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ARE YOU TALKING TO ME? A CASE OF SPECIFIC REPLY BY MEANS OF ELECTION CAMPAIGN ADVERTISEMENTS

Abstract: The article aims at an analytic description of a specific type of exchange occurring during political campaigns. The candidates often engage in a virtual dialogue; that is, an exchange of points made by means of campaign advertisements. The specific type of exchange or reply is, in certain aspects, no different to an ordinary conversation. However, what influences it most is the context of public/mass communication. The main concern of the presentation is to investigate, within the framework of Relevance Theory, ways in which a candidate's reply to the opponent's advertisement is actually a message to the viewers and prospective voters rather than to the rival themselves. The analysis is carried out on selected advertisements for Mitt Romney and Barack Obama broadcast during the U.S. presidential election campaign in 2012.

Key words: discourse, Relevance Theory, genre, political campaigns, public/mass communication, 2012 U.S. presidential election campaign

Relevance Theory: a brief outline

Sperber and Wilson's (1996) account of verbal (and nonverbal) communication is based on the assumption that humans are relevance oriented. Relevance is defined in terms of contextual effects and processing effort. Contextual effects can be of three kinds, all arising from the interaction of new information (the utterance) with a context of existing assumptions. They can involve the strengthening of an assumption that already exists, a contradiction that leads to elimination of an existing assumption, or the production of a contextual implication by combining the new information and an existing assumption. The latter logical implication is not derivable from the new information or the existing assumption alone. The new information is relevant in a given context as long as it gains contextual

effects in the context; the greater the contextual effects the greater the relevance. However, the cost of the contextual effects is the mental effort of producing them; the greater the mental effort the lower the relevance achieved by the utterance (Wilson 1994). The process of inference is relevance guided. However, in the inferential process the linguistic meaning of the words decoded by the receiver is just one of many inputs that can affect interpretation. There are also contextual assumptions, which are either provided by the speaker or supplied by the hearer (constructed or retrieved from memory). In all the cases analysed below the viewers are provided with the context necessary to retrieve the intended interpretation (together with implicatures).

Humans not only notice information that is relevant to them, but also use relevance as a criterion to decide whether a given interpretation of an utterance is the speaker's intended interpretation. The viewer most probably interprets a given political advertisement along the lines intended by the authors; that is, what they expect would be relevant for the viewer and on the other hand what is "compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences" (Sperber and Wilson 1996: 270).

In mass-communication the audience consists of millions of different addressees each of them being different in terms of gender, class, command of English, material status, geographical location and many more aspects having an effect on the cognitive environment of every addressee and its potential significant influence on the final effect of the utterance i.e. its relevance. Therefore in mass-communication, relevance is always relevance to an individual. Experienced mass-communicators are naturally aware of that fact and they usually know fairly well who their target audience is and are able to carefully shape the message to avoid miscommunication. (Yus 1998).

In political communication the authors try to control the interpretation as much as possible, which may easily be achieved by careful selection of the context provided and the phrasing used in the utterance itself. That does not prevent the viewer from interpreting the advertisement in some other way and drawing conclusions not intended by the authors. Typically, the speakers (here the authors) do not know (and do not need to know) in which ways their utterances may be relevant for the hearer.

Presidential election campaign

The most vital communication channel during an election campaign exists between the candidates and the audience. Typically, it is a type of multiple one-way communication channel through which several candidates communicate messages to the audience. In the election campaign taken for analysis there were

two main candidates running for the presidency in the U.S. in 2012: Mitt Romney and Barack Obama. Each candidate adopted a general strategy for the campaign along the lines of which most of the advertisements were produced. In the case of Romney the general strategy was centered on criticism of the current state of the U.S. economy as a result of mismanagement by Obama's administration. Romney particularly criticized the unemployment rates and job creation problems. All of this led to the conclusion that re-electing Obama would be the wrong decision. The general strategy of Obama was centered on the very person of Romney. The main issues were Romney being rich (and unable to understand the average citizens), outsourcing jobs in the companies he co-managed and not being completely honest.

Among the vast number of advertisements released during the campaign there were advertisements showing a given candidate making references (more or less direct) to various statements of the rival (whether coming from a speech, TV interview, debate or advertisement) made recently or coming from the previous campaign. Here they more or less directly pick on the rival's declarations, past promises or general policies. In many cases some words of one candidate are used so that the main line of criticism could be employed once again. Any inaccuracy or reluctance of Romney to speak about his business was likely to be used in Obama's advertisements to discredit Romney by showing that there is something he is hiding, and therefore that he cannot be trusted. On the other hand, any promise or statement of an economic matter made in the previous campaign by Obama was likely to be held to account and clearly contrasted with the current situation in the U.S. economy in Romney advertisements.

