

WORDS AT WAR I.
THE 1ST BUSH VS GORE DEBATE¹:
A SEMINAR FOR THE POLITICAL SCIENCES.

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Abstract

I dibattiti televisivi in generale e per primi quelli per le elezioni presidenziali americane sono costruiti sulla competizione di interessi tra due candidati che cercano di conquistare la fiducia dei potenziali votanti.

Lo studio delle principali tecniche retoriche utilizzate dai due antagonisti può portare ad un quadro esplicativo delle loro diverse strategie comunicative che possono rivelare la natura del loro atteggiamento nei confronti del pubblico.

Questa analisi si propone di illustrare come il mezzo televisivo abbia creato una sorta di penetrazione tra un tipo di comunicazione formale/istituzionale ed uno informale/colloquiale.

Il primo è normalmente associato al linguaggio pubblico e della politica, il secondo è invece quello della conversazione informale.

A conclusione si ipotizza inoltre come questo linguaggio ibrido

¹ The 90 minute American 2000 debate between Vice President Gore and Governor Bush took place in Boston, Massachusetts. The moderator Jim Lehrer, at the beginning of the broadcast, stated the rules and format of the debate:

“No answer to a question can exceed two minutes. Rebuttals are limited to one minute. But as moderator, I have the option to follow up and to extend any particular give and take another three and a half minutes. But even then, no single answer can exceed two minutes. The candidates, under their rules, may not question each other directly. There will be no opening statements, but each candidate may have up to two minutes for a closing statement. The questions and the subjects were chosen by me alone. I have told no one from the two campaigns or the commission or anyone else involved what they are”.

abbia influenzato la vita politica contemporanea e si propongono anche nuovi spunti per l'approfondimento dell'analisi.

Introduction

Televised election debates, constructed on the competitive interests of two people that meet in front of a wide public, become arenas where each candidate tries to conquer the trust of the potential voters at the expense of the antagonist.

The following analysis is based on the written transcription of the first debate between Vice President Gore and Governor Bush and is primarily concerned with its verbal features, so that the significant instances of paralinguistic (prosody) and non-linguistic behaviour (facial expressions, gestures) are not included in this study.

Both the candidates realise two main communicative tasks characterising the discourse² of political broadcast talk, that is:

- 1) They give relevant info about the electoral programmes,
- 2) They want to convince the audience about the reliability of their election platforms and about the unreliability of the opponent's.

Although there are similarities in the way the debaters deal with the above communicative tasks, it is possible to find different "approaches" to the rhetoric of politics.

The Stylistics of Broadcast Politics

The main communicative tasks of both debaters is that of giving information about their electoral programmes; in performing this task they try on the one hand to convey the sense they are the *sine qua non* for their country; on the other hand, they also try to show the defects and faults of each other platforms.

There is a number of rhetorical devices employed to persuade the potential voters such as: contrastive pairs, repetitions of phrases, the list of (at least) three items, and a cunning use of adjectives, intensifiers, and forms of address (Beard 2000: Unit two, Unit three; Clark

² A discourse is a 'practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and contrasting the world in meaning' (Fairclough 1992: 64).

& Pinch 1995: 36; Hawthorn 1987: Ch. 10). Besides comparing the above devices, this paper also proposes an analysis of the most frequent metaphors mentioned by the candidates. The approach is that of the cognitive theories of metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) which see them as linguistic expressions and mental representations.

There is distinction between the metaphors as linguistic expressions and metaphors as mental representations; the latter are conventionally expressed in small capital (A is B) where A is the 'target' domain and B is the 'source' domain. For example, in POLITICS IS WAR/GAME: A = POLITICS and B = WAR/GAME.

The attention in this paper is focused on the value of metaphors in the discourse strategies of the two debaters as the systematic metaphors³ found show that the discourse of politics is represented by constant semantic fields and the results of the study suggest the two politicians make use of all the categories to convince spectators of their reliability.

