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The Verbal Strategies in the Obama- McCain Debates

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Abstract:

The major objective of this paper is the analysis of the verbal strategies employed by politicians during presidential debates in the USA. It consists of three major parts. The first two parts provide a theoretical background of the research. In the first part political discourse is defined. Special interest is placed on its functions and constituents. Next, the history of the presidential debates and basic verbal debate strategies are discussed. The last part of the paper constitutes the empirical study which focuses on the analysis of the verbal debates strategies employed by two American presidential candidates: Barack Obama and John McCain. The study concentrates on three issues: (1) which verbal debate strategies were used by the presidential candidates during the debates, (2) the differences in using verbal strategies by the debaters, and (3) the effectiveness of the use of these strategies.

Keywords: political discourse, presidential debates, verbal debate strategies.

Introduction

Debates play an important role in presidential campaigns in the USA. Participation in a debate gives politicians a great opportunity to present their views on various issues and confront them with their opponent's ideas. The goal of this paper is to analyze the debate strategies implemented by the politicians during the Obama-McCain debates.

The first part of the paper focuses on the notion of political discourse – its main functions and constituents. The second part deals with the presidential debates in the USA. A brief debates' history is followed by the presentation of various verbal debate strategies used by politicians. The final part of the paper presents the analysis of the verbal strategies employed in the Obama-McCain debates.

1. On the notion of political discourse - its functions and constituents

Scholars provide a number of definitions of political discourse. Following Johnson and Johnson (2000: 4), political discourse is “the exchange of reasoned views as to which of several alternative courses of action should be taken to solve a societal problem”. Chilton and Schäffner (1997: 207) perceive political discourse as “a complex form of human activity” based on the observation that “it is impossible to conduct politics without language”. Chruszczewski (2002: 8) characterizes this notion as “a social heteronomy of language” which is developing rapidly.

Van Dijk (2001: 5) argues that political discourse constitutes a class of genres which are connected with a social domain, i.e. politics. With respect to the term *genre*, Fairclough (1992: 126) notes that it does not only denote a text of a specific type but also a “particular process of producing, distributing and consuming text”. Debates made by politicians represent different genres embraced by the domain of politics because “political discourse is the discourse of politicians” (Van Dijk 2001: 5).

Thus, political discourse is strictly connected with “the professional realm” (Van Dijk 2001: 20) where various activities of politicians occur. In the light of this statement we may include here only those discourses of politicians which are used in institutional settings, such as parliaments or government sessions.

Political discourse performs diverse functions, for example, Schäffner (1996: 2) observes that texts produced by politicians may have different functions owing to various political activities, such as political campaigns which are “inherently comparative” (Benoit 2004a: 1). Voters choose between candidates (two or more) and these candidates who will make a better impression will win their votes. Thus, politicians have to formulate their messages in order to attract voters’ attention. Benoit (2004a: 1) enumerates the following functions of political campaign discourse, i.e. *acclaiming*, *attacking* and *defending*. It should be emphasized that they may appear on two different grounds: policy (issue) or character (image). *Acclaims* are connected with the situation when politicians “enhance their own credentials as a desirable office-holder” (Benoit 2004a: 1). In *acclaims on policy* politicians praise their past achievements, like reduction of taxes, speak about future plans and general goals. *Acclaims on character* complement leadership abilities, personal qualities, and ideals. *Attacks* are employed by a politician in order to “downgrade their opponent’s credentials as an undesirable office-holder” (Benoit 2004a: 1). Therefore, with respect to *attacks on policy*, a politician presents a negative attitude towards past deeds, future plans and general goals of his/her opponent. The same situation is observed with regard to *attacks on character*, namely personal qualities, leadership abilities, and ideals of an opponent. Finally, *defending* refers to responding to attacks. Benoit (2004b: 1) enumerates a number of image repair strategies, for instance *denial*, *evading responsibility* or *reducing offensiveness* which may be employed in *defending*.

As far as constituents of political discourse are concerned, its *participants* are politicians and members of the society who interact with each other. With respect to *audience*, Chruszczewski (2002: 76) writes about *direct* and *indirect audience*. The former refers only to those receivers who are physically present in the place where a given text is produced, for instance a speech. It should be emphasized that *indirect audience* is more important regarding texts produced by politicians because it is vital for them to be heard/noticed by a large number of people. This type of *audience* does not have a direct contact with a producer/speaker and therefore is shaped by the media. When it comes to *channel*, receivers/hearers encounter political texts in newspapers, on TV, in radio stations, or on the Internet. Lastly, the main *goal* of political texts is to shape people’s beliefs and opinions (Chruszczewski 2002: 106). In other words, politicians through their texts “transform a people’s beliefs and behaviors” (Saenz 2001: 3).

