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FRAMING TECHNIQUES IN POLITICAL INTERACTION A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF 2012 AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

TEHNICI CADRU ÎN INTERACŢIUNEA POLITICĂ O ANALIZĂ CRITICĂ A DISCURSULUI DEZBATERILOR PREZIDENŢIALE AMERICANE DIN 2012

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Abstract: The thesis discloses most of the important and recurrent frames used both by the Republican and the Democrat nominees in the 2012 presidential debates broadcast on TV. The framing techniques are illustrated in the corpus analysis in relation with the background and mental representations of the listeners, features that have been carefully examined in the theoretical and methodological section. The richness of these framing techniques is meant to convince the audience of the ideologically-based evidence which appeals to core values and underlying principles, to their moral worldview. The two candidates try to evoke a suggestive imagery of facts by developing in people's minds a variety of frames, being well aware that facts are unable to speak for themselves, and therefore they need value-based frames in order to become moral imperatives. An obvious mark of framing is the repetition of more or less different structures or words, usually key words, which have a significant argumentative force and which the two competitors use in order to convince or manipulate people onto the desired path. The most important thing in the creation of their rhetoric is for each of them to remain faithful to the key words they have chosen and not to copy, by mistake, the opponent's frames, as this would imbalance their chances of success. The framing technique has an incredible impact upon people's minds, as it deals with ideas and the logical connections the brain makes when in face of powerful and meaningful stimuli. If wrapped in a frame, usually appealing to morality and values, messages about particular programs and policies are more likely to be successful than if transmitted under the form of a list of tasks.

Keywords: We the People, frame, schema, intentions, discourse, opportunity, path

Summary

Political discourse is among the few categories of social studies where discourse analysis is virtually unknown, although studies of rhetoric and political communication overlap a discourse analytical approach. What has become of interest in the analysis of political talk and text is the current approach to *frames*, which the present work attentively treats. Their role as sets of beliefs or conceptual structures is to organize policies, political thought and discourse.

Over the last two or three decades, politicians, governments as well as institutions seem to have lost much of their authority and credibility. This major crisis of legitimacy is partly due to political discourses' apprehension. Politicians can shape and reshape the political public in their discourses; they can construct and reconstruct the people and consequently, a great amount of their success is based on how the public reacts to their message, on how they accept and make real these constructions which are often products crossing the threshold of reality onto that of imagination. Audiences can, on numerous occasions, draw out meanings which are often left implicit. It is exactly this combination of implicit meanings (or what is left unsaid) with explicit meanings (or what is actually said) that adds significance to a text.

When we refer to presences or absences in texts, to what is made explicit or, on the contrary, left implicit, or to what is foregrounded or backgrounded, we actually deal with presuppositions. Any textual analysis focuses on what is *there* in the text, on linguistic analysis which is descriptive in nature, but much attention should also be paid to things that might have been *there* in the text but are not, thus to absences. They leave place to presuppositions which are part of a text's intertextuality. Presuppositions play an important role in anchoring the unknown in the known (which is the implicit in the explicit) or the new representations in the old ones. These valences make it possible for someone who hears or reads a text to have a certain opinion formed as a consequence of the common-sense assumptions the text attributed to the person in case. The moment people presuppose something, they can assume that there are other representations considered as common ground for them, where the actual presuppositions are explicitly present, that is, they are part of what is being said. This is where we start dealing with intertextuality, with the diverse techniques of analysis, including that of framing.

The range of chapters from historical Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics through notions of semantics and relevance theory to framing techniques in the political interaction under

analysis are meant to enhance the ability of readers to deal with a variety of phenomena and problems in ways that are internally coherent and also enriched by multiple and diverse connections with one another. In trying to describe something that has not yet been described, the theory and data I have relied on seem to be inseparable and mutually enriching. The synergy between the theoretical parts and data analysis that is evident and reflected in the pervasive understanding of Critical Discourse Analysis as the careful examination of actual text and talk, leads to the conviction that on the one hand, theoretical insights are needed to extend the analysis of political discourse beyond instance specific insights, and on the other hand, that analysis must be grounded, at the same time, in actual instances of language, so as to provide both empirical bases and realistic constraints for theory- building. In my research, theory, practice and language inform and enrich one another.

