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Expressing and resisting power in American political debates

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Abstract

The paper investigates political debates in the US to determine how power relations are expressed through language in a controlled situational context. As Presidential campaign events, debates have generated a great deal of interest; thanks to the new media, they bring together large audiences and are crucial in creating, maintaining and enforcing politicians' identities. Party political debates paving the way to the party candidacy for the 2016 American Presidential elections are examined to see how politicians interact in a public multiple interview. The goal of this paper is to see what strategies politicians use to enact, reproduce and resist power relations (Fairclough 1989, 2010), while respecting the debate rules and the mediation by appointed journalists. Political debates occur in potentially conflicting situations of asymmetrical talk in which political 'face' (Brown, Levinson 1987) is at risk. The paper thus examines the turn of politicians' roles which shift from an attacking attitude - enacting strategies to express power - to a defensive attitude of facework (Masumoto, et al. 2000). In conclusion, debates play a vital role in constructing the US political life by encouraging politicians to manage discussion and conflict using different strategies, challenging the role of the moderator as the participant in the most powerful position.

Keywords: Political debates; power relations; discourse analysis;

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1. Introduction

This paper intends to analyse oral discourse in the context of public interviews involving journalists and politicians to examine the strategies they use to enact, reproduce and resist power relationships. The roles of the participants are analysed to see how they affect the expression of power in the interactions. Norman Fairclough's studies on power and language (1989, 2014) provide, among others (Kedar, 1987; Lakoff, 1990; Simpson & Mayr, 2010), the theoretical model adapted to carry out the present analysis.

The partial results presented in this paper are part of a larger project involving specific research on American Presidential debates prior to the 2016 political elections. The debates examined below belong to the series of debates scheduled by the two parties with a view to the 2016 Presidential elections. Their goal is to pave the way to the selection of a Party candidate who will run for the Presidency.

Because their strong impact in creating trends in public opinion is well established, political debates are a common practice in the USA. In crucial moments such as Presidential campaigns, the stage of politics moves from inherently dedicated locations, such as the Congress, to more open locations, such as Party Conventions and TV interviews, in search of national resonance and large audiences. Since the mid-twentieth century, politicians have learned how to act in public events in order to gain the public's attention and hopefully their votes. Politicians' utterances are targeted more to the general public than to their politician mates, so their communication style has undergone a deep process of change, with different results.

Debates play a prominent role in the political process of selecting party nominees and presidential candidates for presidential elections. Public opinion polls have been conducted which have confirmed the relevance of public debates in shaping trends and political opinions.

According to Pew Research Center's (www.pewresearch.org) post-election survey, 67% of voters in the 2008 election said the debates between Barack Obama and John McCain were *very* or *somewhat* helpful in deciding which candidate to vote for. On October 3, 2012, an estimated 67.2 million people watched a debate between President Barack Obama and the Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney. In the 2016 presidential election cycle, at least 20 debates will take place including primary debates and general election debates.

On August 6, 2015, the Democratic National Committee (www.democrats.org/more/the-2016-primary-debate-schedule) announced the locations for six debates, and their specific dates until March 2016. Two forums, in which candidates do not respond directly to each other, were later also announced.

The 2015-2016 debate schedule was announced by the Republican National Committee (www.gop.com/2016-gophq/event_schedule/?schedule_type=debate) on January 16, 2015. It revealed that 12 debates would be held, fewer than the 20 debates and forums held in the past Presidential elections from 2011 to 2012.

The present paper takes into consideration two Party debates, one for each party.

For the Democratic Party, the selected debate is the one held in Las Vegas on October 13, 2015 featuring Lincoln Chafee (now out of the race), Hillary Clinton, Martin O'Malley, Bernie Sanders, and Jim Webb (now out of the race), sponsored by CNN, Nevada Democratic Party and Facebook, and moderated by Anderson Cooper, Dana Bash, Juan Carlos Lopez, and Don Lemon.

