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Presidential discourse analysis: Irony and sarcasm in pre-election debates

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This paper proposes a simple exercise of discourse analysis. It focuses on presidential discourse, namely the speeches of the finalists in the most recent elections in the US (2016) and France (2017) during the final pre-election debates. Passages have been selected and submitted to an analysis that highlights the humorous aspects of language use, namely irony and sarcasm. The analysis is based on the principle of contrastiveness. The selected utterances will be looked at from two points of view: the original version containing the humorous component and an imaginary version discharged of the component. The aim of this approach is to observe the differences engendered by the humorous (ironic, sarcastic) aspects of speech in interaction, as opposed to neutral language use.

Keywords: *discourse analysis, presidential discourse, irony, sarcasm.*

1. Introduction

Major political events worldwide have drawn the attention of linguists as never before, particularly when it comes to understanding how public political figures use the most powerful weapon in their arsenal to gain public support: words. With the aim of defeating their opponents and seducing their audience of potential voters, candidates for the position of chief of state make abundant use of linguistic procedures meant to serve these purposes, while presenting themselves in a positive light.

Humour is a convenient way to achieve these objectives, as it allows for the bombardment of 'the other' and provides a pleasant performance at the same time. In this 'science of verbal manipulation', numerous strategies are employed to produce specific effects. From the different humorous acts, those that best suit the aims of candidates in presidential pre-election debates are irony and sarcasm (Charaudeau 2013b). Under the appearance of positive evaluation meant to

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generate a pleasant emotion, the candidates are actually attacking and trying to disqualify each other, as well as convince the public to share their views.

Irony and sarcasm are driven by different mechanisms and have varied effects within interactions. In this paper, I propose an analysis of the most popular aspects of verbal humour found in presidential discourse. I extracted my corpus from the speeches of the finalists in the most recent elections in the US (2016) and France (2017), namely the final pre-election debates.

2. Method

In this analysis, I selected relevant sequences of speech, which I extracted from the filmed debates, all fully available on youtube.com. These passages have been transcribed and subjected to a form-function type of analysis (Gee 1999, 54), looking for patterns of speech and links across them, in order to formulate a valid hypothesis about the most common strategies used to convey irony and sarcasm.

As an exercise, I proposed an analysis based on a principle of contrastiveness, namely a double assessment of the selected utterances. First, I focused on the original formulation, giving special attention to the +ironic component; second, I attempt to discharge the utterance of the ironic component, bring it to a neutral formulation, and reimagine it in a –ironic formula. Then, I analysed the differences from the point of view of the ironic contribution to the interaction.

My kit of inquiry tools contained the various associations between literal and intended meaning, the different equations determining the construction of different humorous acts and strategies, intertextuality, conversations, etc.

The exercise consisted of identifying, noting, classifying, interpreting and comparing the various uses of verbal humour in this genre of discourse from the point of view of a contrastive ± ironic feature. I have mostly focused on linguistic elements and some paralinguistic elements, leaving non-linguistic aspects out for this phase of my research. In the analysis of the data, I made use of the theoretical framework I have chosen to work with, applying it both for the classification and interpretation of humorous speech acts.

Therefore, I intend to see how irony and sarcasm are used as recurrent humorous strategies in presidential speech, in what manner they contribute to the construction of a charismatic image of the candidates and in what ways their absence affects these strategies and images.

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3. Theoretical framework

The long tradition of studies on irony and its related fields, of which sarcasm is the most popular, has shown that they could not easily, if at all, be isolated into clear, exact, separate definitions. Attempts to justify complex terminological distinctions have proven to be "bound to crumble at the first close examination" (Attardo 2002, 167). Irony has the greatest number of definitions, considered either in opposition to humour, or encompassing all humorous acts (Charaudeau 2006). However, there are specific keywords that have for decades orbited the concept of humour.