As for the identification of the rhetorical elements and of the metaphors, the text has been searched manually and then the function *Concord* and of WordSmith Tools 3.0⁴ has been used in order to obtain a precise count of the data.

The rhetorical devices

The contrastive pairs are normally constructed in such a way as to show the differences between the two platforms. For instance⁵, Gore first opposes the cost of Bush's tax cut proposal for the "wealthiest 1 per cent" to the spending proposed for education, medicare, and social security. Then, he also makes the indirect criticism of his opponent's

³ The list of figures of speech taken into consideration is that in Appendix 3.

⁴ For a detailed description of WordSmith Tools see M. Scott, *WordSmith Tools Version 3*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁵ The references to the rhetorical devices of the candidates are here limited to a selection of quotations from the entire script, for those who wish to read the whole debate, they can find it at <mailto: www.debates.org>. All the quotations are taken from Appendix 1; the topic of the questions asked by the moderator are indicated by a letter (A, B, C, D); the parts of text from the debate transcript have been numbered to make quoting easier.

plan explicit when he says: “Now, I think those are the wrong priorities” (A, 3). As for Bush, he opposes in his rebuttal the “politics and finger pointing” to “some positive things” (A, 5), implying that it is time to do real things for the country rather than talking about it.

Repetitions are a constant element of the entire broadcast, especially in Gore’s turns. One of his recurrent phrases is “if I’m entrusted with the presidency”, as in (A, 2) which opens a list of commitments introduced by the future tense (see Appendix 1 below). More examples of repetitions are: his invitation to “work out the numbers” (B, 6, 10) coming from the two tax-plans, and the reference to the “wealthiest 1 per cent” (A, 3; B, 6), favoured by Bush’s tax-cuts. As regards Bush, he reacts to Gore’s reference to numbers by calling it “fuzzy maths” (B, 11) and he often stresses his capacity of “working with both Republicans and Democrats” (A, 4). The candidates also use lists of items (normally three), a particular type of repetition. Bush denounces the past unfulfilled promises of Gore’s party by repeating “eight years ago they campaigned... four years ago they campaigned...” (B, 8) and dramatically reminds a past experience with his “I remember” (D, 20), whereas Gore often stresses the points of his replies by starting the sentences with “I think” (C, 17).

As for the use of adjectives and intensifiers, Gore normally refers to his platform with redundant and positive attributes and describes Bush’s in a negative tone. He opens the debate with a high-sounding statement about “a very important moment...” for the country which has achieved “extraordinary prosperity” and has to make “an important choice” (A, 1) to infer the idea that only his election will give new prosperity to people. Also, he often judges Bush’s position as “wrong” (A, 3; C, 17). Bush chooses a different line, the attributes referred to his antagonist’s plan are meant to mock him, such as “fuzzy” (B, 11). What is more, he minimizes both what regards himself or his programme: “I was a small oil person” (C, 12) in the attempt to make people see him as one of them. The table of Frequency Wordlist⁶ (see Appendix 2 below) shows that the most common descriptive adjectives in Gore’s answers are “social” and “new” and they foreground his concern for the citizens and his intention of giving them a modern,

⁶ The Frequency Wordlist will be referred to as FW from now onwards in the body of the article.

new country. This is particularly interesting when compared to Bush's FW: there are no descriptive adjectives in the first 59 hits.

The use of adjectives is just one of the differences in the discourse features characterising the speech of the two debaters. One major point to make is about the forms of address: on the one hand, Gore formally addresses his antagonist as "Governor Bush" (FW, rank 31). On the other hand, Bush uses various titles "the man" (9 times), besides the formal "Vice President" as if clearly ignoring his position as a leader.

Another interesting feature of their speech shown by the frequency lists relates to pronouns "I, me" with Gore scoring more hits than Bush (see FW below). As it is, Gore often starts his turns with a first person subject (A, 1; A, 2; B, 6; C, 14, etc.), talking about himself or his opinions, whereas Bush also employs a second person pronoun, or impersonal subjects (A, 5; B, 8; B, 9; D, 22), which denotes how Gore's speech is more self-centred than his opponent's.