For the Republican Party, the debate considered here is the primetime one held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on November 10, 2015 featuring Donald Trump, Ben Carson, Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, Jeb Bush, Carly Fiorina, John Kasich, and Rand Paul, sponsored by Fox Business and Wall Street Journal. The appointed moderators were: Maria Bartiromo, Neil Cavuto, and Gerard Baker.

2. Political debates as social struggles for power

Language is never neutral. On the contrary, it conveys many implications, even when the speakers are not aware of them. It is a very powerful tool that can be used to control or to shape the thoughts of others. Politicians know that it is the most powerful weapon and the most effective tool to win political support, thus they place special attention to their communicative and interactional style.

Every time people interact, they enact, reproduce and sometimes resist power relationships through language.

Power is rarely equally distributed between the speakers, even in casual conversations where the speakers are apparently at the same level of power and have “the least or no power differential” (Kress, 1985).

Part of the individual’s power of influencing the interactions with others is personal, as it depends on characteristics such as their ability to master the language and their ability to realize when to talk, what to say, and how to say it. Power also arises from the social relationships between the people involved in the interactions, from their reliability and from mutual respect. Another share of power stems from the social role a person fills. In some institutional contexts, some speakers are recognized as powerful because of their institutional roles which determine an asymmetrical distribution of the speakers’ rights and obligations. When the speakers do not contribute to the interaction on equal basis because they do not have the same status, the interaction unfolds alongside an expected pattern, which anticipates that respect and compliance are bestowed upon the ones considered more powerful as a direct effect of their roles. In some cases, the speakers do not have the same rights and obligations, such as the right to ask questions, or the obligation to avoid interruption or avoid silence. In an institutional context such as a police interview, some speakers, i.e. police officers, are the ones who are expected to control the interaction. In such cases, characterized by asymmetrical speaking rights and obligations, the person asking the questions is considered to be in a more powerful position than the person who has to answer the questions, which makes these kinds of interactions different from ordinary conversation. However, the power deriving from an institutional position can be challenged, as better discussed below.

Power is constantly being contested, and often it is only concealed by the apparent equality of a casual context (Eggins & Slade, 1997). In some occasions people agree to cooperate in talk and contribute to the interaction on an equal basis, but in other situations, such as political debates, the interaction is not open to free individual interventions, being regulated by rules that theoretically no speaker has the power to ignore.

Dominant participants exercise their power by controlling and limiting the contributions of non-powerful participants (Fairclough, 1989). However, in every interaction, power is not steady, it is won, exercised, sustained, and lost in the course of a social struggle; from this perspective, political debates are social struggles. Those who hold power at a particular moment have to constantly reassert their power, and those who do not hold power are always liable to make a bid for power (Fairclough, 1989).

The two categories of speakers in political debates, e.g. moderators and politicians, assert their dominant positions and try not to be dominated by the others. The usual consideration about institutional talk, i.e. the person responsible for questioning is invested with huge power, is challenged in political debates, since the politicians are not willing to be dominated by journalists and take the chance to show their power and appear as effective as possible in front of the large audience that is sometimes virtual.

Political debates can be compared to a stage where the actors perform their roles, and act according to a predetermined script. Roles are clearly established from the beginning.

The simple act of introducing the invited politicians implies a definition of the roles, determining who is who- host and guest. In fact, in the role of host, the journalists provide and enforce the rules of

the game. They have the power to manage time, to decide how long the politicians can talk and to cut them off in case they run overtime. They make certain that every speaker has their share in the talk, stopping cross-talk and keeping order. Moreover, they ask the questions the politicians have to answer, which is the attribution that provides them with the greatest amount of power. And even more crucially, they cannot tolerate pauses or hesitations, so they rapidly move to another question to fill the gaps, which are inadmissible in such events. Not being able to answer immediately is thus considered a sign of weakness, and deciding to move forward is an act of power.