Humour, as the umbrella term for all things laughable (Martin 2007), traditionally comes out of a contrast and provokes laughter as a correction (Bergson 1924). In the case of humour in words, or verbal humour, it is created from the relationship between what is thought and what is said (Charaudeau 2013b). Depending on the nature of this association, there are different types of verbal humour.

3.1. Irony and sarcasm

One predominant theory states that verbal irony happens where a speaker says something that seems to be the opposite of what they meant (Gibbs and Colston 2007). Etymologically, to be ironic means "to pretend", prefiguring the idea of distance or even opposition between the thought and the action; to be ironic means to detach oneself (Jankélévich 1964, 18).

Irony is an antiphrastic generic expression of praise for blame (Muecke 1970). It can engender multiple types of antiphrastic expressions like ironic agreements, insincere politeness, thanks or excuses, all based on pragmatic insincerity (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2013). In addition to the antiphrastic theory, other strategies of irony have been produced, including the famous echo theory, according to which irony can be communicated through rhetorical questions, ambiguity, quotations or allusions, also based on pragmatic insincerity (Sperber and Wilson 1996). Irony has a specific target and consists of any form of verbal attack containing something "pleasant" in its formulation (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2013), but rather unpleasant for the target. In the case of irony, between what is thought and what is said there is a clear relation of opposition (Charaudeau 2013b).

The concept of sarcasm is related, through its etymology, to bitterness. It is found in the literature relative to irony. It may be described as an extended form of

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irony, using literally positive words to express intended negative meanings (Gibbs and Colston 2007, 12), an overtly aggressive type of irony (Attardo 2000, 795), a sharp ironic utterance designed to cut or give pain (Merriam-Webster.com). Scholars do not completely agree upon whether irony and sarcasm are essentially the same thing, or differ significantly (Attardo 2000, 795). While many authors believe the former, some advance theories towards a clear, almost mathematical distinction between the two. According to Charaudeau (2013b), irony opposes what is thought and what is said, while sarcasm exaggerates what is thought in what is said. Therefore, in irony we have a *relation of opposition* while in sarcasm there is a *relation of hyperbolization* between what is thought and what is said. The positive words hiding a negative intended meaning function differently in irony and sarcasm, and they do not produce the same effects within the interaction (Charaudeau 2013a).

Irony and sarcasm are considered the most popular types of humour used in political debates, particularly presidential debates, as, in this genre, we are almost exclusively dealing with targeted, offensive humour, aimed to negatively impact an opponent (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2013). In achieving the aims of destroying the enemy but creating a charming image of oneself, irony and sarcasm have proven the most suitable, useful and popular strategies used by participants in this genre of discourse.

3.2. Irony and sarcasm in presidential debates

It is a popular phenomenon of linguistic research that the concepts one is working with may fluctuate depending on the genre of discourse chosen for analysis. Humour naturally takes extremely different shapes depending on the type of interaction. For example, irony, as a form of instrumental humour (Morreall 2005, 74), is exploited as a strategic means in political speeches for the purpose of dominance through language (Sperber and Wilson 1996), a powerful tool used by politicians to gain public support. The final debates between presidential candidates have become a certain kind of ritual, taking place every four or five years, in a formal setting, with specific rules of speaking in turns, respecting the "presidential ethos" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2013), etc. These debates are almost always turned into war zones where the opponents fight against each other ruthlessly with the most "powerful weapons" they can make using "the right words" (Jankélévich 1964).

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Their aim is to disqualify the opponent and seduce the audience; to reach their goals, they resort to emotion. Humour is one way to arouse emotion in a way that creates pleasure and complicity with the audience. Irony and sarcasm, although targeted to offend and destroy the opponent, have a "pleasant component" which is used for the creation of this humorous connivance between the (ironic) candidate and the public. This attempts to engage the public in a personal "inner circle" of the speaker, transforming them into a partner in the destruction of the opponent.

In this genre of discourse, the humorous act, composed of ironic and sarcastic expressions, is played among three participants: the speaker, the opponent or target and the audience. They all engage in an interesting game of language, with the dramatic stake of who will be granted the next presidential mandate.