In any case, the general contextual assumption used for interpreting election campaign advertisements is that the candidates mutually manifest to direct their advertisements towards the viewers (rather than to the rival himself). One of the underlying assumptions is that both the communicator and the audience regard who the two groups are. In campaign advertisements the communicator is the candidate even though he (or his voice) does not always communicate the message (but he typically authorizes the ad), and the audience are the potential voters. But the ads in a political campaign are typically aimed at the supporters and usually a particular social group of the undecided. The reason is the target group is usually the one that is willing to recognize both the informative and the communicative intention (Sperber & Wilson 1995: 58, 61) of the candidate, unlike the opponents, who well recognize the informative intention but are not willing to recognize the communicative intention. In other words, the target group not only understands the message, but also accepts it, and believes in the candidate (at least to some extent), while the opponents understand the message, but they typically do not accept it. Even though it is probable, that some people with no right to vote, will actually watch those ads, we can safely assume that for campaign advertisements the

audience includes all the potential voters, that is, the target audience, including the opponents and even the rival himself; however in many of the ads he may not be assumed to be a very salient part of the audience.

It is interesting to notice that occasionally the advertisements contain address forms directly referring to the rival or at least their content is specifically directed to the rival. There are advertisements which are addressed to the rival himself. And here the discourse changes from the typical *candidate – voter* direction, at least formally, to *candidate – candidate*. The address to the rival candidate can be quite direct as in the cases presented below. The aim of this paper is to examine such utterances in order to specify the contextual effects by which they gain relevance and observe the balance between relevance to the audience and relevance to the rival.

Another important aspect to be mentioned here is genre. People encountering the mass-media, typically watching TV, are able to recognize instantly that the message belongs to a particular genre, and they access the conventions of the genre for efficient, that is, relevant interpretation. It seems that genre is the most significant element of the addressee's cognitive environment guiding the interpretation (Forceville: 2006, 2012). It seems safe to say that identification of genre is most relevant for the interpretation of any multimodal message. The context in which a multimodal message is processed is quite unstable, changing, endless in its potential settings, but genre attribution is rather stable and predictable. I would like to show one of the ads which use direct address to the opponent, though the communicator is quite safe as the genre conventions do not allow the audience to reject the message but to draw the relevant interpretation, that is the one intended by the speaker.

The analysis

Typically communicators use a major part of the advertisement to supply carefully selected assumptions that are to form the mutual cognitive environment for the target audience. In other words, they provide a specifically chosen context whose main function is to facilitate the 'right', that is, intended interpretation of the last utterance presented.

The cases selected for the analysis contain a direct reference to the rival or at least the utterances are intended to be interpreted as directed to the rival. The candidates address their criticism or a question directly to their rival, using a more or less formal address form. Naturally, the advertisements are broadcast and/or directed to the audience; therefore the audience certainly entertains the contextual assumption that they are aimed at communicating particular content to the viewers themselves. In the advertisement "960 Days" Mitt Romney, after stating

that Obama has already been 961 days in office, presents a number of statistics (concerning unemployment, jobs lost, increase in federal spending, the cost of Obamacare and the national debt), which are followed with Obama's appearance in the Congress where he had sent his American Jobs Act. It closes with a critical comment addressed directly to Obama (2).

(1) *President's Obama's Days in office – 961, Net Jobs Created – zero, Jobs Lost – 2 Million, Unemployed, Underemployed, Stopped looking – 25 Million, Increase in Federal Spending – 840 Billion, Cost Of Obamacare – 1 Trillion, National Debt – 14 Trillion*

(2) *Mr. President you are 960 days late.*

(3) Romney ironically criticizes Obama for being 960 days late with introducing his Jobs Act. [Explicature]

The first part of the ad (1) form a carefully selected context of facts against which the main line is to be processed and gain relevance. Additionally the final line contains irony as shown in the explicature (3), since (2) involves (echoic mention) echoic use of language (Sperber and Wilson 1981, Sperber and Wilson 1992, Wilson 2006: 1734) which conveys a distancing and criticizing attitude of the speaker (Wilson, Sperber 2004: 634, Sperber, Wilson 2012: 128). Such a mechanism is another powerful tool in political discourse, which is not attended to in the present paper as it is discussed in greater detail in Rut-Kluz 2018.