The first section is an *introduction* which reflects the choice of topics for inclusion. Their relative foregrounding and backgrounding is indicative of my own biases or interests within the field. **Section II**, entitled *A Theoretical and Methodological Approach* contains four chapters, including preliminary remarks and the latest studies in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics with an attempt to differentiate between the two, as well as an emphasis on rhetorical and argumentative strategies. It focuses on differences in orientation, thinking, and research methodology between studies of rhetoric (in both its traditional and modern perspectives) and argumentation, which is then elaborated upon more prominently in the fourth section which examines the politics-discourse interface, more specifically the theoretical notions and approaches to the interpretation of the three debates under discussion. Chapter three of the same section II sheds light on *semantics* and discourse phenomena, while chapter four touches briefly on the relationship between *discourse and relevance theory*.

Since my main interest is on the framing techniques which incorporate such notions as mental representations, schemata, scripts or background knowledge, the material I used from Lakoff, Searle, Fraser, Chafe, Feldman and elsewhere enabled me to selectively focus upon essential features of their work which I have found particularly fruitful in organizing and developing my own analytical framework.

Language users normally make sense of what is said or written in terms of their usual experience of things. Their tendency is to make instant interpretation of what is familiar to them and to ignore possible alternatives. Pre-existing knowledge structures enhance our ability to

automatically interpret the unwritten and the unsaid. They function like familiar patterns from our previous experience on whose basis we interpret new experiences. The pre-existing knowledge structure people have in memory is called a *schema*. If there is a static or fixed pattern to the schema, then we refer to it as *frame*. A frame is like a prototypical version shared by everyone within their social group. When it comes to event sequences, more dynamic types of schemata, often described as *scripts* are involved as pre-existing knowledge structure. Our interpretations of accounts of things that happened are built on scripts. They help us recognize some expected sequence of action in the course of an event. Usually, not all details of a script are likely to be stated since most of them are assumed to be known.

Referring to the interpretation of utterances not related to their context-free lexical meanings, but serving as purposes for the understanding of the speaker's intentions conveyed by means of his message, Paul Grice developed the theory of meaning that focused on *implicatures.* Thus, our interpretations are derived through inference by means of processes of implicatures which are based on the *principles of conversational cooperation.* Extra-communicative knowledge is thus necessary to understand the assumptions about conversational cooperation that listeners rely on in order to interpret the literal meaning. Inferences, whose treatment discourse studies have widely accepted- since they connect the discourse to the local circumstances in which they are produced -, help determining not what a certain expression means, but what the speaker conveys by means of the message his utterances contain.

Our mental states can relate to reality in different ways. Beliefs represent how things are, so they can be considered true or false. When it comes to desires and intentions, their aim is not to represent how reality is, but how we would like it to be or what our intention is to make it be. Thus, intentions and desires are not true or false, like beliefs, but fulfilled or frustrated. This distinction carries over to *speech acts*. The circumstances surrounding the utterances as well as the hearer's recognition of the speaker's communicative intention represent the *speech event*. The speech event and its nature determine the interpretation of the utterance as performing a certain speech act.

Since social – conventional aspects of language form conditions of possibility for speech acts, then these social phenomena do not replace individual intentionality, on the contrary, it is against the presupposition of conventions, social rules and practices that intentionality functions. Social capacities are realized in the individual brains of the speakers and what makes them social

is the fact that they refer to other people in the society besides the speaker. Their functioning between different individuals in the society does not prevent them from being realized entirely in the individual brains. The capacity to represent, symbolize or use states and objects as representations of other states and objects is innate in human beings. The background of human mental capacities does not consist of rules and conventions, but of pre-intentional abilities which are of a non-representational sort.

Worthy of consideration is the pragmatic study of metaphor which tells us what things other nations, classes or groups in society prioritize or attach weight to in their interaction with themselves, others or the environment. In this sense, metaphors and their study represent a unique way of understanding the human cognitive capability. They can advance as well as limit our thinking, foreground certain aspects while partially structuring a phenomenon and letting other aspects remain backgrounded or obscured altogether. It is possible that the pervasiveness of some metaphors should exclude other valid ways of viewing phenomena. According to Mey (2001:302), "Metaphors are not individual means of conceptually dealing with the world, but means that have become current within a given linguistic and cultural community". Only the total context of a situation we intend to characterize metaphorically can determine, pragmatically speaking, the usefulness of a particular metaphor. Considering that metaphors in a particular language community can remain more or less stable along historical stages and generational differences, their ability to secure the continuity of language and culture highlights the importance of metaphors in understanding and conceptualizing one's surroundings.

