FACETS OF THE INDIRECT ATTACK IN THE FIRST TELEVISED ELECTION DEBATE KLAUS IOHANNIS - VICTOR PONTA

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Abstract

Without any political bias whatsoever, the present article analyses a recent Romanian election debate, that between the incumbent President, Klaus Iohannis, and his opponent at the time, Victor Ponta, with a view to winning the 2014 presidential elections.
*The analysis looks into a strategy that frequently appears in political communication, **the indirect attack**, which has the advantage of conveying a strong message without putting the speaker at risk.*
*Out of the multiple facets that the indirect attack may present, the paper focuses on **irony**, **questions**, as well as the apparently neutral **assumptions** that both speakers make about themselves and the opponent, in order either to assert themselves and gain legitimacy, or to undermine the interlocutor's position. These strategies are used repeatedly by both participants in an attempt to make the antagonist appear unprepared, opportunistic, unreliable and corrupt in the eyes of potential electors.*

***Keywords*:** televised debate; negative campaigning; indirect attack; irony; humour; questions; assumptions.

1. Introductory remarks

The present paper looks into a televised political debate with a view to winning the presidential elections in Romania in 2014; the confrontation takes place between the candidate of the National Liberal Party, Klaus Iohannis, and the Prime Minister in office, Victor Ponta, who is running for President on behalf of the Social Democratic Party. The debate was broadcast a few days before the second round of the elections and it was watched by high numbers of viewers. Subsequently, it received extensive coverage in several newspapers, both parties claiming that their candidate "had won" the verbal confrontation.

The article focuses on the strategy of the *indirect attack*, as it is extensively used by both speakers. The analysis begins with a broad presentation of televised debates and the role they play in political communication nowadays; afterwards, an actual examination of the indirect attack is put forward. Three main facets thereof have

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been identified: *irony* (with three sub-categories: ironic assumptions, ironic questions and ironic humour), *questions* as carriers of an indirect attack, and *assumptions* as carriers of an indirect attack. All these strategies have been labelled as forms of *negative campaigning*.

2. Televised debates in the modern world

Television plays a crucial role in political communication nowadays. Its influence became obvious for the first time in 1952 in the USA, when Richard Nixon, in an attempt to make people forget about the bribery suspicions he was under, delivered a strongly emotional speech on television which resulted in him being appointed Vice President (Thoveron, 1996: 62-63). The impact of television on political confrontations gained further ground in 1960, when Nixon lost the elections to Kennedy; the result is believed to have been brought about by four one-hour televised debates, broadcast simultaneously on the three important TV networks. Since then, televised debates before presidential elections have increasingly become more important, in the USA and in Europe as well. To the extent to which elections campaigns and political life in general have turned into television shows, where the politician has a duty to play the role of a popular hero, these final debates have been credited with both a strong bearing on the final outcome, and with the compulsory task of entertaining the viewers and arousing their emotions.

Out of all the political shows that one can watch on TV, debates with a view to winning the presidential elections stand out as the most dramatic, the most intense, the most prestigious. It is for this reason that they attract large numbers of viewers, many of whom may not be into politics in general, but who cannot miss out on the excitement of watching such a debate. The intensity of the verbal and non-verbal clash between the protagonists is enhanced by the high stakes involved - winning the most important public office in a democracy, that of President (Boicu, 2012: 27-29).

2.1 A few remarks on the first televised debate Klaus Iohannis – Victor Ponta

The first debate between the two presidential candidates had long been awaited before it finally took place, on the 11th of November 2015, 5 days before the second round of the elections. It was considered by some to be improvised and the rules that the candidates were supposed to abide by appeared fuzzy and unclear. The two opponents approached the encounter in completely different ways, both generally and verbally: while Klaus Iohannis showed up without any documentation, his adversary had at his disposal a generous pile of papers. As far as the verbal confrontation went, Victor Ponta dominated the encounter, constantly interrupting his interlocutor and putting forward a great many facts and figures; strategically, his approach can be explained by the need politicians have to "imbue

their utterances with evidence, authority and truth, a process that we shall refer to in broad terms, in the context of political discourse, as «legitimisation»" (Chilton, 2004: 23). By contrast, Klaus Iohannis spoke less, in a manner which was labelled by his opponents as unprepared and neglectful, but which his supporters considered a sign of moral and intellectual superiority.