The criticism is directed at President Obama, though in the context of the assumption that campaign advertisements are directed to the viewers the relevance of comment (2) to the viewers seems to be higher than to Obama himself. It seems only sensible to assume that in this type of discourse the intended addressee is the target audience rather than Obama himself, since the genre of the discourse defines the receiver as the voter rather than the candidate and accordingly the utterance is much more relevant to the target audience than to the rival candidate.

However, the question still remains, what is the relevance of the address to Obama, since according to Relevance Theory any cost in processing an utterance should be paid off in additional effects in the cognitive environment (Wilson 1994). It is definitely yields a stronger assumption than a possible alternative utterance *President Obama is 960 days late*. It is almost a challenge to the president to justify being so late. It also offers the possibility for members of the target audience to join Romney and say directly to Obama *Mr. President you are 960 days late*. It is simply possible to stand on the same side with the communicator, and say to the president „*you are late*.“ This would not be possible if the line was *President Obama is 960 days late*. Then the supporter could possibly say *Yes, Obama is late* but nothing more or nothing stronger. It would not have the effect of bringing the target audience together and putting them on the same side with the candidate against the opponent and involving the viewer more into the discourse.

What is more, the relevance of (2) to the viewers (4a, 4b) is to be taken as intended by the speaker (that is Romney, who approves of the advertisement) and (4c) is a strong implicature. The implicatures (4d – f) are weak implicatures (Sperber and Wilson 1996) which are not intended by the speaker and (even though the hearer may treat them so) and the relevance of an utterance is obtained with hardly any help from the weak implicature.

(4) Implicatures

- a. Romney believes Obama is much too late with a solution to unemployment.
- b. Romney believes Obama is inefficient as a president.
- c. Romney believes Obama is not a suitable candidate.
- d. Direct address to Obama
- e. Stronger criticism challenging Obama.
- f. Potential unity with the candidate.
- g. In group consolidation.

There are other cases of formal address to the candidates that are more relevant to the audience some can be found in advertisements authorized by Obama, where a direct address is made to Mitt Romney. They show some other aspects of meaning implicated in this way. e.g. the more familiar form *Mitt* not only lowers the formality of the discourse, but also shows little respect towards Romney, even patronizing him.

In the next cases analyzed reference is made to advertisements for Mitt Romney or, in the first one, to news reports. In the advertisement “Your Turn” one of the leading themes of the campaign strategy is taken; that is, the outsourcing of jobs by companies that Mitt Romney invested in. Mitt Romney said that there is “no evidence” that he was actually in charge of the companies at that time. The advertisement points to *newly disclosed documents* which show that Romney was: *sole stockholder, CEO, and Chairman, when jobs were shipped overseas*. The final statement (5) of the advertisement is clearly directed to Mitt Romney and it is almost a challenge.

(5) *Here’s the evidence Mr. Romney; your turn to explain.*

- a. Mitt Romney is hiding important facts about his business.
- b. Mitt Romney cannot be trusted.
- c. Mitt Romney is not a good candidate.

Statement (5) seems to be equally relevant to both the viewers and Mitt Romney, as Romney is clearly asked for a response and may feel obliged to answer. The intended relevance for the viewers is gained by contextual effects (5 a – c) discrediting the rival by showing his apparent dishonesty.

Another Obama advertisement “Cynical” refers to several of Mitt Romney’s ads in which he suggests that *auto jobs are being sent to China*, showing the negative reaction of the companies involved and the news media criticizing the Romney advertisements as *inaccurate*. The advertisement’s commentary (6) on the situation refers to Romney directly.

(6) *We know the truth, Mitt.*

- a. Mitt Romney is not completely honest.
- b. Mitt Romney is cynical in his campaign.
- c. Mitt Romney is not a good candidate.

Here the statement is directed both to the audience and to the rival. Even though Romney is not as directly called to respond as in the previous case, then still the address form is directed to him and is less formal. Mitt Romney is somehow challenged by (6) in contrast to potential “We know the truth” or “We know the truth about Mitt” which would give rise to less strong implicatures. Given the genre recognition mechanism and the fact that the interpretation is guided by the genre characteristics, the relevance of (6) is higher to the audience and it implies by contextual effects (6 a – c) that Romney is not honest in his advertisements, which may also be generalized and implicated to the lack of honesty in the whole campaign and even as a trait in his character.

The final case analyzed comes from the Obama advertisement “Get Real” which features short fragments of Mitt Romney’s speech where he shows how to start a business by saying *Take a risk, get the education, borrow money if you have to from your parents*. It is also taken as an opportunity to contrast the policy of both Romney and Obama on financing for students. The reply to Romney’s statement is (7).

