

THE STRATEGY OF COUNTERATTACKING IN ROMANIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The purpose of the present article is to provide an analysis of the Romanian political discourse; more precisely, we focus on the televised debate organised with a view to presidential elections. We intend to show how political actors attempt to reverse the attacks directed at them by applying a retaliatory strategy, one of launching an even stronger attack themselves. In order to do that, they always start by using the opponent's discourse tactic, developing it so as to appear in a good light and undermine the interlocutor's position.

Keywords: televised debate, counterattack, negative strategy, allegation, opponent

Introductory remarks

The present article belongs to a complex project, *Promisiunea politică* (*The Political Promise*, Scurtulescu, 2006); more precisely, it is based on the findings in the chapter „The political promise and discourse strategies in the direct televised confrontation”. The chapter draws a parallel between two electoral confrontations, organised with a view to the presidential elections: the final debate Adrian Năstase – Traian Băsescu (8 December 2004) in Romania and the first debate George W. Bush – John Kerry (1 October 2004) in the USA. However, for the purpose of the present article, we shall focus only on the Romanian situation, using examples taken from the confrontation between the two Romanian political figures.

When we tried to summarize the main strategies in the two candidates' discourse, we reached the conclusion that those strategies can be divided into three main categories: positive strategies (relying on a speaker who asserts himself without launching attacks against his opponent), negative strategies (which aim at undermining the adversary's position by attacking his ideology, his promises, and even his private persona) and neutral strategies (which are not exactly accurate, since this type of discourse is never neutral). In the present paper we shall focus on

the strategy of counterattacking, illustrating it by means of examples taken from the Romanian confrontation mentioned above.

Attack: the best form of defence

We say that a speaker counterattacks when he uses any negative strategy (a direct attack, an indirect attack, an attack using the opponent's strategies, or an attack of the opponent's weak spots), not at his own initiative, but in retaliation against a preceding attack from the adversary. Linguistically, counterattacking relies on *intertextuality* (Beaugrande and Dressler, 1983:10), namely the feature concerning those factors which make the use and understanding of a certain text dependent on having previously read one or more other texts. In order to interpret counterattacking, we must be aware of the initial attack.

Example 1:

- a. *A theoretical question. Do you think that... or, let me rephrase it: what do you think the effects would be for a country, if the President of Romania were liable to be blackmailed? Some of the effects that might emerge.* (Traian Băsescu)
- b. *Maybe I will tell you what I think would happen if the President of Romania were irresponsible.* (Adrian Năstase)
- c. *Liable to be blackmailed, of course, that depends on what you are referring to, we ought to speak about this a lot.* (Adrian Năstase)
- d. *As far as I am concerned, I am not liable to be blackmailed;* (Adrian Năstase)
- e. *if you are the one who is liable to be blackmailed, then it is you who will have to answer;* (Adrian Năstase)
- f. *as far as irresponsibility is concerned, I want to tell you that Romania cannot afford, now that we have embarked on a good path, we have succeeded in joining NATO, we have eliminated visas, today we have completed technical negotiations with the EU and we have the possibility to go along this path.* (Adrian Năstase)
- g. *For all these reasons, we cannot afford a president who only generates scandals, who generates crises. We need peace, we need responsibility...* (Adrian Năstase)
- h. *I was talking about a president who is liable to be blackmailed.* (Traian Băsescu)

The fragment above represents an outstanding illustration of the counterattacking strategy. In fragment (a), we notice the question coming from Traian Băsescu (candidate of the DA alliance), and the two alternative readings which can be attributed to it: on the one hand, there is an „innocent”, general reference reading; on the other hand, there is a second reading, that of an implicit, indirect attack, aimed directly at the opponent. In fact, the opponent instantly retaliates; his answer (b) shows us that he correctly chooses the second reading, the one of the indirect attack, to which he responds by using the same strategy – a general statement, with the possibility of an indirect attack interpretation. Thus, to the potential implicit allegation “you are liable to be blackmailed”, he responds by using the equally

slick accusation (also implicit): you are irresponsible. In fragment (c), the speaker delicately avoids conflict, returning to a general reading of (a), that of a president who is, generally speaking, liable to be blackmailed. Then, he moves on to (d), an opportunity to explicitly deny the hidden allegation in (a). By means of fragment (e), the allegation is aimed back at the opponent, the speaker thus denying any responsibility. Fragment (f) completes the counterattack; Năstase brings arguments to the claim in (b) (that his adversary is irresponsible), strengthening it, at the implicit level as well – his statements are still general, his target implied (g). Taking the floor again, in fragment (h), the first speaker tries to bring the discussion back to its original topic, that of a president who is liable to be blackmailed; however, he encounters the opponent's resistance – Năstase continues his discourse along the same lines.

In other words, the representative of the social-democrats retaliates; to a potential indirect allegation, he responds by a multi-layered strategy. He returns the allegation, then adds a new one, without however omitting the possibility that the question in (a) may be interpreted literally. He then continues by reasserting his own achievements and by a new potential indirect attack against the opponent, attack which ends the excerpt we have selected. In political discourse, attacking is always the best defence strategy.