Another significant linguistic feature characterising Bush's turns is the use of the first person plural imperative "Let's" (A, 5). The use of the imperative, together with colloquialisms "it seems they can't get it done" (B, 8), common sayings "It's to scare people in the voting booth." (B, 11) and the attempt to ridicule his antagonist (B, 11) show his attitude towards the spectators: he wants to give up formalities and be considered as 'one of them'.

Metaphors

There are various metaphors which help the accomplishment of the two communicative tasks of political broadcast talk. As the concepts they subsumed depend on the type of the semantic field from which the figures of speech⁷ are taken, Table 1 below features a possible qualification:

⁷ Table 1 is adapted from E. Vaghi - M. Venuti, *Euro Currency in the British Press*, in **Language, Culture and Politics: Issues and Debates for the Political Sciences*, Napoli, CUEN, to be published in 2002.

Table 1

Categories:

WAR AND GAMES: expressing the idea of conflict and competition between two opponents.

MECHANICS: rendering abstract ideas in terms of mechanical concrete objects.

CONTAINERS: creating an opposition/equivalence between the 'container' and the 'contained'.

MOVEMENT: creating an analogy between up=positive connotation; down=negative connotation.

METONYMY (PERSONIFICATION): "a referent is replaced by the name of an attribute, or of an entity related in some semantic way"⁸. Also: "In PERSONIFICATIONS an object is described in terms of human characteristics, but no human beings are referred to"⁹.

The choices the opponents made as for the systematic metaphors are similar, nevertheless it is still possible to find a few differences in use during the debate. At this point, it is essential to mention a theory about the variation in metaphorical preference: in Rigotti F., *Il potere e le sue metafore*, (see References) she suggests that if on the one hand conservative politicians were using more figures of speech from the category POLITICS IS WAR/GAME, on the other she claims liberals are more inclined to using metaphors from the PERSONIFICATION: POLITICS IS A FAMILY TIE category. The results¹⁰ shown in this paper confirm this theory and also add a few elements of reflection on the matter.

The category with more hits in Bush's turns is that of POLITICS IS WAR/GAME, and it offers examples such as: "let's forget all the finger-pointing" (A, 5) referred to the necessity not to attack each other but to work together in order to make everybody's life better. Most of these figures of speech describe the struggle to get things done for the nation "we've been battling over abortion" and to ridicule the political choi-

⁸ K. Wales, *A Dictionary of Stylistics*, London, Longman, 1995, p. 297.

⁹ G. Lakoff - M. Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 33.

¹⁰ The most interesting lexical forms of metaphors and their frequency are featured in Appendix 3.

ces of the Vice President, who cannot but “try to scare people in the voting booth” (B, 11).

The second most frequent category is that of PERSONIFICATION through which the Governor of Texas expresses his hopes for his country to prosper and “grow”. Through this category he creates the image of a family relationship between him, a fatherly figure who can “help” the nation, and his potential voters who should “share” the economic surplus coming from Social Security with him.

In POLITICS IS MOVEMENT systematic metaphors great attention is made in describing as negative all those changes in the regular course of events which can cause the “overturn” or the “subversion” of the system; whereas very interesting is the nature of POLITICS IS A PHYSICAL OBJECT series of metaphors. Most of them refer to the “bridging of the gap” between Republicans and Democrats when referred to internal policy and to the “rebuilding” of the military forces when it comes to international policy, the rebuilding is not meant to make Bush “the world’s policeman”, but “the world’s peacemaker”.

The category POLITICS IS WAR/GAME is also that with more hits in Gore’s table. If, on the one hand, spectators could hear the predictable evocation of the Vice President “fights” for the middle class families; on the other, the interesting characteristic of his metaphorical selection is the use of terms referred to the world of drama. In this world the USA must “play a great/constructive/the lead role”, and he is the one who can “cast” his lot for the best.