In fact, it is uncertain whether this debate actually led to a change in the political options of many people. Those who had supported Ponta before the confrontation subsequently reiterated their option by stating that their favourite was the only one who deserved to win, as he was the only one who knew what he was talking about, whereas Iohannis' supporters, although maybe disappointed to some extent, refused to change their vote. Ponta was labelled by his political opponents as inconsiderate, rude and overpowering, while his constantly interrupting the interlocutor was interpreted as arrogance and lack of manners instead of good knowledge of the issues at stake.

What is particularly interesting about this debate is that both candidates attempt to define themselves as 'opposition candidates', since it is a well known fact that these enjoy more freedom in their promises and potential electors tend to trust them more. Since neither of the two opponents is the incumbent president and they are both running for the first time, they both try to capitalize on the wider range of possibilities that 'opposition discourse' provides (Enache and Militaru, 2013: 289-305). In short, they both construct their discourse around the notions of *change* and *reform*, promising to replace a regime that is marked by the *erosion of power* (Thoveron, 1996: 56). Since 'power' candidates (currently holding office) have inevitably failed at least partially in meeting the expectations of the public, the scope of their promises has been narrowed; in this context, 'opposition discourse', focusing on the notions of change and reform, is bound to appeal to dissatisfied strata of society (which have become larger as a consequence of the economic recession). Thus, although Prime Minister in office, Victor Ponta claims that he wants to change the current regime (exploiting the fact that the incumbent president, Traian Basescu, has expressed support for the opponent); in his turn, Klaus Iohannis plays the opposition card by taking advantage of the fact that his rival is currently Prime Minister, hence a representative of the party in power.

Ex. 0.a.: Victor Ponta: *(...) I want to change everything that has been going on in the last ten years relating to the Presidential function, Mr Iohannis wants everything to stay the same (...)*

Ex. 0. b. Klaus Iohannis: *We are the opposition... (...)*

The extracts above illustrate the fact that, throughout the confrontation, both candidates have identified the wide range of opportunities provided by 'opposition discourse' and they both try to use its strategies to their own advantage.

2.2 Conflict and negative campaigning

In the strongly conflictual dimension of the confrontation (Enache and Militaru, 2013: 33) which, alongside the persuasive dimension, represents one of the main pillars of political communication, *negative strategies* (Scurtulescu, 2006: 189-209) play an important role in tarnishing the opponent's image.

Unlike the positive campaign, which is based on self-assertion, the negative campaign attempts to undermine the opponent's knowledge, intelligence, good intentions or accomplishments; it may identify a hidden agenda behind his good deeds, it may claim to have discovered a contradiction between his words and actions, past or present, or it may attempt to intimidate the political opponent, to make him falter or to confuse him.

This negative campaign (mudslinging) is always strong in the absence of a proper governing plan. It represents the easy way to put the speaker in a positive light, not due to his own accomplishments, but to the opponent's alleged errors. It is therefore ideal when the speaker's own policy is unclear and he therefore tries to win based on an emotional response rather than a rational one. (Enache and Militaru, 2013: 61-63).

Negative campaigning has also been called 'character assassination', an attempt to tarnish a person's reputation. It may involve exaggeration, misleading half-truths, or manipulation of facts to present an untrue picture of the targeted person. It represents defamation and can be a form of *ad hominem* argument (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Character_assassination).

Out of the main types of negative strategies (direct attack, indirect attack and counterattacking), the indirect attack appears to be the most convenient. In indirect attacks, a speaker launches implicit accusations against his opponent, by means of innuendoes, irony, or rhetorical questions. The following sections of the present paper will focus on these strategies in order to show how Klaus Iohannis and Victor Ponta, the 2014 Romanian presidential candidates, use them to undermine the adversary and gain public support.

3. Indirectness and the indirect attack

By definition, "indirectness occurs when there is a mismatch between the expressed meaning and the implied meaning" (Thomas, 1996: 118). The same author highlights the fact that indirectness in widely used in verbal interactions because people obtain "some social or communicative advantages" from its use (Thomas, 1996: 143).