Following the conviction that, in order to understand people's sayings, we should look at a bigger picture than just the single utterance which performs a single speech act, **Section III** offers a window on what I would consider the core of the present research from a theoretical point of view. The chief analytic constructs that have been discussed here are employed in describing the mental representations and frames that the two presidential contenders evoke in their debates. Probably the richest in well-honed conceptualizations, this section poses such questions as: *What is consciousness?, What is intentionality?, What are schemata or frames?* to which I have endeavored to find answers and apply in the present corpus analysis. Prior to their application, I have also expounded on these features in relation to political interaction in the second chapter of the section. Interaction and turn-taking, the concept of *face,* as well as adjacency pairs or preference structures took center - stage. A last chapter containing discourse

strategies and their interpretation which I have found wise to incorporate as it serves to highlight some of the points of interest for the present paper, makes the transition towards a more practical section, **Section IV**, which is the *corpus analysis*. Here, using the theoretical and methodological concepts presented, the three debates are subject, one by one, to close and careful examination, focusing on framing techniques and other representations, but not ignoring important aspects pertaining to Critical Discourse Analysis, as well.

A salient remark is that speakers employ different discourse strategies or conversational routines to trigger different sets of assumptions or frames of reference about the world and the way we act in it. These have made the object of research for many discourse analysts, since framing has led to the construction of relations likely to be misinterpreted at times. Misunderstandings can lead to the inability to accomplish goals or even to conflict. A central analytical problem has thus become the relation between interaction and the social order which can offer clues to understanding the nature of context.

Recurring collocations of words constitute the intertextual background of language we deploy in our interpretation of texts. It is books or texts we read or heard in the past that our knowledge or expectations of what is probable or likely to be said is founded upon. The immediate recognition of a referent represents something shared or in common, indicating social connection via inference.

Speakers assess widely varying combinations of referential, syntactic, discourse and other features. Discourse acts depend upon culturally agreed signals and the interpretations made by the participants when assessing talk within its context in real time. The combinations they make cannot be reduced to short definitions, and neither is the referential meaning easy to delimit within them. To communicate effectively, speakers and hearers have to develop and employ a set of conventional devices that would convey speaker meaning. The speaker intentionally produces an utterance, which, at another level, represents something. The utterance the speaker produces should have conditions of satisfaction or truth conditions. If he succeeds on a regular basis, it means there has to be a conventional device which is socially recognized, and being repeatable, is taken by his hearers to convey the message. The performance of speech acts is thus interwoven with the repeatable device which typically consists of the words and sentences in a language. Intentionality or preexisting speaker meanings are encoded in these conventions for unstructured

propositions. Simple speaker meanings are possible without language and its conventions, but complex thought and meaning are impossible without a compositional structure.

Complex syntactical devices combined in a compositional manner communicate intentional states, by enabling the participants to figure out what the sentences mean from the meanings of separate elements and of their arrangement in the sentence. The intentional state and its entire propositional content are encoded in the sentence which is so designed as to express for free the unity of the proposition which is built into the logical structure of biological intentionality.

Intentionality, in its form of collective intentional behavior, lies in a special feature of the mental phenomena, whose component it is. We could assume that either collective or individual, all intentionality would require some preintentional background of mental capacities. President Obama skillfully uses the "We the People" frame to address his audience and direct their intentions toward a collective aim. Adopting Searle's (2002:95) opinion that "the notion of a we-intention, of collective intentionality, implies the notion of *cooperation*", I consider that it is somehow the same notion that by means of carefully constructed words and phrases the President intends to inculcate upon the conscience of the nation: that we can cooperate and achieve our common goal even if we act separately, by each doing his or her own part, therefore attributing people the freedom of action, (a set of "I intend" s) but being inspired by the same collective intention ("we intend" s). Therefore, we – intention should be built into the specific notion of *doing one's part* also considering the reconciliation of collective intentionality with the existence of a society which consists entirely of individuals whose consciousness lies in individual minds or brains. So it would be both more plausible and in the spirit of the present analysis to say that human beings detain all intentionality, whether collective or individual. We should also recognize that if somebody intends to perform an act and such an intention exists in the mind of every individual agent who acts as part of a group, then the intentionality required for collective behavior, even though it makes reference to the collective, can be actually possessed by individual agents.

In general, all intentionality, interpretation, understanding, and meaning operate against a background of mental capacities which are not themselves interpretations, intentional states, understandings or meanings. Thus, this background is not itself meant or understood but

constitutes the boundary conditions on understanding and meaning both in isolated utterances and in conversations.