The role of politicians seems to be simpler, as they are only supposed to answer the questions when required to do so. However, in actual fact the debates develop in a different way, as politicians do not always seem to be willing to cooperate and accept questions and timing, being eager to take maximum advantage of the opportunity to be 'visible' to the nation.

In theory, journalists seem to have a dominant position. Their questioning style has changed over time, turning from deferential to critical (Nimmo & Newsome, 1997). Today the questioning attitude has become confrontational rather than informative, sometime even a little aggressive, as a result of a long path towards the emancipation of journalism from politics. Political interviews in the early years of TV broadcasting, the 1950s and 1960s, were relatively deferential. Politicians were often in command of the situation, sometimes they simply broke off the conversation in order to read out a prepared statement. Early television broadcasting was in general politer than in current times, but that is not the only reason for the non-confrontational conversational style adopted in political interviews. In actual fact, journalism and journalists were part of the establishment and sometimes backed the government by creating public opinion on issues such as fear of communism or the Cold War. Watergate probably started a new generation of independent investigative reporters who paved the way to a new impudent journalistic style.

In an article early this year, The Guardian criticizes today's political interviews, maintaining that they often fall into a familiar pattern, in which politicians are committed to saying only what they want to say, whatever questions may be asked, and the interviewer's only hope is to crack this facade. In their words, "the whole enterprise becomes essentially performative" (www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/20/the-aggressive-political-interview-its-not-just-sales-and-alberici). The article regards political interviews as ritualized confrontations, where what is mostly at stake is the capacity of a politician to maintain their persona under fire. Whether or not any new information emerges about policy or its implementation is rather beside the point. The role of the journalists is, thus, to keep the politicians under fire, and the role of the politicians is to keep pace with the interviewer and end up with a self-reliant attitude, being able to persuade the public of their personal, rather than political, qualities. Under this perspective, political debates are big shows, broadcast as such by television, which follow the current trend of emphasising the 'spectacle' side of politics.

Thus the expected role of the journalists is to ask thorny questions while not taking sides or giving opinions, and keeping a neutral stance. When politicians do not cooperate adequately, aggressive and hostile questioning may be taken as bias on the part of the journalists, who are expected to act beyond formal charges of distortion, inaccuracy and partiality.

3. Negotiation of power

Power is not obtained once and for all. Power is won and lost very easily in every interaction. The most powerful person "limits" the contributions of the less powerful participant in a continuous negotiation.

Some devices can be used to achieve this goal, among which: interruption, enforcing explicitness, controlling topic, formulation; some examples of these devices spotted in the Party debates mentioned above are provided in the following sections.

3.1 [Resistance to] Interruption

Interruptions are usually considered as violations of the common rules of conversation that envisage turn-taking to provide each speaker with their fair part in the conversation. Through interruption dominant speakers can dismiss or ignore contributions which they consider irrelevant (Simpson & Mayr 2010). Interruptions in political debates thus express the power to limit others; they can be used either by the journalists to control the politicians' answers or by the politicians to interfere with the journalists or to prevent other politicians from talking. Interruptions are not always negative forms of constraining, but in some cases can have positive functions, as they can be conceived as a "restoration of order (turn-taking) rather than conversational deviance" (Murray, 1987).

Interruptions are very common in political debates, and the examples abound. Below there is an extract from the Republican debate, in which the moderator, Baker, is trying to give the floor to Bush, but he is interrupted by the other politicians who keep interrupting each other because they want to enter the conversation and have their say. Even if he is the journalist in charge of managing the interview and thus he is supposed to be in the most powerful position, Baker has a lot of trouble letting Bush talk. In the end he has to address Trump directly, almost asking for his permission to introduce Bush into the conversation. The final impression from this passage is that the journalist is not able to dominate the scene, while Trump and Kasich are overlapping, and Bush, supposedly crushed by his opponents, seems to be the winner as he elegantly comes up with an ironic gag, thanking Trump for letting him talk.