4. Irony and sarcasm in the selected corpus

4.1. Final US presidential election debate, 19 October 2019

The phrases subjected to analysis were extracted from the final debate between the candidates for the presidency of the United States of America: the Republican nominee, Donald Trump (DT), and the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton (HC). The debate took place on 19 October 2016, in Las Vegas, and was moderated by the journalist Chris Wallace of Fox News.

Less than 30 minutes into the debate, one of the most controversial subjects that had intrigued people who were following the US presidential election campaign worldwide came up: immigration. The so-called "open borders" policy, supported by HC and considered "a disaster" by DT, was the subject of some seven minutes of dispute. It was alleged that HC had stated that she wanted open borders and open trade in a paid speech that she was trying to keep secret, but which was revealed by WikiLeaks. When "open borders" and their effects came up, HC shifted the discussion to the subject of Russian espionage against Americans, forcing DT to take a stand against this national security issue. The reference to the Russian President Vladimir Putin generated extra strained talk between the candidates, who then hurled direct insults at each other. I propose the following extract for analysis:

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HC: Finally will Donald Trump admit and condemn that the Russians are doing this and make it clear that he will not have the help of Putin in this election, that he rejects Russian espionage against Americans, which he actually encouraged in the past?
DT: *That was a great pivot off the fact that she wants open borders. How did we get onto Putin?* […] She wants open borders, now we can talk about Putin. Putin, from everything I see, has no respect for this *person*.
HC: Well, that's because *he'd rather have a puppet as president* of the United States, it is pretty clear.
DT: No puppet! No puppet! You're the puppet! […] No, you're the puppet![2]

4.1.1.That was a great pivot off the fact that she wants open borders.

The first reaction by DT here is a classical "praise to blame" expression of irony (Muecke 1970). It is obvious that the message uttered by DT was meant to blame HC for having undertaken a devious attention shift, in order to get herself off the shaky ground of the "open borders". Still, the message was constructed as praise for a number of reasons. Here, we are dealing with an unambiguous opposition between the thought and the utterance.

The +ironic feature of the utterance is given by the word *great*. In a –ironic construction, the utterance would sound something like: *That was a pivot off the fact that she wants open borders.* So, why "[…] a *great* pivot off […]" and not simply "[…] a pivot off […]"? According to several scholars (Morreal 2005, Gibbs and Colston 2007), in a political debate humour is connected to conflict and has the role of softening the aggressive nature of the attacks launched by the participants. Also, humour removes barriers, assuring the faster and easier understanding of the messages uttered. Politicians make use of humour with the aim of disqualifying their opponent, creating some kind of affiliation with the audience and gaining their support in the upcoming election (Charaudeau 2013b).

Trump "praised to blame" Clinton's strategy of changing the problematic subject, through an expression packed with pragmatic insincerity. As the language of praise is rarely used in debates between presidential candidates unless it has hidden meaning (Charaudeau 2013b), the "*great* pivot off the fact that she wants open borders" is actually an expression of disapproval and discontent with her

[2] Transcription of speech retrieved on 25 October 2019 from www.youtube.com, Third Presidential Debate: Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (Full Debate) | NBC News. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smkyorC5qwc&t=1693s

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approach, used in this formula to dissociate him from the idea of aggression with polite language. The absence of the ironic component would most probably highlight the critical nature of his utterance and the condemnation hidden within the intended negative meaning of his utterance, revealing him as an undesirably obtrusive and offensive person.

The whole issuance is spoken with a low pitch and slow tempo, elements which are clear paralinguistic features of irony, with a pitch prominence on "great pivot", generating a "watch this!" effect (Gibbs and Colston 2007).

The word order within the sentence is convergent to this effect. The theme of the sentence is "great pivot", while "open borders" is in the rheme of the sentence. What the speaker puts first in the order of a sentence will influence the interpretation of everything that follows (Brown and Yule 1983, 133), it is clear that the intention of this order was to expose the rhetorical trick she tried to pull off, nevertheless not leaving the actual subject, "open borders", out of the discussion.

