

“POSITIVE” STRATEGIES IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

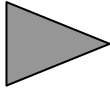
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Introduction

The present article starts from the premise that, generally speaking, political discourse relies on a set of invariable rules, and that political actors behave in the same way, regardless of their nationality or of their immediate purpose. The long-term goal of any politician is access to power; therefore, his / her behavior is always oriented along given lines.

For the purpose of this paper, I have used the situation of a direct confrontation between two political actors; I start from the assumption that there are three main categories of strategies that politicians resort to: *positive* strategies (where the protagonist appeals to self-assertion), *negative* strategies (where they prefer to criticize the opponent(s)), and “*neutral*” strategies, which play on the emotions of the audience (potential electors). In the following pages, I shall focus mainly on the positive strategies. As an illustration of the theoretical background, I shall use extracts taken from two major electoral confrontations: the first Bush – Kerry presidential debate in the USA and the Nastase-Basescu debate in Romania, both taking place in 2004 with a view to winning the presidential elections.

As I have already said, positive strategies involve an appeal to self-assertion, without any explicit attacks against the opponent (although the three main classes of strategies rarely appear independently; they occur mostly in hybrid forms, therefore an utterance falling into the category of positive strategies might happen to exhibit fragments of indirect attacks, for instance). However, we can basically say that the main types of positive strategies in political discourse are the following:



Argumentation to support one's point of view

This strategy appeals to reason instead of emotion. This type of discourse is mainly informative; precise data and facts are brought into discussion, usually to support a promise of some kind. We notice that this strategy appears both in the speech of candidates who are already in power and running for a second mandate in public office, and in the one of candidates of the opposition, aiming at replacing the former in the oncoming elections. The only difference is that, while the former link the accuracy of the data they put forward to the fact that they already hold power, thus pleading for **continuity**, the latter emphasize the things which could be accomplished if the present power were replaced by a better one. Thus, they plead for **change**. Therefore, by using this technique, the speech of the candidates who hold power stick to a conservative approach, while the opposition candidates support a reformist view. The strategy is efficient, since informative discourse always suggests the speaker's objectivity – they know what they are talking about, they know what the problems are and how to solve them.

Example 1.

John Kerry:

- a. I have a better plan for homeland security. I have a better plan to be able to fight the war on terror by strengthening our military, strengthening our intelligence, by going after the financing more authoritatively, by doing what we need to do to rebuild the alliances, by reaching out to the Muslim world,
- b. which the president has almost not done (...).

The excerpt above illustrates the fact that the informative level does not stand on its own; it can be backed up by a direct attack supporting the indirect one. Example 1

par. a, the actual promise, carries the conversational implicature that the opponent does not have a viable plan for homeland security, that he does not obtain good financing, that his position has undermined the established alliances; par. b. shifts criticism from the status of implicature (Grice, 1989) to the status of entailment (Yule, 1996). In other words, from the deep structure of the text, the attack moves towards the surface structure.

Example 2.

George W. Bush:

So I went to the United Nations. (...) They passed the resolution that said, "Disclose, disarm, or face serious consequences."

If we study the two examples above, we see that although the argumentation strategy appears in both candidates' speeches, Kerry resorts to it in order to justify his promises (his approach is thus future-oriented) whereas Bush applies the same strategy to justify his past actions (his approach, therefore, can be labeled as past-oriented, or even past-justifying). Of course, there are situations when the president *en titre* presents a future-oriented view, but usually his arguments are also based on earlier actions:

Example 3.

George W. Bush:

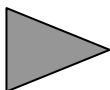
(...) Because we achieved such a rapid victory, (...) we thought we'd whip more of them going in. We've got a plan in place. The plan says there will be elections in January, and there will be. The plan says we'll train Iraqi soldiers so they can do the hard work, and we are. (...) There's going to be a summit of the Arab nations. Japan will be hosting a summit. We're making progress. It is hard work.

Consequently, we should not be surprised to see that, in the speech of the candidate running for the second time, future-related promises are invariably linked to past achievements (or to what the speaker thinks are past achievements). This underlies the idea of continuity, omnipresent in the speech of candidates already holding power.