There is a second category which has almost as many hits as the previous, that of POLITICS IS A CONTAINER/MOVEMENT. A recurrent expression is that regarding the Medicare and Social Security funds, which, according to Gore’s plan are to be closed in a “lockbox”¹¹ so that people could consider them as a safe haven even in times of economic distress. The same fatherly image that Bush gives in PERSONIFICATION can be found in Gore’s too. As it is, he often mentions the necessity to “help, protect and preserve”, not only people, but also the “natural treasures of the country” in contrast with Bush’s plan to open the Artic National Wildlife Refuge to the big oil companies.

¹¹ As for the recurrent theme of the lockbox in metaphors of politics, see F. Vaghi, *Le metafore del potere nel Beowulf e nel Leviathan di Hobbes*, «Quaderni del Dipartimento DISCLIC della Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere di Genova», Vol. XII, Genova, Tilgher, 2002, pp. 101-126.

Conclusions

The different use of the rhetorical devices of the two debaters can lead to a possible general statement about their attitude towards their potential voters.

The main feature of Gore's speech is the repetition of formulaic phrases and sentences having a cumulative effect whose aim is twofold: first, they give a sense of cohesion to the contents of his turns; second, spectators easily remember the points of an electoral plan as they are given in a repetitive, rhythmic prosody. Moreover, his figures of speech register a relatively even distribution between aggressive, war and game tokens and the more descriptive CONTAINER and PERSONIFICATION ones. In a word, Gore's rhetorical turns evoke the familiar, hegemonic, 'safe' and recognisable power relations institution/citizens subsumed by public discourse.

As for Bush, the sentences with first person plural imperatives and a vocabulary closer to everyday language give his turns a more colloquial, 'private' tone. This particular attitude towards spectators also renders more effective the metaphors of WAR/GAME he employs as if the aggressive tone subsumed by this metaphorical class sounded more 'natural' than his opponents'.

This contributes to the interpenetration between the formal style of public discourse, evoking dignity, authority and credibility with the informal style associated to private conversations, evoking friendly feelings. The public-colloquial (Leech 1966: 75) hybrid is therefore a public language addressed to a wide audience, having many features of colloquial language.

This means that what could be recognised as a power relation is cleverly masked in Bush's words, because they are uttered by someone who acts as a close friend rather than as a representative of the public institutions.

There are more linguistics elements which can be analysed to compare the styles of the debaters, see for example verbs, i.e. "think" (Gore WE, N 20) and "want" (Bush WE, N 22), and nouns ("money": Gore WE, N 59; Bush WE, N 28). There are also several issues remaining to be explored, which because of space limitations were not possible to be taken up here. Such issues are for example: the role of the journalist and the issues related to the way his personal style affects the questions he poses, the challenges he conveys or the defence he shows. These are

only part of the questions that remain open inviting future exploration.

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Appendix 1
Examples

(A) On Experience and Leading Capacities
(B)

1. GORE: I have actually not questioned Governor Bush's experience; I have questioned his proposals. And here's why: I think this is a very important moment for our country. We have achieved extraordinary prosperity. And in this election, America has to make an important choice: Will we use our prosperity to enrich not just the few but all of our families?
2. G: If I'm entrusted with the presidency, here are the choices that I will make: I'll balance the budget every year, I will pay down the national debt, I will put Medicare and Social Security in a lockbox and protect it, and I will cut taxes for middle class families.
3. G: Under Governor Bush's tax cut proposal, he would spend more money on tax cuts for the wealthiest 1 percent than all of the new spending that he proposes for education, health care, prescription drugs and national defence, all combined. Now, I think those are the wrong priorities.
4. BUSH: ... And I've had a proud record of working with both Republicans and Democrats, which is what our nation needs.
5. B: "Look, let's forget all the politics and all the finger-pointing and get some positive things done on Medicare and prescription drugs and Social Security."