Example 2:

- a. *Mr. Bănescu, in Mircea Dinescu's TV show on Realitatea TV, on the 23rd of November, you stated: "I do not need priests to believe in God, I do not need intermediaries."* (Adrian Năstase)
- b. *Your statement denies the Church its very reason for existence.* (Adrian Năstase)
- c. *Under the circumstances, I am asking you: How will you be able to be the President of a country that is 99% Christian?* (Adrian Năstase)
- d. *I think you are wrongly interpreting...* (Traian Bănescu)
- e. *All I did was quote you.* (Adrian Năstase)
- f. *In order to reach God,* (Traian Bănescu)
- g. *and in my profession, there was no church on the ship* (Traian Bănescu)
- h. *In order to reach God, you have to believe in God, primarily. It is the compulsory condition.* (Traian Bănescu)
- i. *There is no need for a sailor, or an aviator, or for people with risky jobs to have a church in order to do their job.* (Traian Bănescu)
- j. *It is enough to believe that there is something up there. That God exists.* (Traian Bănescu)
- k. *The important thing is to act like a man who believes in God* (Traian Bănescu)
- l. *not like a Godless man* (Traian Bănescu)
- m. *the way you treated the pensioners.* (Traian Bănescu)

- n. *You gave Iacubov tax exemptions while you made a mockery of pensioners and farmers. You gave Nicolae from The National Company of Romanian Tobacco tax exemptions while you made a mockery of the young generation.* (Traian Băsescu)
- o. *That is probably the difference between the two of us.* (Traian Băsescu)
- p. *My profession forced me to believe in God without having a church nearby.* (Traian Băsescu)
- r. *During Ceausescu's time, you probably could afford going to church every Sunday.* (Traian Băsescu)

The fragment above also represents a counterattack, coming from the other candidate as well. It is interesting to analyze the way in which the text develops. In fragment (a), the first speaker, Adrian Năstase, supplies the public opinion with a quotation of his adversary's words. Statement (b) represents a comment upon the quotation above, a comment which naturally places the opponent Traian Băsescu in an unfavourable light. Religious references are usually successful in Romanian political discourse; the first reference of this sort, made at the highest level, was in 1996, when Emil Constantinescu challenged his opponent, Ion Iliescu, by asking him whether he believed in God. The question had a strong impact then; religious appeal still has a strong impact on Romanian electors. Against this background of negative perception of the adversary created by Năstase, the actual question follows (c). The entire structure (a-b-c) represents an enthymeme, whose reconstruction looks as follows:

Major premise (presupposition of the question in (c)): Romania is a 99% Christian country;

Minor premise (partly explicit in (b)): Your statement / you denies / deny the Church its very reason for existence;

Conclusion (implicit): you will not be able to be the President of Romania (not a good president, anyway).

In other words, the implicit conclusion makes any potential answer to the question in (c) appear redundant. However, the counterattack follows. First, in (d), we notice an attempt to challenge the interpretation in (b). The interlocutor refuses to accept the unfavourable explanation supplied by his opponent. By means of fragment (e), Năstase, taking the floor again, transfers attention from his own interpretation in (b) to the actual quotation in (a). Now, Băsescu starts unfolding his own retaliatory dissertation. First, fragment (f) with its two parts offers a general statement in which the speaker shifts the focus of his discourse from the institution (the church – the form) to the substance (religious faith). The interposed fragment (g), referring to the special situation of the speaker, is aimed at justifying why he has sacrificed form in favor of the essence. A necessary explanation, since form plays its important role in the collective unconscious. In (h), the speaker shifts from general to specific; thus, (h) represents a reinforcement of (g), to which it is connected in terms of content. Fragment (i) brings us back to general situations. Thus, in the

(f-g-h-i) sequence, the speaker oscillates between general statements and particular examples; however, he breaks the pattern by the sudden insertion of fragment (k), where the counterattack begins. It is here that the candidate, who has so far discussed only the positive pole of the issue concerned (what one should be like – recommendations), also focuses his attention on the negative pole. There is no time to wonder who this negative pole is aimed at – also generically, since the discourse acquires direct reference by means of fragments (l) and (m). Naturally, the speaker's allegations are directed at his opponent. The implicature of the sequence (k-l-m) is as follows: you do not behave like a man who believes in God. We also notice in (m) a series of direct attacks: you made a mockery of... etc. Fragment (n) shows us the speaker clearly drawing the line between the two poles discussed; thus, he takes a distance from the position he has attributed to his opponent, making sure he appears in a good light himself. By means of (o), the speaker returns to the positive pole where he has placed himself, while in (p) the attack – also indirect – is resumed. Fragment (n) brings into discussion both the adversary's communist past, and his privileged status; an allegation that Bănescu has repeatedly thrown at his counter-candidate. By defining the two poles, by placing himself at the positive pole and the opponent at the negative one, the speaker implicitly brings to light the choice between good and evil that is offered to the electors, whose adherence to his own cause appears as natural. This is exactly what the other candidate was trying to accomplish via the counterattack in example 1. Fragment 2 ends in a negative strategy – a direct attack against the opponent.

Conclusions

The examples above show us how, by clever manipulation of the discourse, an attack can end by harming the person who launched it; no politician enjoys being forced to defend himself or to respond to allegations. Therefore, many political actors choose to retaliate, by responding to each attack with an even stronger one. Generally, negative strategies in political communication mean that a speaker promotes his point of view by various attacks against the opponent, against his ideology, against the political faction represented by the interlocutor or against anything that can be directly linked to him. Political speakers would go for anything that can help them destroy the opponent's image: discourse, arguments, past errors, private life, anything that is good enough to destroy the image of their adversaries. And sometimes being placed against the wall is the best way to start your own attack.

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