In political communication in particular, the reasons for being indirect include the general reasons for using indirectness and also go beyond the standard theory. Thus, broadly speaking, discourse initiators may use indirectness either to make their use of language more interesting, to increase the force of their message (since, if the hearer has to work at understanding the message, he or she makes a greater investment in that message - a fact which is particularly true of jokes and irony); because their goals compete with those of the interlocutors (a situation that always applies in political communication as well), or for reasons related to politeness theories and their regard for *face* (Thomas, 1996: 142-146). In political communication, however, there is another reason whose importance is crucial. Political actors are involved in an instance of communication that is primarily conflictual and persuasive (Scurtulescu, 2006: 64-89) – the conflictual dimension refers to the ongoing competition between different factions / parties / candidates, while the persuasive dimension includes the attempts of each of these to convince potential electors to support them and vote for them. Throughout the election game, since speakers often launch accusations against one another, they may opt for indirectness in their speech in order to be protected from the possible negative consequences of making direct allegations (such as, for instance, subsequent slender charges, or the more common 'face loss') – (Grundy, 1995: 127-141).

The indirect attack represents an instance of indirect campaigning, which is widespread in political communication. Negative campaigning is used when a candidate has "little name recognition" (http://www.completecampaigns.com/article.asp?articleid=8), when an incumbent candidate is attacked (thus constituting itself predominantly as a strategy of opposition candidates) or, most importantly, when a candidate lacks a viable political platform. As has been said before, the indirect attack represents the safest way to undermine the antagonist's position, because in this case, "allegations against the opponent are not explicitly stated, but conveyed implicitly" (Enache and Militaru, 2013: 62). This fact protects the initiator of the attack from any unpleasant consequences, gives him a wider range of options for putting his message across, and, therefore, allows him to tarnish the opponent's reputation in an unhindered manner. In short, being carriers of an implicit message, indirect attacks are *deniable*. Moreover, not only does the indirect attack undermine the attackee's position in a subtler, stronger way; not only does it make him look bad in the eyes of potential voters, but it also leads to a decrease in voter turnout, which, in the long run, also benefits the initiator of the negative campaign.

In terms of politeness theories, whereby politeness is defined as "the extent to which actions, including the way things are said, match others' perceptions of how they should be performed" (Grundy, 1995: 127-141), the indirect attack also represents an instance of "face-threatening behaviour", according to Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (Grundy, 1995: 133). In the two famous linguists' view, *face* comes in two varieties, the positive face - the wish to be well thought of

by others - and the negative face - the wish not to be imposed on by others (Grundy, 1995: 133). Since the indirect attack attempts to destroy a person's image in the eyes of others, it can also be defined as an act of aggression against the opponent's positive face.

The main categories of indirect attacks identified for the purpose of the present article are: **irony** (with its variants: the ironic assumption, the ironic question and ironic humour), **questions** and **assumptions**. The following sections will dwell on these strategies and analyse the way in which they work in order to obtain the effect desired by the speaker.

3.1 Irony as carrier of an indirect attack

The term 'irony' originates in the Ancient Greek *eirõneia*, meaning 'dissimulation', 'feigned ignorance', 'pretence' (also *eirõn*, a dissembler); it is a rhetorical device in which "what appears, on the surface, to be the case, differs radically from what is actually the case" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irony). Irony (especially verbal irony) has sometimes been considered the same as sarcasm; blatant understatements or overstatements as well as the deliberate use of language which states the opposite of the truth represent well-known instances of irony. Hence, ironic comments may be humorous or mildly sarcastic (*The Oxford Companion to the English Language,* 1992: 532). It goes without saying that, for a statement to count as ironic, the 'truth' must be a fact, concept, idea or state of events that is acknowledged as such by all parties involved in a dialogue. In the case of political communication, and especially in the case of televised debates, prototypically, there are three parties involved in the dialogue: two active participants (the candidates) and one passive participant, which is the public, or potential electors (Scurtulescu, 2006: 88).