Generally speaking, the strategy of *argumentation* relies on the narration of facts, events or situations which speakers feel favor them. "Like with any discursive act, the prerequisite for producing narration is the dialogic principle – intentionality is



activated - on the one hand as a reaction to the presence of an interlocutor; on the other hand, to obtain a reaction in the latter. (...) Narration is firstly an argumentation technique (in favor of a certain event continuity) and therefore a credibility strategy enabling the emitter to change reality relying on a causality theory (conscious / unconscious, individual / collective); (...) the persuasive force of any narration consists in suspending the dialogic sequence in order to enforce a monologic practice of manipulation (Adam, 1992).”



Self-assertion

What can be described as the art of suggesting self-confidence, self-assertion is the technique by means of which speakers display confidence in their qualities without feeling the need to supply arguments to support their position. The strategy is overwhelming in political discourse; in order to gain other people’s confidence, you have to show that you trust yourself and the political faction you stand for; thus, it is wrong to give the impression of insecurity, to hesitate or to imply that your opponent has the slightest chance to win. We shall exemplify the presence of this strategy by using excerpts from the speeches of Romanian politicians.

Example 4.

Adrian Năstase:

The presidential administration is strong if the President of Romania is a strong man. I have proved, both when I was leading the party and when I was head of the government, that I am a strong man.

Example 5.

Traian Băsescu:

(...) clearly, the presidential institution has to be extremely strong. Consequently, I shall reorganize it and lend it the status that it has to have.

The two excerpts above show us the two Romanian presidential candidates expressing their opinion that the institution they seek to lead needs to be **strong**. Strength, therefore, is the key value in this context (institutional strength, of course). Adrian Nastase, the prime minister *en titre* at the moment of speech (therefore, the candidate of the party holding power) structures his statement under

the form of a simple syllogism, supplying both the major premise and the minor premise. The minor premise appears as a presupposition of the sentence ‘I have proved that I am a strong man’, and we have arguments to back it up (I have lead the party, and the government). Therefore, by inserting reasons meant to support the expressed self-confidence, the speaker mingles strategy 2 with strategy 1 above - *argumentation to support one’s point of view*. The conclusion of the syllogism could not have been more obvious: I am the right person to be elected President.

If we reconstruct the speaker’s reasoning, it appears as follows:

Major premise: The presidential administration is strong if the President of Romania is a strong man;

Minor premise: *I have proved that I am a strong man* presupposes *I am a strong man*;

Conclusion: I am the right person to occupy this position, therefore, elect me!

Not surprisingly however, the same conclusion seems to arise from the opponent’s discourse as well. His reasoning is also syllogistic, but a little more complex. We notice the major premise: *the presidential institution has to be extremely strong*. The modal verb replacement *has to* plays on ambiguity, appearing to imply that the institution in question is not strong at the moment of speech, as it should have been. The implicature is backed up by the next statement, to which it connects via a cause-effect relation: *Consequently, I shall reorganize it and lend it the status that it has to have*. The minor premise reiterates the form *have to*, with the same implicature (now, it lacks the proper status it needs). Also – and it is here that we think self-confidence surfaces most – although this minor premise ought to imply the statement *if I am elected, I shall restructure it*, thus generating the conclusion *elect me*, there is another possible reading of the passage, namely as an enthymeme, without the conditional sentence implicated by the minor premise, by means of which the candidate expresses his certainty that he will be elected. Thus, the fragment has two potential readings:

1. Major premise: the presidential institution has to be strong (implicature: but it is not);



Minor premise: if I am elected, I shall make it strong (the implicature is generated by *I shall reorganize it and lend it the status that it has to have.*)

Conclusion: I am the right person to occupy this position, therefore, elect me!

The second reading is bolder, since the candidate – if this second reading is accepted – appears to be certain that he will be elected:

2.