With the ironic use of the word "great", DT tried to mock her grandiloquence, to reduce her whole story to worthless rhetoric (Charaudeau 2013b), in the aim of discrediting and disqualifying her in front of the audience. He restated that she wants open borders, bringing what he thinks of as a dangerous aspect of her political platform in front of the audience, and foregrounding the fact that she tried to deceive people by deviating their attention from this problem.

4.1.2.How did we get on to Putin?

Right after the ironic praise of having guilefully manoeuvred her way out of the "open border" subject, in a final attempt to ridicule HC on this occasion, DT ends his issuance with an interrogation, anaphoric to her intervention. "How did we get on to Putin?" is obviously an ironic question, as interrogating the interlocutor presupposes that one does not know the answer, which is certainly not the case here. There is clear opposition between what is spoken and what is thought, intending to point out the absurdity of the situation, and further, to win more credit for himself in the eyes of the public.

The +ironic component of this rhetorical question is given by the fact that the speaker is pretending to be ignorant and naïve in a matter where both are well acquainted. Here too, the "pleasant thing" in its formulation has the role of softening a rigid and rude remark that would remain after discharging the intervention of the pretended components. The candidate exposes this absurd situation to the public, the third and most important participant in the communicative act. He is trying to seduce his audience, so he would most probably

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not take the risk of doing it in a way that could associate him with disgraceful features, such as bad mouthing his opponent.

4.1.3. He'd rather have a puppet as president

The last part of the selected passage is a ping-pong of sarcastic words used with derogatory intentions. When the name of Putin surfaces, inferring a suspicious connection between him and DT, Trump does not seem to invest any effort in denying that complicity. On the contrary, he attempts to turn the whole sequence against his target, HC, into another attempt to disqualify her. "Putin, from everything I see, has no respect for this *person*" foregrounds a sarcastic mechanism in the use of "person". Sarcasm exaggerates the thought (Charaudeau 2013a). The tone chosen to address the "person" that Putin has no respect for is a highly disparaging one, through its neutral nature, depriving the addressee of all the traits that qualified her as a candidate for the position of chief of state, starting with her name. It suggests insignificance and transmits contempt. There is a scornful connivance that he is trying to create with his supporters and the entire audience through this bitter humorous act, trying to make them share his feelings about her.

An instant response from HC is launched to explain the sensation of intimacy between Putin and Trump that resulted from his earlier remark and translate it into the statement that Trump is actually beholden to Putin. She is also providing an interpretation of the lack of respect that Putin was said to have for her, and his obvious affection for her opponent. "Well, that's because *he'd rather have a puppet as president* of the United States, it is pretty clear" is her sarcastic way of saying a number of things. First, Putin has no respect for her because she is not a puppet, therefore he respects her opponent precisely because he is a puppet, since that is what "he'd rather have". The joyful component in the connotation of "puppet" has the power to bring that "pleasant thing" of humour from her attack on the opponent, placing her in a triumphant position in the eyes of the public.

4.2. France, "l'entre-deux-tours" presidential election debate, 3 May 2017

It is well-known that there is a different system for electing the president in France than in the US. As is common for many European countries, presidential elections take place in two rounds, a first round in which all the candidates compete for votes, and a second in which, assuming that nobody received more than half of the

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votes in the first round, the top two contenders face each other in a final confrontation. Before the second round, a final presidential pre-election debate takes place, the famous "entre-deux-tours" debate.

The "entre-deux-tours" debate is a proper discursive genre in itself. It is a sort of ritual with strict rules concerning the formal aspects of the debate, and implicit rules concerning discourse, namely the use of humour and irony (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2013). According to the same source, discourse in this genre goes almost exclusively in the direction of self-promotion and the disqualification of the opponent. One of the most popular strategies used to achieve this goal is humour, which is mostly offensive and targeted at the opponent. Still, this verbal war needs to be handled with care, given the formal setting of the debate and the high stakes of the election, so the use of humour should be compatible with the "presidential ethos".