People select features of the world as if they were current experiences. The notion of *schema* developed by psychologists in the early 1990s explains how people understand and remember accounts. In retelling them, people often distort facts to fit their cultural expectations. Schemas represent sets of cultural preconceptions about different types of relationships. Both the speaker and the audience presumably refer to schemas in producing and understanding messages. To have a mental representation, people take the limited input and processing the content by applying schemas, they elaborate on it in diverse ways. Besides schemas, people use mental constructions or models in which they represent specific events, objects and relationships in utterances. These mental instantiations of the world which is described are based upon the situation, the discourse and the purposes people have to serve. The mental models can be changed if the word which follows disrupts the expectation in the model so far. The generic information displayed or represented in schemas, is, in fact, the starting point for the mental model, which is then completed by visual and spatial relationships that represent instantiations of an event or scene.

What is at issue in political language is the symbolic manipulation of reality with the aim of achieving political goals. The meaning of words can suffer transformations according to the person who uses them and to the formation they are in, which would be different if the words and their interaction were interpreted within another formation. This process of *transformation* underscores the fact that similar words or phrases come to be reinterpreted the moment they are within different ideological frameworks. Directly linked to this process is the other one, of *representation*, which refers to how language is used in different ways to carefully represent what we know, believe, and perhaps think. Following Montgomery's universalist and relativist views of representation, language can simply reflect a set of universal conceptual possibilities or, act hand in hand with our system of thought. In the case of universalist type of representation, language acts as a means to express our system of thought, a system independent of the language itself. In opposition, the relativist representation views language and thought as inextricably linked or intertwined, such that understanding the world within this perspective would be affected by available linguistic resources.

Throughout my work, particularly in the context of analyzing the frames in the three presidential debates, I have tried to figure out what was going on in the minds of the protagonists at the level of single words, key words or conceptual metaphors imposed by repetition. My research also focused on patterns of language or routines that were used in interaction and which are generally embedded in complex cultural processes.

Recurring collocations of words called attention to background knowledge and shared representations upon which expectations of what was to be said were founded. The introductory frames in particular made use of an analogy. In this sense, the analogical discourse framing assumed that the elements would agree with one another, and so the listeners would be encouraged to infer meanings. What the two presidential contenders have managed to accomplish by means of their debate performances is to create social reality. Being constituted of representations, reality, particularly the institutional reality, is essentially linguistic.

Section V offers the general *conclusions* to our research, underscoring the efficiency of the instruments used for analysis and also the contributions that the present paper could bring to linguists or communication analysts interested in supplementing and completing my annalistic attempts. In stating this, I refer to a possible completion of my research that would include aspects of paralinguistic and nonverbal communication that could be extremely valuable in producing a thorough analysis of the speech of the two presidential contenders.

The type of presidential debate encounter has become one of the most watched since the 1960's Kennedy-Nixon first televised presidential debate. Following traditional argumentation theories, debates would be successful when opponents disagree or when one candidate manages to outshine the other. In 2012 as well as in 2008 presidential debate, Obama initiated a debate technique which seemed to contradict previously accepted debate logic, a feature which ensured his success. Not once did he agree with his opponent while substantially sustaining his arguments. Agreeing with your opponent in a debate is something which contradicts the function and purpose of debate in general.

Obama uses a seemingly contradictory type of agreeing that strengthens his position and presents his merits. This paradoxical expression of agreement, together with the framing techniques and conceptual metaphors he uses, reflected in the language employed within the debates, arouse interest. Thus, in order to discuss them, we identified them in the current literature so as to establish how framing a debate had previously been documented. After that,

we conducted a discourse analysis of the 2012 presidential debates. Based on the findings, we discussed and noted how the implications of these findings could guide readers to the basics of framing. Since words are defined in relation to frames, the two candidates' words evoke their own frames, and consequently their values.

In all three debates, both Mr. Romney and the President made use of a diversity of argumentative techniques corroborated with instances of framing meant to appeal to previous presidential speeches. Some of the frames are specific to President Obama; some others are used by Governor Romney as well. The "Path frame" occurs with both, as it is easily interpretable in its basic sense as well, the metaphor of the path not being a very complicated one. The representation of the economic crisis as a "hole", that is, "the hole frame", is made reference to by Obama, and in fewer occasions by Romney, in almost similar terms. "We the People" frame is the most reiterated of all as it is linked, especially towards the end of each debate, to the approach of "opportunity for all".

Still, there are specific frames which are characteristic only to one or the other of the two presidential contenders and which direct the listeners' attention to particular details they intend to emphasize. The *Progress frame* enables Obama to invite people to adhere to the idea of the unity of shared sacrifice (by joining efforts with the government). The frame of "a Place" has a similar vision with that of Lyndon Johnson's 'Great Society'. Romney thinks it is possible to achieve "the power to shape the civilization" in the "laboratories of democracy" (A1:13)[1] represented by the States. Even though this fundamental frame of society seen as a *building* or a *place* is part of the progressives' vision, Romney knows that by appealing to it, he actually awakens the desire of Americans to become once again the builders of the "Great Society", to rely less on government and more on the character of their nation.