BAKER: Governor Bush...
KASICH: Jerry, Gerald, it was an attack.
(CROSSTALK)
(UNKNOWN): If you're not going to have my back, I'm going to have my back.
(UNKNOWN): A couple things here. First of all...
BAKER: Governor -- Governor, you...
BAKER: You should let Jeb speak.
(UNKNOWN): We have grown -- we have grown...
TRUMP: No, it's unfair.
(CROSSTALK)
KASICH: In the state of Ohio, the state of Ohio, we have grown 347,000 jobs [...] but if Mr. Trump understood that the real jobs come in the downstream [...] Children would be terrified, and it will not work.
(CROSSTALK)
TRUMP: ... built an unbelievable company worth billions and billions of dollars. I don't have to hear from this man, believe me. I don't have to hear from him.
BAKER: Mr. Trump, Mr. Trump, you yourself -- you yourself said let Governor Bush speak. Governor Bush?
BUSH: Thank you, Donald, for allowing me to speak at the debate. That's really nice of you. Really appreciate that. (APPLAUSE) What a generous man you are.
From Republican Debate, November 10, 2015

3.2 Enforcing explicitness

When facing difficult situations, speakers may use ambiguous utterances to avoid being too precise. In such cases, the more powerful person may demand for disambiguation (Thomas 1990: 134). In the excerpt below taken from the Democrat debate, the moderator, Cooper, challenges Clinton by quoting two of her statements in which apparently she said opposite things. His question is rather

direct and sharp. Moreover, quoting the politician's exact words is a way to express power, nailing them to their own responsibilities. After Clinton's non satisfying answer, Cooper asks an even more aggressive question, and obtains a direct answer: "I'm a progressive", which could be apparently satisfying if it wasn't for the following: "But" which introduces another escape from directness. Again, in this passage, the journalist's attempt at clarification is not completely successful and the politician is able to sneak off.

COOPER: Secretary Clinton, though, with all due respect, the question is really about political expediency. Just in July, New Hampshire, you told the crowd you'd, quote, "take a back seat to no one when it comes to progressive values". Last month in Ohio, you said you plead guilty to, quote, "being kind of moderate and center". Do you change your political identity based on who you're talking to?

CLINTON: No. I think that, like most people that I know, I have a range of views, but they are rooted in my values and my experience. And I don't take a back seat to anyone when it comes to progressive experience and progressive commitment. [...]

COOPER: Just for the record, are you a progressive, or are you a moderate?

CLINTON: I'm a progressive. But I'm a progressive who likes to get things done. And I know... (APPLAUSE) ... how to find common ground, and I know how to stand my ground, and I have proved that in every position that I've had, even dealing with Republicans who never had a good word to say about me, honestly. But we found ways to work together on everything from...

COOPER: Secretary...

From Democratic Debate, October 13, 2015

3.3 Topic control

In informal conversation the way topics develop is often unpredictable. In institutional interactions topics are introduced and changed by the dominant person according to a pre-set agenda. In political debates the agenda is set by journalists, who have the questions ready in advance and set the rules of time and turn shifting. In many cases, the large public is asked to collaborate in the preparation phase by sending in questions to be asked to the politicians through social media. The advances in communication technology allow continuous interaction and provide live feedback on the reception of an event even during the unfolding of the debate. Thus controlling the topic has become much more difficult, as the topic develops independently in parallel channels, such as Facebook and above all Twitter, even stealing the spotlight from the main event. Controlling the topic has thus become launching the topic, that then develops in its own ways along other lines. For instance, during the Democratic Debate held on October 13, Donald Trump held a parallel session on Twitter, commenting on what was going on at the debate, shifting the topic from what was being said on the stage to his personal ideas. However, the interaction between different channels of communication is a fascinating subject that deserves more space for analysis so it is not to be discussed here. Going back to the dynamics of topic control during the debate, even if journalists set the agenda and decide what has to be discussed, sometimes politicians use a "bridging" technique that moves them from the question they want to elude to what they want to say. Politicians often use phrases like: "let's start at the beginning", or "before I answer that", or "what's important to remember" and then side-step the question. Resorting to this technique is a means to express power on behalf of the politicians who in the end have their say irrespective of the question; even if they are taken back to task by the journalists who exercise their power and insist on an answer, politicians have already had a chance.