On 3 May 2017, the final presidential pre-election debate took place in France between the pro-European Union candidate Emanuel Macron (EM) and the far-right nationalist Marine Le Pen (MLP). The international press has repeatedly stated that this most recent "entre-deux-tours" reached a milestone as the country's most verbally violent presidential debate in history. For this analysis, I have selected several lines from the first three minutes of the debate, which entailed an actual explosion of offensive humorous acts.

4.2.1. L'enfant chéri du système and thanks for the compliment

No further than the first second of debate, Marine Le Pen began to pick on her opponent, characterising him as a mostly inappropriate candidate for the presidential election. When taking his first turn, Macron utters an ironic "thanks".

> MLP: Les français ont pu voir le vrai Macron dans ce second tour […] *l'enfant chéri du système et des élites*. En réalité a tombé le masque, monsieur Macron, voila, c'est bien, je trouve que c'est utile, on a vu, les choix que vous avez fait dans ce second tour, des choix cyniques […] Cette période […] a été profondément utile aux français pour faire un choix.
> EM: Ecoutez, vous avez démontré que vous n'êtes en tout cas pas la candidate de l'esprit de finesse, de la volonté d'un débat démocratique, équilibré et ouvert. *Merci pour cette belle démonstration que vous venez de faire, madame Le Pen,* je ne m'attendais pas à autre chose.

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> MLP: The French people could see the real Macron in this second round, the beloved baby of the system and the elites. In reality, the mask has fallen, Mr. Macron, see, it is good, I think it is useful, as we have seen, the choices you have made in this second round, cynical choices. This period was extremely useful to the French people to make a choice.
> EM: Listen, you have proved that you are definitely not a candidate with a spirit of *finesse*, with the will for a democratic, balanced and open debate. Thank you for this beautiful demonstration that you have just staged, Madame Le Pen, I would not have expected anything else. (Translation my own)

In her first attempt to ridicule EM, MLP puts a grin on her face, softens her voice and calls her opponent "enfant chéri", associating him with what she promotes as two evil characters of the French society: the system and the elites. Spoken with an affectionate pitch glide, "l'enfant chéri" becomes a ridiculous person who has not reached the age of maturity. The vocal affect of MLP approaches that of a mother towards an infant, highlighting the contrast between her maturity and reliability and his lack of these qualities, due to his younger age and inexperience. This attitude is left implicit, to be gathered only from the tone of her voice, a characteristic of irony (Sperber and Wilson 1996).

The +ironic component of this utterance is made of the words "enfant chéri" combined with the paralinguistic features. The opposition between the thought and the expression is clear, both at a linguistic and at a paralinguistic level. Discharging the utterance of the +ironic component would transform it into an insult, that she could not afford to say openly in front of the audience, as it would have turned her into a cold, mean, offensive person. "L'enfant chéri du système et des élites" translated back into the intended meaning would actually refer to a "product of the system and elites", somebody who made their way into the world on the back of these entities. Depriving it of the affectionate voice would turn it into an even colder utterance, issued by an even colder speaker, undermining the credibility of her cause and image.

When his turn came, EM attempted to deconstruct her previous statements and complete the whole process with a conspicuously polite but partly insincere thanks. Partly, because on the one hand, he could insincerely thank his opponent for the "belle démonstration" of humiliating him, and on the other hand he could sincerely thank her for having made a fool of herself with her speech so far. In either case, the "pleasant thing" is identifiable with the humorous and polite components of his utterance.

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4.2.2. […] les autres y arrivent, mais pas nous

The next sequence illustrates another classical example of irony, one belonging to the famous echo theory (Sperber and Wilson 1996). For an instant, EM transposes himself in the role of MLP and presents a parody of the ideas she defended throughout her campaign. It is a fabricated quotation using an ironic tone, meant to expose the ridiculous things she has actually expressed.