2. Presidential debates in the USA

Political debating is greatly widespread in the USA and is almost a ritual part of a political campaign (Trent and Friedenber 2000: 252). However, contemporary debates differ profoundly from the first presidential debates in the XIX century. The next subsection illustrates how presidential debates evolved.

2.1. The history of presidential debates in the USA

The history of presidential debates in the USA is long and encompasses two main periods: (1) the Lincoln-Douglas era; and (2) media-oriented debates.

The Lincoln-Douglas debates are considered to be the first significant political campaign debates in the United States history (Trent and Friedenber 2000: 249). On July 24, 1858, Stephen A. Douglas was challenged by Abraham Lincoln to a series of debates. Douglas, who was the front-runner, agreed and dictated the terms. He suggested seven debates. Moreover, he wanted to have the opportunity to open and close four debates.

Lincoln, who could open and close three of them, accepted all terms. Although Lincoln-Douglas debates were not the first debates in the US history, they were considered to be real debates rather than press conferences. Auer (1977: 146) points out that “a debate is a (1) confrontation, (2) an equal and adequate time, (3) of matched contestants, (4) on a stated proposition, (5) to gain an audience decision” and adds that “each of these elements is essential if we are to have a true debate. Insistence upon their recognition is more than pedantry, for each one has contributed to the vitality of the debate tradition”. All five elements were present in the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

First of all, Lincoln and Douglas confronted each other during the debates – each of them asked questions to the opponent and refuted him. Secondly, their debates involved an equal and adequate time. Both Lincoln and Douglas spoke for one and half hour in each debate. Moreover, they spent 21 hours debating on one issue, namely the future of slavery. Thirdly, the contestants were matched. Fourthly, the debates involved one stated proposition, i.e. slavery. Finally, the debates “revealed the inadequacies of Douglas’s program of popular sovereignty of territories for the territories and the inconsistency of that program with existing institutions” (Trent and Friedenbergs 2000: 252).

Lincoln and Douglas were not followed by many other debaters. Although their debates received national attention, other politicians did not engage in campaign debates. In the XIX century many candidates used surrogate debaters (speakers who fill in for an absent candidate), especially in presidential elections. However, none of the nineteenth debates gained national prominence.

The situation changed in the mid-1920s due to the growing popularity of the radio. The first broadcast debate took place in 1948. The candidates were Harold Stassen and Thomas Dewey. The terms were specified by Dewey who wanted the debate to be held in private, in front of a few journalists. He wanted to close the debate and choose its topic. This debate was broadcast nationally by four main radio networks (Trent and Friedenbergs 2000: 252-254).

By 1956 almost all of the country had access to television. Although political candidates were appearing on TV, debates were not transmitted – with one significant exception. In 1956 the first televised presidential debate between Estes Kefauver and Adlai Stevenson was held. However, after the famous Kennedy-Nixon debate in 1960, political debates at the presidential level did not take place. Trent and Friedenbergs (2000: 256-257) are of the opinion that “at the presidential level public expectations have grown steadily stronger since 1976 that serious candidates for the nation’s highest office will be willing to debate their ideas”. Therefore, since 1976 major presidential candidates have consistently decided to hold debates. This decision is based purely on their self-interest.

How do media-oriented debates differ from the Lincoln-Douglas ones? It is necessary to come back to the five elements which constitute a debate and examine their presence in the famous Nixon-Kennedy debates. First of all, Nixon and Kennedy did not confront each other. Moreover, they did not even talk to each other. Secondly, both Kennedy and Nixon spoke for half an hour in each debate. The first debate was devoted to domestic affairs, whereas the fourth debate dealt with foreign affairs. There were no restrictions for the second and third debate. Each candidate spent eight minutes discussing one issue. Interestingly, Trent and Friedenbergs (2000: 251) emphasize that the Nixon-Kennedy debate and other contemporary debates meet the third criteria, i.e. the contestants were closely matched. If one of them was more fluent or better prepared, a real debate could not take place. However, the Nixon-Kennedy debates do not meet the fourth criteria – they did not involve one stated proposition. This may be observed in many current debates: depending on the format, in a single debate ten or more topics are discussed.

2.2. Verbal debate strategies

There are numerous verbal debate strategies identified by the scholars. The present paper addresses on the verbal debates strategies proposed by Gigot et al. (2004) and those listed by Trent and Friedenber (2000).