Generally speaking, three kinds of irony are considered as such and recognised. The first type, *Socratic irony*, has been defined as "a mask of innocence and ignorance adopted to win an argument" (*The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, 1992: 532); thus, in this case, questions which may seem foolish can be asked to move a debate in the direction desired by the speaker, and, in the special case of political communication, to make the passive participant adhere to the speaker's point of view and become his supporter. The second type of irony, *dramatic or tragic irony*, reflects "a double vision of what is happening (...) in a real-life situation" (*The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, 1992: 532). Finally, *linguistic irony* or the "duality of meaning" (*The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, 1992: 532) is now perceived as identical to the classic form of irony. This is the case where the stated meaning is completely opposite to the meaning conveyed.

Irony is a strong weapon in political communication, functioning in most cases as an instance of indirect attack. Among its many characteristics, the following strike us as fundamental:

- irony has in itself an axiomatic nature, thereby taking the *speaker's superiority* for granted. Thus, irony turns the equal nature of dialogue (where the equality between interlocutors is taken for granted) into an interaction where the speaker has the right to talk down to their opponent and disparage them.

Therefore, irony functions as a poorly disguised case of down-putting;

- irony represents the linguistic expression of a mental form of aggression - when addressed ironically, the interlocutor is treated like an enemy; thus, the interaction changes from a sociable, cooperative one into a hostile one and its conflictual dimension is visibly enhanced;
- stylistically, ironic statements imply a meaning that is opposite to their explicit one; thus, affirmative statements convey a negative meaning and the other way around; this represents, in fact, the very definition of irony;
- irony always has a strong impact on the audience, since it functions as an invitation to the public to become the speaker's partner and even accomplice in their attack against the interlocutor.

In the next section of the article, *irony* will be analysed as it appears in the Klaus Iohannis - Victor Ponta election debate, the paper attempting to shed light on why candidates use it, how they use it and what they are hoping to accomplish by using it in the normal course of the debate.

3.1.1 The ironic assumption

Ironic assumptions function as general statements related to the speaker's rival; they usually represent either an instance of Socratic irony, whereby the speaker pretends not to be aware of facts or states which are obvious and well-known by everyone, or a case of linguistic irony, where the meaning conveyed is totally opposed to the meaning stated. In this way, by playing dumb, political actors attempt to place the opponent in a bad light, to direct the interaction towards the purpose they have in mind and, above all else, to gain support and agreement from the passive actor (potential electors).

Ex. 1. Victor Ponta: I have discussed a great deal with the President of the Commission, Mr Crin Antonescu, whom I think you know (...)

In the example above, the use of the verb *think* (*cred* in Romanian) is ironic, since it is common knowledge that Antonescu and Iohannis used to be political partners; moreover, since Antonescu has disgraced himself in the past, the speaker wants to make the connection between the former and his opponent even more obvious. Thus, the speaker pretends to be naive, not fully aware of a certain state of facts

that everyone is familiar with, which makes example 1 rank as Socratic irony; the message conveyed is that the antagonist used to be partners with a compromised political figure and is therefore not trustworthy himself.

Ex. 2. Victor Ponta: For the Romanian citizens who are in Italy, in Spain, people whom I visited, Mr Iohannis has not visited them, but probably he will, for the people in France, in Germany, there are two important things that the government and the president ought to do.

Example 2 is similar to Example 1, and the speaker makes use of the same strategy. However, the implications of this assumption about the adversary appear to be more complex than in the first case. On the one hand, the example can also be classified as an instance of Socratic irony, since the speaker claims to be naive about what he is saying. On the other hand, the speaker explicitly states that his opponent has not visited the Romanian communities in France and Germany (that part is not ironic); in doing so, he indirectly attacks the latter "on his own ground" (Scurtulescu, 2006: 189-190), since the well-being of the Romanian communities abroad (the *diaspora*) had been the main topic for attack throughout Iohannis' 2014 election campaign (it all started with the problems which arose when Romanian citizens abroad found it difficult to vote at our country's embassies, because of the insufficient logistics capacity). Victor Ponta therefore attempts to undermine his opponent's position by informing the audience that his antagonist hasn't visited the communities whose interest he claims to protect. Also, the second part of the statement is ironic, since the speaker pretends to make an innocent assumption about his interlocutor, while conveying the opposite meaning (that the latter will, in fact, never visit these communities), and thus also ranks as linguistic irony.