(C) Medicare and Abortion Pill

6. GORE: I know that. The governor used the phrase "phony numbers", but if you — if you look at the plan and add the numbers up, these numbers are correct. He spends more money for tax cuts for the wealthiest 1 percent in all of his new spending proposals for health care, prescription drugs, education and national defence, all combined.
7. G: And when the phrase "strict constructionist" is used, and when

- the names of Scalia and Thomas are used as benchmarks for who would be appointed, those are code words, and nobody should mistake this, for saying that the governor would appoint people who would overturn *Roe v. Wade*. I mean, just — it's very clear to me.
8. BUSH: Well, here's what I've said: I've said, Jim, I've said that eight years ago they campaigned on prescription drugs for seniors, and four years ago they campaigned on getting prescription drugs for seniors, and now they're campaigning on getting prescription drugs for seniors. It seems like they can't get it done.
 9. B: You've had your chance, Vice President. You've been there for eight years and nothing has been done.
 10. GORE: ... if you work out the numbers...
 11. BUSH: Look, this is the man who's got great numbers. He talks about numbers. I'm beginning to think, not only did he invent the Internet, but he invented the calculator. (LAUGHTER) It's fuzzy math. It's to scare them, trying to scare people in the voting booth.

(C) Future Oil Price and Supply Problems

12. BUSH: Well, it's an issue I know a lot about. I was a small oil person for a while in West Texas.
13. B: And you bet I want to open up a small part of — a part of Alaska because when that field is on-line, it will produce a million barrels a day. Today we import a million barrels from Saddam Hussein.
14. GORE: Now, I could probably give you some other examples of decisions over the last 24 years. I have been in public service for 24 years, Jim...
15. G: ... Let me give you some specific examples...
16. G: I strongly support new accountability; so does Governor Bush. I strongly support local control; so does Governor Bush.
17. G: They currently favour going forward with a runoff election. I think that's the wrong thing. I think the governor's instinct is not necessarily bad, because we have worked with the Russians in a constructive way, in Kosovo, for example, to end the conflict there. But I think we need to be very careful in the present situation before we invite the Russians to play the lead role in mediating...

18. BUSH: Well, the man loves his wife, and I appreciate that a lot, and I love mine. And the man loves his family a lot, and I appreciate that because I love my family.

(D) Handling the Unexpected

19. GORE: When the action in Kosovo was dragging on, and we were searching for a solution to the problem, our country had defeated the adversary on the battlefield without a single American life being lost in combat, but the dictator Milosevic was hanging on, I invited the former prime minister of Russia to my house and took a risk in asking him to...

20. BUSH: I — you know, as governor, one of the things you have to deal with is catastrophe. I can remember the fires that swept Parker County, Texas. I remember the floods that swept our state. I remember going down to Del Rio, Texas.

21. GORE: Look, Governor Bush, you have attacked my character and credibility and I am not going to respond in kind. I think we ought to focus on the problems and not attack each other. And one of the serious problems, hear me well, is that our system of government is being undermined by too much influence coming from special interest money. We have to get a handle on it.

22. BUSH: No, there's no difference on that. There is a difference, though, as to what the economy has meant. I think the economy has meant more for the Gore and Clinton folks than the Gore and Clinton folks has meant for the economy.