(7) *Get real, Mitt.*

- a. Mitt Romney does not know that borrowing money from parents to pay for college education is not possible for many average Americans.
- b. Mitt Romney does not know the economic situation of many average Americans.
- c. Mitt Romney is detached from the everyday life of average Americans.

Even though it is a direct address to Mitt Romney it seems to carry little relevance for him but rather the genre recognition guides the viewers to achieve the relevance by contextual effects (7 a – c) stressing that Romney is detached from the reality of everyday life of average Americans and does not know that it is not that easy. The address form used (*Mitt*) downgrades the very person of Romney in the public discourse, showing little respect for him.

The next two advertisements analyzed do not contain direct address forms referring to Obama, and yet are more aimed at his person than the audience. However, again the statements are more relevant to the audience. They seem to be designed to involve the target audience into the campaign, either by urging them to ask questions directly to the rival, even if, for obvious reasons, it may not be possible, still such an utterance may better achieve its communicative intention, which is getting the audience to consider Obama’s unfulfilled promises.

(8) *I’m not a bump in the road.*

(9) *I’m an American not a bump in the road.*

- a. Obama is wrong to equate the unemployed with bumps in the road.
- b. The unemployed should be taken care of not avoided.

The statements (8) and (9) are delivered in one of the Mitt Romney advertisements by ‘ordinary’ Americans in response to Obama’s words that *There’s always gonna be bumps on the road to recovery*, accompanied by a statement released by the White House Press Secretary saying that *We are headed in the right direction*. Those Americans are presented as unemployed people unable to find jobs who are addressing Obama with an objection to him treating them as statistics.

The last two cases (8), (9) *I’m not a bump in the road* are uttered by average Americans, who represent various kinds of unemployed people. Even though the audience probably realizes those are hired actors, not necessarily presenting real stories, still the implicatures conveyed in this form are stronger than a usual criticism expressed by Romney would have. Additionally, some of the audience may identify with those ‘average Americans’ and feel represented by Romney.

Certainly it is interpreted as Romney who is behind those Americans (as he is authorizing the advertisements) and again (8/ 9 a) and (8/ 9 b) are more relevant to the viewers than to Obama himself. The relevance of (8) and (9) for the viewers is in the fact that Romney objects to unemployed Americans being treated as statistics: that he is taking the side of the unemployed. Directing statements (8) and (9) to President Obama strengthens the message.

In the last analyzed advertisement of Mitt Romney “Obama Isn’t Working: Where are the Jobs?” there are three questions (10) relating to promises Obama made in 2009 at the University of Maryland, before he was elected president. Naturally, the Obama promises are recalled in the advertisement to be contrasted with contemporary press publications on the problems graduates have in finding jobs. The relevance of (10) to the audience is gained by the contextual effects listed in (10 a – c). Romney distances himself from directly asking the questions (10) to Obama but he urges the graduates to confront Obama instead and to have them take part in the public discourse (or at least feel they could take part). Such a mechanism brings about implicatures such as (10d) and (10e).

(10) Ask him:

What happened to the promise?

Where is the opportunity?

Where are the jobs?

- a. Obama does not keep his promises.
- b. One should not believe Obama’s promises.
- c. Obama is inefficient and therefore not a suitable candidate.
- d. Obama should be held accountable for his promises by the group he was promising to.
- e. Romney is helping to air the questions that graduates want to and should ask Obama.

The relevance of such questions is in criticizing Obama for the economy he has created and therefore criticizing him for failing to keep the promises; the intended relevance of (10) is to the viewers again rather than to Obama. The intended interpretation implicates an accusation towards Obama of not keeping his promises.

Conclusions

In election campaign advertisements the candidates occasionally refer directly to their rival; however, the general shared assumption is that the advertisements are directed at the viewers; that is, the voters rather than the rival himself. Such utterances and their intended interpretation gain the majority of their relevance to the viewers and are only partially relevant to the rival addressed in the utterance itself. The address forms (referring to the rival) gain their relevance to the audience by contextual effects strengthening the criticism or the challenge to the rival.

The whole mechanism is supported and guided by the genre, which among other things characterizes the typical communicators and the typical audience as well as the communicative intention. Any utterances directed at the rival strengthen the implicatures derived, especially those, which criticize or a challenge the rival. The aim of such forms is to involve the audience in the discourse by putting them together with the candidate and against the opponent. In this way this is yet another feature of political discourse together with irony which work in the same direction. Both addressing the opponent especially with a criticism or a challenge as well as using ironical criticism to not only make the message a stronger statement, but also has an even more vital effect of consolidating the target audience around the candidate and against the opponent, which seems to be the aim of any politician running for the office.

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Romney materials

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