Ex. 3. Klaus Iohannis: As far as what you have said is concerned, even you, who are after all a deputy, will have probably found out that it is not the president who abolishes laws.

In the example above, the speaker engages in a complex form of indirect attack which includes a conventional implicature (Yule, 1996: 45-46) as well as an instance of irony. The conventional implicature is triggered by the word *even*, which conveys the message that the opponent would, in the normal course of events, be the last person to learn that it is not the president's duty to abolish laws (a fact which represents common knowledge – this is piece of information *X*). The conventional implicature appears disparaging to Ponta, since it carries along the implication that he is uninformed and therefore unfit to take office. Moreover, the irony enhances the force of the message, suggesting that, in reality, it is possible that the rival may still not be aware of X). Overall, the intention behind this extract is to make the incumbent prime minister appear unprepared and taken by surprise by the most basic political facts.

Ex. 4. Klaus Iohannis: We are the opposition, it is the opposition's duty to set up polling stations.

Example 4 can be divided in two parts. The first part, where the speaker asserts that he represents the opposition, is not ironic; here, as has been said at the beginning of the article, Iohannis intends to make people see him as the 'opposition candidate'; the second part of the statement, however, represents an instance of linguistic irony, since the speaker intends to convey a meaning opposite to the one explicitly stated (namely, it is not the responsibility of the opposition to set up polling stations, it is the duty of the party in power, a duty they have failed to meet). In conveying the implicit meaning, the candidate also attempts to weaken his interlocutor's position.

3.1.2 The ironic question

Ironic questions include a question as well as an instance of irony; in most cases, we are dealing with Socratic irony, whereby the speaker claims to be naive or even foolish in order to make the antagonist look bad. Ironic questions are usually rhetorical in nature and they convey an implied answer meant to undermine the opponent.

Moreover, the analysis of ironic questions also involves elements pertaining to politeness theories, in that they usually lead to loss of face for the addressee. When a speaker asks a question and is ironic in doing so, on the one hand he already knows the answer to his question, the answer is implied, and the implication is conveyed to the third participant (the audience); on the other hand, in most cases, the recipient either has no answer to the question he is asked, or the answer he has, if given, would place him in a bad light in the eyes of the same third participant. In both cases, ironic questions infringe positive politeness rules and the attackee may end up losing face.

Ex. 5. Klaus Iohannis: Mr Ponta, you told us that, when you were young, you voted for Ion Raţiu, then you said you voted for the liberal candidate. Can I count on your vote this time as well?

The irony of the situation in this case stems from the embedded meaning put across by the speaker. On the one hand, Ponta could not possibly vote for the liberal candidate, who is his very opponent. On the other hand, at a deeper level, the message conveyed by the speaker is that his rival appears to be demagogical and opportunistic in his political choices since, although he has always voted for liberal candidates and publicly said so (therefore expressing open support for the liberal factions), he is currently running for President on behalf of a party whose doctrine seems, at least in theory, completely opposed (The Social Democratic Party, which supported Victor Ponta, is a left-oriented party, while the Liberals are traditionally right-oriented).

Ex. 6. Victor Ponta: Mr Iohannis doesn't know how many pensioners there are in Romania: there are 5,3 million pensioners. I am convinced you have no idea what the average pension is. Do you happen to know that, by any chance?

Appealing to pensioners has always represented a powerful weapon on the Romanian political arena, since their number is significant and so is their vote. Moreover, they are traditional Social-Democratic electors. In the example above, the speaker attempts to first show that he is informed and therefore well-prepared, then makes an assumption about the interlocutor that aims at compromising the latter's image (by making him look incompetent), then reinforces his point by means of an ironic question. The question's detrimental impact on the opponent is meant to be two-fold; firstly, the speaker has already provided the answer (before the question); secondly, the conventional implicature of his question is that the antagonist is highly unlikely to know the answer (*Do you happen to know that, by any chance?* – in Romanian, *Știți cumva?*).