Appendix 2

Frequency Wordlist

Bush

N	Word	Freq.	% Lemmas
1	THE	408	5,17
2	TO	376	4,76
3	AND	226	2,86
4	OF	203	2,57
5	A	199	2,52
6	I	187	2,37
7	IN	144	1,82
8	THAT	117	1,48
9	IS	97	1,23
10	YOU	96	1,22
11	WE	89	1,05
12	FOR	81	1,03
13	IT'S	70	0,89
14	BE	62	0,79
15	GOING	58	0,73
16	HAVE	55	0,70
17	IT	55	0,70
18	NOT	55	0,70
19	MY	47	0,60
20	ON	46	0,58
21	WHAT	45	0,57
22	WANT	43	0,54
23	WITH	42	0,53
24	PLAN	41	0,52
25	DO	40	0,51
26	OUR	40	0,51
27	THAT'S	37	0,47
28	MONEY	36	0,46
29	THIS	36	0,46
30	GET	35	0,44
31	AS	33	0,42
32	BUT	33	0,42
33	ARE	32	0,41
34	CAN	32	0,41
35	MAKE	32	0,41
36	OR	32	0,41
37	PEOPLE	32	0,41
38	THINK	32	0,41
39	SO	31	0,39
40	THEIR	31	0,39
41	IF	30	0,38
42	KNOW	30	0,38
43	THEY	30	0,38
44	WELL	30	0,38
45	ABOUT	29	0,37
46	PRESIDENT	29	0,37
47	SENIORS	29	0,37
48	WHO	29	0,37
49	ALL	28	0,35
50	HE	28	0,35
51	NEED	28	0,35
52	WILL	28	0,35
53	YOUR	28	0,35
54	I'M	26	0,33
55	NO	25	0,32
56	THERE'S	25	0,32
57	ME	24	0,30
58	JUST	23	0,29
59	TIME	23	0,29

Gore

N	Word	Freq.	% Lemmas
1	THE	432	5,83
2	TO	248	3,34
3	AND	245	3,30
4	I	203	2,74
5	OF	166	2,24
6	A	165	2,22
7	THAT	147	1,98
8	IN	136	1,83
9	FOR	108	1,46
10	HAVE	91	1,23
11	WE	79	1,07
12	IS	75	1,01
13	YOU	70	0,94
14	IT	61	0,82
15	ON	57	0,77
16	NOT	49	0,66
17	THIS	49	0,66
18	OUR	48	0,65
19	IF	44	0,59
20	THINK	44	0,59
21	ALL	42	0,57
22	ARE	42	0,57
23	BE	40	0,54
24	BUT	40	0,54
25	WILL	38	0,51
26	SECURITY	37	0,50
27	WOULD	36	0,49
28	MY	34	0,46
29	NOW	34	0,46
30	WITH	34	0,46
31	GOVERNOR	33	0,44
32	THEY	32	0,43
33	YEARS	32	0,43
34	AS	31	0,42
35	MAKE	29	0,39
36	SOCIAL	29	0,39
37	HAS	28	0,38
38	NEW	28	0,38
39	ONE	28	0,38
40	FROM	27	0,36
41	ME	27	0,36
42	GO	26	0,35
43	PEOPLE	26	0,35
44	WHO	26	0,35
45	IT'S	25	0,34
46	JUST	25	0,34
47	OR	24	0,32
48	AT	23	0,31
49	TAX	23	0,31
50	DO	22	0,30
51	GET	22	0,30
52	HE	22	0,30
53	OUT	22	0,30
54	PLAN	22	0,30
55	THAT'S	22	0,30
56	UNDER	22	0,30
57	BECAUSE	21	0,28
58	MEDICARE	21	0,28
59	MONEY	21	0,28

Appendix 3

Bush tokens n=98. 44,34%

Metaphor	Examples of Lexis	Tot. No. and %
POLITICS IS WAR/GAME	finger-pointing clobber frighten/scare fail approach ban battle over keep the pressure threaten be harmed targeted tax trap free game plan be safe protected	50 51%
POLITICS IS MOVEMENT	come in stay in drop overturn subvert increase be put out of let someone down	12 12%
POLITICS IS A PHYSICAL OBJECT	build rebuild nation-building cornerstone bridge the gap common ground	16 16%
PERSONIFICATION POLITICS IS A FAMILY TIE	create help grow be on his team share stand up step up	20 21%

Gore tokens n=113. 51,31%

Metaphor	Examples of Lexis	Tot. No. and %
POLITICS IS WAR/GAME	fight force destroy play the lead role threaten attack fail ban	36 32%
POLITICS IS MOVEMENT	go down push into go up be out of office overturn divert balance join at a fork lockbox	34 30%
POLITICS IS A PHYSICAL OBJECT	component focus drain handle	18 16%
PERSONIFICATION POLITICS IS A FAMILY TIE	help itching protect preserve	25 22%