case is the antagonist) accuses his opponent of inconsistency. The preconditions imposed by the type of discourse (which restricted the intervention of the other candidate in this particular debating stage) did not allow Geoană (the protagonist) to defend his position. He is able to suggest that the decision taken days before (as stated by his opponent) was supported a few years ago by the protagonist when he decided to vote in favor of the issue. However, the moderator intervenes and does not offer the candidate the possibility to develop his argument and to construct his own strategies of protecting his standpoint. This example proves the importance of the preconditions and contextual restrictions that can play a fundamental role in successfully applying strategic maneuvering in political debates.

A successful form of strategic maneuvering, however, is achieved by Traian Băsescu when accused of favoritism and inconsistency by his political opponent:

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(7) **Geoană despre Băsescu**: *Exact acum 5 ani aproape zi cu zi la confruntarea de dinainte de turul doi cu Adrian Năstase îi spuneați acestuia că Domnul Oprea este hoțul hoților (...) Acum îl vedeți drept cel mai bun paznic la stână.*
Păi logica asta de selecție a cadrelor, domnule Băsescu, înseamnă că mâine poimâine, Vanghelie, un gospodar la primăria Sectorului 5 îl propuneți candidat de prim-ministru sau dacă sufletelul doamnei Oprea vă spune ceva o puneți prim-minstru pe doamna Oprea...pe doamna Udrea pentru că în astfel de logică nu puteți să conduceți o țară.
Băsescu: *Am la dumneavoastră rugămintea, dacă este posibil bineînțeles, să respectăm femeile. Sunteți de acord?*

Geoană about Băsescu : "On this day, five years ago, every day before the second tour of elections, you told Adrian Năstase that Mr. Oprea is the worst of thieves (…) Now you see him as the best keeper of the sheepfold."
"Well, this logic for candidate selection, Mr. Băsescu, means that soon after, you will nominate Vanghelie, a household name of the City Hall's Sector no.5, for prime-minister or if the heart's desire of Mrs. Oprea resonates with you… Mrs. Udrea; because this type of logic impedes you to run a country. "
Băsescu: "I am asking you if it's possible, of course, to respect women. Do you agree?"

As observed in the example above, Băsescu is accused by Geoană of inconsistency and as a response, the candidate chooses to dissociate himself from the problem and selects the topical potential that best suits his needs. In this case, the speaker prefers to choose dissociation as his best line of defense. This is dialogically achieved through the use of humor. As such, when accused by his opponent of inconsistency (in the case of Oprea) and favoritism (in the case of Udrea) he decides not to protect his standpoint using counter-arguments as a defensive strategy, but rather to use his communicative competences as to shift the attention from the ongoing issue. The candidate is able to use humor and to take out of the topical potential, the gender of the candidate that he is accused of favoring. As a response, he asks Geoană to respect the opposite sex thus shifting the attention from the ongoing issue and ending that particular confrontational stage.

7. Conclusion

It is difficult to establish the extent to which the use of rhetorical strategies and argumentative maneuvering have the intended effect and work in the favor of the opponent. Without empirical evidence to verify how the demands of the audiences are met/ modified by these mechanisms, we can only prove that these integral

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elements of public speaking may hold significant power and may influence the way that people perceive them. A better understanding of how these strategies may be incorporated in speech acts may provide a more accurate understanding of the way the message itself is constructed by the speakers and could determine people to disregard normative aspects brought forth by public figures and focus more on factual data and information that are often deliberately discarded by speakers.

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