3.1.3 Ironic humour

Commonly defined as "the tendency of particular cognitive experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humour), the term *humour* comes from the Latin *humor* meaning moisture, body fluid, temperament. Currently, the notion is viewed as "a disposition towards pleasantry, often realized in the enjoyment of anecdotes, jokes, puns, riddles and witticisms" (*The Oxford Companion to the English Language,* 1992: 486). Humour, as well as the sense of humour itself, is hard to define, as it represents "a complex effect of people's experience as members of a culture, a nation, and various kinds of community" (*The Oxford Companion to the English Language,* 1992: 486). Humour, and the interpretation thereof, rides on a wide variety of personal, social and cultural factors. Its main components often include an element of surprise, a contradiction or paradox, or an instance of ambiguity.

Ironic humour appears to be even more difficult to define, although, in theory, almost anyone would recognize it. In this particular debate, a number of statements have been labelled as belonging to the "ironic humour" category if, on the one hand, they can be described as ironic (meeting at least one of the prerequisites which define irony - the speaker plays dumb or the implicit meaning is the exact opposite of the explicit one) and, on the other hand, they present at least one of the features defining humour mentioned above.

Ironic humour is also asymmetric in nature, in that while one speaker is serious in his approach and expects the opponent to do the same, he finds himself mildly mocked by the latter. This also pertains to the element of surprise that humour often entails. Moreover, unlike irony in its 'pure' form, which represents a case of psychological aggression, ironic humour displays a dimension that is non-

aggressive; on the contrary, it involves a sense of generous communion, both with the adversary and especially with the public, in an attempt to capture their benevolence. One can say that it is precisely this 'kind' dimension of ironic humour that distinguishes it from pure irony and brings the speaker closer to the audience; in this respect, humour of whatever kind also serves the positive face of the speaker.

While ironic humour appears to be milder than pure irony and helps enhance the speaker's positive face, it can also act as an effective form of negative campaigning (http://www.completecampaigns.com/article.asp?articleid=8), since it attempts to shed light on an alleged drawback of the antagonist.

Ex. 7.a. Klaus Iohannis: You stay Prime-Minister and I'll be President. It's fine that way.
and also
Ex. 7.b. Klaus Iohannis: I don't wish to be Prime Minster. You are, and I think you should keep this office in the future. I can see that you are good at what you do (...)

In examples 7a and 7b, the speaker appears to be paying his opponent a compliment, by telling him that his activity as Prime Minister is a good one and that it should continue. In fact, the only way Ponta can remain Prime Minister is if he loses the elections. This very fact lies at the basis of the ironic component of these two examples: the meaning conveyed ("you ought to lose the elections, since you would not make a good president") is the opposite of the meaning explicitly stated ("you ought to keep your current office, since you are doing a good job"). The humorous component springs from the element of surprise, combined with the implied paradox suggested by the speaker (if he had genuinely acknowledged the opponent's value and praised his activity, that would have meant the opponent was qualified to win the elections and be President instead of Prime Minister).

Ex. 8. Victor Ponta: Well, you really can't be a good Orthodox if you are a Protestant.

Example 8 includes an ironic component (the speaker takes on an air of naivety which is clearly a mask), and responds to a previous accusation of his opponent's (Iohannis had demanded that Ponta apologise for accusing him of not being a good Orthodox, since he was a Protestant). Ponta retaliates by reinforcing his previous statement, in a mildly ironic tone; the point he makes (that one cannot be at the same time a bona-fide follower of two distinct religions) attempts to strike us as both commonsensical and humorous due to the paradox that is put forward.

All things considered, ironic humour appears to be less aggressive than 'pure' irony, as the humorous element acts as a mitigator, it softens the aggressive dimension of irony and it puts forward a more 'likable' image of the initiator.

3.2. Questions as carriers of an indirect attack

When the indirect attack takes the form of a question, the answer to that question is usually implied, and it is meant to be detrimental to the adversary's image. Since the image stands for the mental picture that a candidate wishes to construct of themselves and convey to the public (Thoveron, 1996: 81), it represents an inherent part of their election campaign. When the question is aggressive and it challenges that image, even in the absence of clear data or facts, it can have a strong negative impact on the electors and it can lead to them withdrawing support for the attackee.