"Freedom" creates a broader frame which stirs people's souls to service for a country that was conceived in liberty. "Free" and "freedom" that the President repeatedly uses are meant to awaken people's admiration for those who served in the war and pay them respect, to make them stay involved - as the action verbs "go", "start", "work', "make" suggest - in defending American principles in dire times.

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[1] This and all the following quotations which make no reference to a source are extracted from the transcript of Obama –Romney presidential debates found in the annexes attached to the thesis and abbreviated by A1(annexe 1), A2(annexe 2), and A3(annexe 3)

The "humble servant" frame, so much evoked in the first and particularly the third debate points to the government as the most capable agent to open "gateways of opportunity" (A1:25) and create frameworks and "ladders of opportunity" (A1:29). The government is personified due to its mission of serving people, just like a faithful servant. Obama speaks of it using the verbs "to open", "to create", "to give" attributed to human capacities. This personification of the government reminds us of George Washington's frame of "humble servant" represented by the President who was called by his country to serve.

Discussions of the context and of who utters what and with what goals were also paid attention to in the candidates' interaction, focusing on the assumed implicit contract that exists between the speakers and the hearers, similar to an underlying trust between the two. Therefore, telling the truth would be reasonable as a universal moral principle. Breaking such a contract of trust (and there were cases when the President refuted the Governor's evidence or vice –versa) implied a renegotiation of the contract and a susceptible passage from trust to diffidence. Concession and rebuttal acted in the case of both candidates by creating an inductive development of thinking before reaching the conclusion.

A salient property of the three debates was repetition. Even if, at times, Obama's almost identical repetition of strategic words and metaphors was annoying, it was used for a better reinforcement of a particular idea or frame. In doing so, he was convinced that it would finally become accepted and even adopted by the mind as if it had always been there.

As far as Romney was concerned, the need to display a good organization of ideas and self-confidence was obvious when he enumerated points or issues by numbering them. Although he did this quite often, it was not disturbing, because the transitional words he used created a sense of coherence and organization to the text. The idea that the country needed an "answer" as if it were a person to whom we could communicate things was repeated by Romney several times: "That's not the right answer for America. I'll restore the vitality that gets America working again." (A1:2) Some other times the word "answer" was replaced with a similar one in meaning (e.g. "policy", "course"): "this is not the kind of policy you want to have if you want to get America energy-secure"(A1:13), "whisking aside the 10th Amendment, which gives states the rights for these kinds of things, is not the course for America" (A1:24) Speaking in a very personal style, as opposed to Obama who seldom used the first person singular pronoun, Romney used it very often when he needed to justify his issues and so he became both more

demonstrative and convincing as the first person pronoun in the singular form is more likely to show force and authority than its plural form or the impersonal one which President Obama preferred.

Besides repetition (of features such as the ones enumerated above or of other key words and conceptual metaphors), pronouns, as always in any debate, are worth noting, particularly the use of inclusive "we" so often employed by both candidates with a view to evoking the "We the People" frame. The personal pronoun "I" in the first person singular was used to show intention and initiative and coupled with "we" to show unity in action and purpose. The presence of the personal pronoun "we" in the case of Obama together with a greater use of action verbs as compared to Romney's preference for the first person singular "I", seemed to indicate a more confident and combative incumbent against the challenger. President Obama also used the third person pronoun in the singular "he" as a means to accuse Romney but in a more polite way in front of the public, since the second person pronoun "you" sounded more accusative. In certain cases, we could also notice the colloquial use of "you" as an indefinite pronoun.

The *elevator speech technique* the two candidates also employed in their debates enabled them to directly and clearly transmit the values of their parties' policies and the level of discussion was consequently raised to the most prominent core values they believed in. This clear statement of values made the ideas evident and the way to express them stronger and full of impact.

In conclusion, the thesis combines features of discourse analysis (or the close study of talk in context) with features of rhetorical criticism that analyzes language and argument strategies in speeches, most specifically in political speeches. Thus, it provides communication researchers with an effective way to study how people assign responsibility and blame, present themselves or persuade others, put differently, to reframe and address disciplinary concerns in powerful and persuasive new ways. From this, perspective, I argue, the present thesis brings such issues into focus that are backgrounded or invisible in other disciplinary viewpoints, offering a distinct and valuable voice to the multidisciplinary approaches to discourse.

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