> EM: Ce que vous portez c'est l'esprit de défaite "*C'est trop dur la mondialisation pour nous* […] *on va fermer les frontières, on va sortir de l'euro, de l'Europe, parce que les autres y arrivent mais pas nous*". C'est l'esprit de défaite dans la lutte contre le terrorisme, parce que cette lutte, tous les pays développés l'ont, toutes les démocraties ont à la conduire, mais vous, vous dites "non".
>
> EM: You are carrying a spirit of defeat. "Globalisation is too tough for us […] we will close the borders, we will exit the Euro, Europe, because the others can do it, but not us". It is the spirit of defeat in the fight against terrorism, because this fight, all the developed countries have it, all democracies need to take it, but you, you say "no".

This utterance pretends to be a literal interpretation of MLP's entire platform, with a pitch prominence on "dur" and "pas nous". Combined with a +ironic discrete whining tone, the utterance quickly reaches the ridiculous note aimed by the speaker. Out of this "humorous mode" and back into a "serious" one, the words spoken would actually share a quite disturbing message for the French people, along the lines of "we cannot handle globalisation, we are exiting the Euro, Europe, because this is too much for us". Based on the feeling of derision, EM is creating a kind of humorous connivance with the audience, and the clear effect of his initiative is, yet again, to disqualify his opponent and to gain personal credit, while attracting the people to his side, trying to make them share his ideas, opposed to the "ridiculous ones" belonging to MLP.

4.2.3. […] vous ne proposez rien

Another classical example of irony is exposed in the next passage. After a long series of attacks targeted at him, EM interrupts his opponent with the aim of stopping and exposing her nonsense with an exaggerated remark highlighting that

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her attacks are nothing but an attention shift from the fact the she has no strategy of her own:

> MLP: Tout ce qui vise à donner un avantage dans la commande publique à nos entreprises françaises, vous êtes contre, parce qu'il faut se soumettre, vous êtes en fait à la France qui se soumet […].
> EM: *Ca fait donc à peu près trois minutes que madame Le Pen nous explique sa stratégie pour lutter contre le chômage en France* […] vous ne proposez rien.

> MLP: Any advantage in the public command of our French companies, you are against, because you must submit, actually you are of the submitted France […]
> EM: It is for around three minutes that Mme Le Pen explains to us her strategy of fighting unemployment in France […] you propose nothing.

Actually, what he is trying to expose is the fact that except for picking on him, she has no solution whatsoever to the real problems of the state, i.e. unemployment. While MLP only spoke about him, EM is "explaining" what she is trying to communicate in an ironic way, pointing at the fact that "sa stratégie" does not exist. Without the +ironic component, this utterance would have been a simple denunciation of her lack of vision concerning complex issues. "You have no strategy" could have been attributed to the personal negative feelings the speaker holds against his opponent, discrediting him in front of the audience.

4.2.4. […] mais c'est normal […] on comprend, hein?

The next example is one of classical irony foregrounding an apparent approval and backgrounding a hidden message of contempt. One of the strongest accusations of MLP against EM was his supportive attitude towards the rich.

In this passage, after having spoken about how he protects his favourites, MLP suddenly takes on the role of an ostensibly sincere empathic comrade:

> MLP: Vous, vous facilitez une fois de plus la vie de grands groups. *Mais c'est normal, ce sont vos amis, c'est ceux avec qui vous buvez des coups à la rotonde, on comprend, hein?*

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> MLP: You, you are facilitating the life of big groups again. But it is normal, they are your friends, they are your drinking buddies, we can understand that, right?

"Mais c'est normal" and "on comprend" clearly state a relation of opposition between the thought and the utterance. For her it is neither normal nor understandable to protect wealthy companies, but in her attempt to ridicule him, she resorts to this kind of apparent positive evaluation, again, packed with pragmatic insincerity. Discharged of the +ironic component, this utterance would be a bare critique of class differences and the abuse of equality. The fake empathy softens the effect of condemnation and through the humorous component of its ridiculous nature lets the message reach the real receiver more easily and efficiently.