Moreover, questions themselves bear an aggressive potential (Boicu, 2012: 221) and, in political confrontations, are generally used as an expression of disagreement. Their primary function, that of asking for information, ranks second in an interaction that is, to a great extent, conflictual; their main role in this case is to challenge the opponent, to put him in an uncomfortable position, to make him falter, and, in doing so, they express the speaker's lack of confidence in the antagonist's good faith. Regardless of whether the question is rhetorical or an answer is actually expected, the information that such questions convey to the viewers is that the attackee has somehow failed to meet standards which are of the utmost importance in the given context. Additionally, alongside the implied answer, which is always detrimental to the interlocutor, face issues are once again at stake. On the one hand, questions threaten the positive face of the opponent (Boicu, 2012: 223). On the other hand, by contrast, they serve to enhance the positive face of the speaker himself.

Ex. 9. Victor Ponta: Do you know what the voter turnout was? Do you know how many people voted?

In the example above, the initiator's intention seems clear. The implied message is that the opponent has no idea what the answer is; in his turn, the interlocutor is presented with a limited number of choices. He can either answer the question (only if he does know the number), or he can deflect. The transcript of the debate shows that he chooses to do the latter. In either case, the speaker's purpose is to make the rival lose face. Should he choose to answer, he would appear to be obedient, playing by the opponent's rules and adopting a defensive stance. In the present case, not answering may lead to loss of face (as some people might assume he is unprepared, and this would make him look incompetent) but, on the other hand, presents the advantage that his deflecting may be interpreted as “ignoring” the antagonist and insisting on what he has to say.

Ex. 10. Klaus Iohannis: Mr Ponta, in a way I am impressed that, aside from all the things you have to do as Prime Minister, or should have done, to correct myself, I am impressed that you also found much time for travelling around Europe. It is

your business that you have delegated enough tasks, all right. At whose expense did you travel abroad during your election campaign?

In the example above, the actual question is preceded by a few introductory explanations which represent indirect attacks themselves. Firstly, "*the things you should have done*" implies that the opponent failed to fulfil the duties of his office. Secondly, the use of the verb 'impress' is misleading, since it is in most cases positively connotated (we are normally impressed by good things, it is used to express praise and admiration). By contrast, the speaker here is ironic, since "travelling" in this context puts forward a two-fold implication. On the one hand, travelling is associated with leisure and free time instead of hard work. On the other hand, and more importantly, the second part of the implication suggests that the adversary has been travelling using public money. The question ending the extract conveys the same implicit meaning: that the attackee has been squandering public money for his own personal benefit.

Ex. 11. Klaus Iohannis: (...) Mr Ponta, why did you lie to the pensioners, telling them that I was going to cut their pensions?

This question carries an entailment - a logical concept that follows from an utterance (Yule, 1996: 33-34): *you told the pensioners that I was going to cut their pensions*; also, the verb 'lie' is a strong one and its use borders on the direct attack; the only indirect element is the fact that this verb appears in a question. Again, the problem of the retirees is a delicate one, with a strong emotional impact on the public; the speaker attempts to make his opponent look bad especially in the eyes of the traditional electors of his party, elderly citizens.

Ex. 12. Klaus Iohannis: By the way, have you finalized the budget for 2015?

Example 12, which emerges under the appearance of an innocent question, represents in fact an indirect accusation. The answer is implied (*you have not finalized the budget*), and the implication of that answer is, again, that the speaker's opponent has failed to meet the duties of his office. Needless to say, then, that, in the speaker's view, he will be unable to cope with the responsibilities of Presidency.

Ex. 13. Victor Ponta: I just wanted to ask you – Mr Iohannis very often says that he will not cohabitate with the Prime Minister. Well, then, what kind of relationship will you have with the Prime Minister? Or will you start a battle, like Mr Basescu did? These are the only two possibilities. What kind of relationship will you have?

In example 13, very much like in example 10, the aggressive question does not appear out of the blue, it needs preparation. In this case, the preparation is supplied

by previous statements belonging to Iohannis that Ponta refers to. Then, the speaker presents a challenge: if the opponent sticks with his previous views, he may appear to be conflictual, putting his own personal likes and dislikes above national interests. If he chooses to express a different opinion, he may appear to be inconsistent and unreliable. He chooses to do the latter, which is in fact the only face-saving possibility he has (since the views stated in the final confrontation override all previously expressed ones, they are the ones electors remember best when casting the ballot).