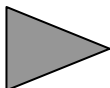
Major premise: the presidential institution has to be strong (implicature: but it is not);

Minor premise: I will be elected (premise implicated by the conclusion);

Conclusion: I will make the presidential institution strong (the implicature is triggered by *I shall reorganize it and lend it the status that it has to have.*)

Since the reading is ambiguous, it is not clear which of the two versions above one should settle for when interpreting the given fragment; however, in both cases – even if in the second this is more obvious than in the first – the candidate exhibits self-confidence. In the first situation, he appears to be certain that, if he wins the elections, he will be able to restructure one of the most important state institutions; in the second situation, he appears certain not only of the above, but also of the fact that he will win the elections. This second reading, though more remote, is far from impossible; political actors have to appear certain they will triumph, self-confidence brings about the electors' confidence.

As far as the candidate's intention to reorganize the Presidency goes, this is in perfect accordance with his status of opposition candidate. His position in the political arena forces him to a reformist approach.



Highlighting one's strong suits

This strategy appears either on its own, or together with highlighting the opponent's shortcomings. In this technique, speakers justify the outspoken self-confidence by putting forward their own advantages, the things they think they are good at, etc. The procedure is closely linked to, and often hard to distinguish from

strategy 1, *argumentation to support one’s point of view*. This technique also occurs both in the speech of the candidates already holding power, and in the speech of the ‘opposition’ candidates.

In example 4 above, as we have said, Adrian Nastase appears confident in his own capabilities; however, by bringing into discussion the fact that he has been head of the party and of the government, he unnoticeably shifts from strategy 2 to strategy 3, since he provides arguments (past accomplishments) to legitimate this self-confidence.

Example 6.

Traian Băsescu:

You probably don’t know that I have been Mayor of the Capital for some four years and a half.

Example 7.

Adrian Năstase:

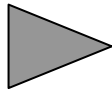
There, this is great news for the Romanians, the (accession) negotiations have been completed today, at the technical level.

In the two examples above, we see that each of the candidates puts forth those aspects they think are favorable to promote their own image. Băsescu’s utterance blatantly flouts the Quantity Maxim of Grice’s Cooperative Principle (Grundy, 1995), in that it brings no new information. Everyone was aware that that the speaker was Mayor of Bucharest back then, let alone his adversary – from the same perspective, the Informativity Principle (Beaugrande and Dressler, 1983) is flouted - but also the Quality Maxim via its irony (“you probably don’t know”). It is exactly this lack of informativity which tells us that the utterance is not meant to inform; it is meant to convey the implicit message that the speaker, as Mayor of Bucharest, knows what its inhabitants think only too well – and of course, particularly the target audience (elderly people).

In a completely different context, the other speaker, Adrian Năstase, emphasizes an aspect favorable to himself, namely the completion of the accession negotiations with the European Union. This is one of the main achievements of the candidate in



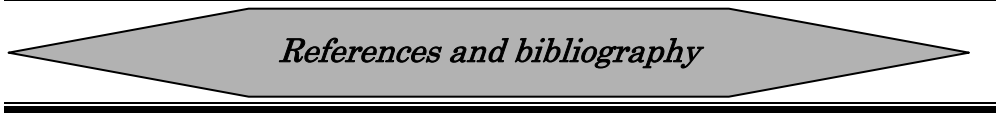
his electoral campaign, therefore he does not miss the opportunity of mentioning it when context suits him.



Final remarks

To end this discussion of what we have called positive strategies in political discourse, I have to say that it is usually difficult to draw a line between them. For instance, strategy 1 can often overlap (partially or totally) with strategy 3. This happens because when a candidate emphasizes aspects in their own past which they consider in their favor, they can back them up by means of argumentation, by conveying some past event or experience involving them. Also, a speaker can express self-confidence either as such, with no arguments, or by supplying explanations or justifications.

The above-mentioned facts lead us to conclude that the three types of positive strategies can occur both independently, each on its own, or in hybrid forms, overlapping with one another; here, I have tried to draw a general picture of the framework holding for those discourse strategies where a speaker promotes their own cause in a ‘positive’ way, that is, by praising their position without explicitly challenging or criticizing the opponent’s.



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