Below there is an excerpt from the Democratic debate, in which the moderator, Bash, expresses his power saying to Sanders "I want to bring you in here", implying he is the one in charge of controlling the topic. However, the politician refuses to answer directly and starts from another perspective. He gets his chance to express his ideas, but in the end he has to succumb to the direct question the

journalist asks for the second time, highlighting the previous lack of answer, but even after the second direct question, the answer is rather vague.

BASH: Senator Sanders — Senator Sanders, I want to bring you in here. My question for you is, as a congressman, you voted against the Iraq War. You voted against the Gulf War. You're just talking about Syria, but under what circumstances would a President Sanders actually use force?

SANDERS: Let me just respond to something the secretary said. First of all, she is talking about, as I understand it, a no-fly zone in Syria, which I think is a very dangerous situation. Could lead to real problems. Second of all, I heard the same evidence from President Bush and Dick Cheney and Don Rumsfeld about why we should overthrow Saddam Hussein and get involved in the — I would urge people to go to *berniesanders.com*, hear what I said in 2002. And I say, without any joy in my heart, that much of what I thought would happen about the destabilization, in fact, did happen. So I think...

BASH: All right. (APPLAUSE)

SANDERS: I think the president is trying very hard to thread a tough needle here, and that is to support those people who are against Assad, against ISIS, without getting us on the ground there, and that's the direction I believe we should have (inaudible).

COOPER: But, Senator Sanders, you didn't answer the question. Under what — under what circumstances would you actually use force?

SANDERS: Well, obviously, I voted, when President Clinton said, "let's stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo," I voted for that. I voted to make sure that Osama bin Laden was held accountable in Afghanistan. When our country is threatened, or when our allies are threatened, I believe that we need coalitions to come together to address the major crises of this country. I do not support the United States getting involved in unilateral action.

From Democratic Debate, October 13, 2015

3.4 Formulation

Formulation is the practice of "summarizing, glossing or developing the gist" (Heritage, 1985). They are the conversational privilege of people with institutional power. In settings such as police interviews or classrooms, they are mainly used to check understanding.

In broadcast interviews formulations are addressed not only to the people being interviewed but also to the audience. Formulations have different functions: they make the contribution of others more intelligible, more explicit, or more understandable, thus helping the audience follow, but also have the function to make the interaction proceed by pushing the speakers to accept or refute them. They are by no means neutral forms of interaction, as they always imply subjective interpretations from the dominant speaker. In political debates, journalists often use formulations to prompt further comments from other speakers. Among the devices mentioned here, formulation is the one more susceptible to the accusation of bias on behalf of the dominant speaker, as it may imply oversimplification or provocative misunderstanding. When the dominant speaker is in a situation of total control of the interaction, formulations can be considered a way to have the others accept the dominant speaker's interpretation as the only one possible or true. In political debates, however, they are used as ways to provoke discussion and to take the interaction to a new combative level. An example is provided below. During the Democratic debate, the moderator, Cooper, provokes Clinton by asking her why her ideas are better than those of her running mates. She accepts the challenge and answers using other comparative forms to linguistically emphasise the superiority of her political vision. Then the moderator reasserts his power by formulating Clinton's long explanation into a simple sentence, using again a comparative form, and turning it to Sanders as a confrontational question. He obviously gets a rejection by Sanders who does not accept the pretended pre-eminence of Clinton's political plan.

COOPER: Just for viewers at home who may not be reading up on this, Glass-Steagall is the Depression-era banking law repealed in 1999 that prevented commercial banks from engaging in investment banking and insurance activities. Secretary Clinton, he raises a fundamental difference on this stage. Senator Sanders wants to break up the big Wall Street banks. You don't. You say charge the banks more, continue to monitor them. Why is your plan better?