The examples above have shown how questions can function as indirect attacks. In many cases, the message they put across is more powerful than the direct accusation, for three main reasons: firstly, they force the attackee to adopt a defensive stance and thus make him lose face; secondly, the answer to these questions is in most cases implied and detrimental to the attackee; thirdly, they enhance the initiator's positive face, as he does not appear as a bully; instead, at least theoretically, he appears as a person who is merely asking for information.

3.3 Assumptions as generators of an indirect attack

Assumptions about different subjects, situations or facts usually act as carriers of conversational implicatures (cases where the speaker conveys more than he actually says), which are by definition deniable (Yule, 1996: 36-45). Therefore, while they allegedly impart information to both the interlocutor and the passive actor, it is often the case that they convey an implicit accusation directed at the political opponent. In everyday words, conversational implicatures translate as innuendos, aiming at tarnishing the opponent's image.

Statements that appear to be neutral and general in nature, play in fact a twofold role. On the one hand, they have a positive side, in that they attempt to grant legitimacy to the speaker. On the other hand, their negative side surfaces under the form of an indirect attack.

Ex. 14. Klaus Iohannis: It is unacceptable that we should have Members of Parliament who cannot be investigated because, for instance, the Social Democratic Party has decided to vote against investigating some Members of Parliament.

The example above parades as a neutral assumption about a given state of facts. However, minimal knowledge of the rules of the ‘political communication’ game would prompt one to assume that, in fact, the speaker is indirectly accusing his opponent of corruption. Victor Ponta runs for President on behalf of the Social Democratic Party, which has in itself the image of a corrupt political faction (a weakness that opponents have consistently capitalized on throughout recent election campaigns). Since he highlights the fact that the respective party has

hindered the investigation of some MPs, the speaker can strongly be suspected of reinforcing that negative image in the eyes of the electors and, consequently, of implying that the opponent himself is corrupt and therefore unfit to take office.

15. a. Ponta: (...) instead of empty words, I can guarantee with facts (...)
15.b. Ponta: So the point is, if we speak about something, we should first know what we are talking about, we should not deceive people by using catchphrases - I'll give up my immunity.

In the extracts above (15a and 15b), the speaker attempts both to gain legitimacy for himself, and to harm the opponent's image. Unlike example 15a, in extract 15b he starts with a neutral assumption that appears to be general in nature (axiomatic). The speaker seems to be making a general point first, a recommendation, and only then proceeds to self-assertion (expressing willingness to give up his immunity may be aiming at annihilating corruption allegations). However, in both extracts, the initiator appears to imply that the opponent's discourse is all waffle and empty talk, that the opponent does not know what he is saying and, that his intentions may be detrimental to the electors' interest (that he is "deceiving" people – Romanian *să-i păcălim*). By contrast, as intended, the speaker portrays himself as honest and competent, a fact which is, again, in compliance with the "rules of the game".

In the present section, assumptions which appear to be general and neutral in nature have been shown to act as carriers of indirect attacks against the opponent. Linguistically, the indirect attack manifests itself as a conversational implicature, a strategy whose main advantage comes from being deniable. This feature works to the advantage of the speaker, giving them freedom to convey implicit messages by means of innuendos and protecting them from all the potential risks of direct attacks.

4. Concluding remarks

The present paper has dwelt on the strategy of the indirect attack in the first televised debate between Klaus Iohannis and Victor Ponta, in view of the oncoming Romanian presidential elections in 2014. Since the indirect attack is interpreted as an instance of negative campaigning, three categories thereof have been identified: *irony* (with its variants: ironic assumptions, ironic questions and ironic humour), *questions* and *assumptions* as carriers of an indirect attack. These techniques have been looked into, the paper attempting to show why and how political actors use them in an attempt to win public support and put down the opponent. In the two candidates' discourse, these strategies also blend with others, including politeness strategies, aiming both at destroying the image of the rival, and at enhancing the speaker's positive image and placing them in a good light in the potential voters' eyes.

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