5. Conclusions

This article presents a simple exercise of discourse analysis based upon a corpus of several lines of speech extracted of the most recent final pre-election debates in the US and France. The analysis is focused on aspects of irony and sarcasm and is set within the framework of a principle of contrastiveness.

In the approach of these two theoretical notions, irony and sarcasm, I have followed a direction that clearly differentiates between them, rather than one that claims they are essentially the same thing (Attardo 2000; Muecke 1970). Briefly, my analysis relies on the simple, almost mathematical formulas of defining irony and sarcasm, namely that irony *opposes* what is thought and what is said, while sarcasm *exaggerates* what is thought in what is said (Charaudeau 2013b). They are both fit under the umbrella of humour, due to the "pleasant" thing present in their formulation (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2013)

The corpus is looked at from two points of view, considering the presence and imagining the absence of the humorous components in speech. In both versions, the analysis applies the chosen theoretical framework for the identification, explanation, classification and interpretation of the data.

In the case of the aforementioned debates, we almost exclusively deal with offensive humour, of which the most popular categories are irony and sarcasm. These are used as instruments of combat (against the opponent) and seduction (of the public). It is interesting to observe the way in which each of the participants in the debates is engaged in the use of these linguistic and rhetoric tricks. They have

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the same objectives, use approximately the same strategies, but develop a personal style. In the case of Donald Trump, for example, the press have even mentioned the appearance of a new linguistic phenomenon: the Trump style. With closer attention to the speeches of all the participants in the final presidential debates, to each can be attributed a personal style: their own personal discourse. Still, within this genre and beyond, much research is needed for the identification and investigation of the limits of irony and especially sarcasm, in language use.

As scholars have noted since the earliest studies in the field, the humorous component is used in speech as a means of correction: it signals and tries to rectify that "particular inadaptation of a person to society" (Bergson 1924, 135). Of course, in the case of the genre of discourse chosen for analysis in this article, one cannot exclusively speak of humour as means of correction, as it is rather used for disqualifying the opponent, for boosting one's personal image and seducing the audience. The humorous component softens this whole process, which in recent years has become more and more a form of aggression. Humour helps the message reach the receiver faster and in a more pleasant way. The humourist creates pleasure and cheerfulness and, for that, he or she is rewarded with the positive perception of the audience, who may feel affinity for the ideas uttered in a humorous way.

Political debates and especially presidential debates are a micro-universe where humour is essential to the functioning of the entire phenomenon. Candidates to presidency have precise goals to achieve through their debate performance: they need to gain the support of the public and, finally, their votes to win the election. To achieve this goal, they almost ceaselessly put effort into the destruction of the opponent and the construction of a valid, positive personal image. The stakes are high and the rules are clear, so the means to reach the objective need to be handled with care in order not to attract undesirable effects detrimental to the initial aim, that of gaining public support.

Irony and sarcasm are priceless tools in the hands of finalists for presidential elections. Still, a precise conclusion hasn't yet been reached about how much of their success or failure is due to the use of these humorous linguistic acts. However, it is clear that skilfully handling humour and, in the end, a healthy sense of humour, are extremely helpful in building a desirable image in the media and more broadly.

The short exercise undertaken above has shown several aspects of the initial hypothesis. The use of humorous acts in presidential discourse, especially in final debates, reduces the stinginess of a conflictual addresser, helps the audience overlook his or her negative features and confers a more charismatic, pleasant and

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positive image upon the speaker. The absence of the humorous component in the same utterances would definitely decrease the audience's will to affiliate with the speaker, given the aggressive, inconsiderate and maybe selfish attitude they would otherwise show.

This is an incipient phase of what intends to be a broader project on presidential discourse analysis. The study also intends to include Romanian presidential discourse. At the time this article was written, scheduling could not permit the inclusion of the Romanian election, forthcoming in November 2019, alongside the pre-election debates between the finalists.

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