CLINTON: Well, my plan is more comprehensive. And frankly, it's tougher because of course we have to deal with the problem that the banks are still too big to fail. We can never let the American taxpayer and middle class families ever have to bail out the kind of speculative behavior that we saw. But we also have to worry about some of the other players — AIG, a big insurance company; Lehman Brothers, an investment bank. There's this whole area called "shadow banking." That's where the experts tell me the next potential problem could come from.

CLINTON: So I'm with both Senator Sanders and Governor O'Malley in putting a lot of attention onto the banks. And the plan that I have put forward would actually empower regulators to break up big banks if we thought they posed a risk. But I want to make sure we're going to cover everybody, not what caused the problem last time, but what could cause it next time.

(CROSSTALK)

COOPER: Senator Sanders, Secretary Clinton just said that her policy is tougher than yours.

SANDERS: Well, that's not true.

From Democratic Debate, October 13, 2015

4. Conclusions

Political debates play a vital role in constructing American political life. They provide space and time for politicians to compare their ideas and publically discuss their vision of the future of the nation. Since television has supported political events, they have implemented and have increasingly marked the development of American collective identity and the identification with national leaders. American people are very attentive to debates which provide the occasion to discuss the most controversial issues of the time, showing the personal and human side of politicians along with their political ideas.

Political debates occur in potentially conflicting situations of asymmetrical talk on which the speakers do not share the same rights and obligations as a result of their different social roles. Being specialised forms of asymmetrical talk, they specifically involve politicians and journalists in interviews with the goal of expressing the politicians' political plans for the nation. The different roles filled by the speakers provide them with different levels of power. In the institutional context of the studio, journalists have the power to set the agenda, managing time and speaking turns, however sometimes they are not able to adequately control the agenda, being challenged by the interviewees who derive their power from their social status as politicians. When political debates are unbiased and well organised, they are confrontations between titans, characterized by continuous and mutual negotiation of power.

It is interesting to see how journalists cope with maintaining their neutral stance as mediators, while trying to perform as dominant participants. On the other hand, politicians may refuse to answer irritating questions and try to manage discussion and conflict to their own ends, challenging the role of the moderators as the participants in the most powerful position. Power relations in the particular types of political debates considered in this paper, i.e. Party debates, are slightly different from the most important type of political debates, i.e. Presidential debates involving the two candidates to the Presidency. In the context of Presidential debates, the two opponents fight a no-holds battle with each other, and the moderators' role seems to be to limit the politicians' power in these harsh confrontations rather than to express their own. Party debates are peculiar, as the politicians belong to the same Party, and are competing to gain the official candidature to the Presidency. When the

scheduled debates are over and one candidate is chosen to represent the Party in the Presidential election, the politicians now confronting each other in Party debates will probably join in the Presidential campaign by backing the Party candidate, who will be one of them.

Seen from this perspective, the power relations demonstrated by politicians belonging to the same party, and so sharing a certain vision of life, are not as harsh as the power relations demonstrated by politicians belonging to two different parties. Even though they are competing for the party candidacy and each of them wants to attract attention to themselves by eclipsing the others, fair play is the rule. They are, or may be, aggressive sometimes, but the expressions of power are addressed to the journalists more than to the other politicians. The level of aggression will increase significantly in the final presidential debates, when only two candidates from the two parties will perform.

In conclusion, journalists have gradually gained their independence from politics and feel free to ask as many hard questions as possible. They have to cause as much discomfort as possible, for the sake of justice and for the sake of show. On their part, politicians have developed strategies to resist the journalists' agenda. Thus journalists and politicians seem to take turns in performing the role of the most powerful person, and negotiate power as the debate goes on. In some cases, the politicians win, in others they have to surrender to their interviewers. However, for the benefit of all, politicians have become more accountable and more ready to address their responsibilities.

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