Better safe than spontaneous is the first strategy. The participants who use this strategy are to “stick with tried-and-true campaign positions” (Gigot et al. 2004: 1-2) and are trained to “use standard answers and one-line zingers” to abash the opponent (Gigot et al. 2004: 1-2). Moreover, in accordance with this strategy a participant of a debate may respond to a question not with an answer but with an attack. *Know thy opponent* is the next strategy, according to which a politician who is going to participate in a debate must know what to expect from his/her opponent, for instance Ronald Reagan was advised to focus on President Carter’s record during the presidential debates. The next strategy, *simplify*, was often employed by Reagan and Roosevelt. It is based on the assumption that viewers “seek shortcuts to understanding” (Gigot et al. 2004: 4). To be successful, politicians should simplify complex issues into images which receivers are familiar with. The strategy *prepare for the predictable* is significant as well. During the Reagan-Mondale debate in 1984, Walter Mondale asked President Reagan when he last said *There you go again*. Reagan did not remember and “looked like a schoolboy who had forgotten his homework” (Gigot et al. 2004: 5). *Emphasize accomplishments* is the next strategy which should be employed when incumbents want to be re-elected. According to it, politicians must demonstrate tangible achievements of their leadership. Naturally, this strategy will not be present in the debates analyzed in the present paper. *Don’t answer that* is the last verbal strategy offered. It refers to the situation in which there is “a noticeable lack of fit between the questions and the answers” (Gigot et al. 2004: 7). In other words, the answer does not refer to the question asked.

Turning now to the verbal debate strategies provided by Trent and Friedenber (2000), in the first one the most important “is to utilize issues by relating them to an overall theme” (Trent and Friedenber 2000: 268). The skilled debater will present his/her overall statement in the introductory statement (if this statement is allowed in the debate format being used) and then will reinforce it with the answers. Finally, he/she will repeat it in the concluding statement. Considering the Obama-McCain presidential debates, this strategy could not be used since the debates’ format did not allowed for an introductory statement.

The principal image strategies are the next debate strategies. There are three types of them, namely *the development of a leadership style*, *personification* and *identification*. As far as the first one is concerned, Trent and Friedenber (2000: 270) point out that there are two leadership styles, i.e. *an activist style* and *a passive style*. Activists frequently refer to their actions and initiatives during the debate. Passive leaders depict themselves as reacting to events. In the second image strategy, personification, a candidate tries “to personify a definite role” (Trent and Friedenber 2000: 270), for example he wants to be perceived as a religious family man. Finally, in the last image strategy, *identification*, “debaters attempt to identify themselves with what they believe are the principal aspirations of their audience” (Trent and Friedenber 2000: 270).

3. The analysis of verbal strategies in the Obama-McCain debates

The analysis in the current paper concentrates on the following three issues: (1) which types of verbal strategies were employed by the presidential candidates during the debates; (2) the differences in using verbal strategies by the debaters; (3) the effectiveness of the use of these strategies.

The first debate took place at University of Mississippi in Oxford, on September 26, 2008. It was moderated by Jim Lehrer of PBS. The debate concentrated on important issues, such as economy, taxes, and foreign politics of the USA.

Know thy opponent was the first strategy frequently used by both senators – 21 times by McCain and 27 times by Obama. Interestingly, each of the candidates touched upon similar issues. McCain concentrated on the Obama's present initiatives only 7 times as he was mostly (14 times) criticizing his past actions, for instance:

[1] McCain: "Now, Senator Obama didn't mention that, along with his cuts, he is also proposing some \$800 billion in new spending on new programs" (Obama-McCain 2008a).

[2] McCain: "Senator Obama suspended those requests for pork-barrel projects after he was running for president of the United States" (Obama-McCain 2008a).

Obama more often focused on the McCain's past actions as well – he referred to them 19 times during the debate, whereas the opponent's current initiatives were brought up by him only 8 times, for example:

[3] Obama: "Over 26 years, Senator McCain voted 23 times against alternative energy, like solar, and wind, and biodiesel" (Obama-McCain 2008a).

[4] Obama: "No, what he doesn't tell you is that he intends to, for the first time in history, tax health benefits" (Obama-McCain 2008a).

Further, it may be stated that Obama wanted to present his plans and future initiatives to voters in the most approachable way. In order to achieve this aim, he *simplified* complex issues 42 times and *identified* himself with the American people 28 times:

[5] Obama: " (...) here's what I can the American people: 95 percent of you will get a tax cut. And if you make less than \$250,000, less than a quarter-million dollars a year, then you will not see one's dime's worth of tax increase" (Obama-McCain 2008a).

[6] Obama: "And unless we are holding ourselves accountable day in, day out, not just when there's a crisis for folks who have power and influence and can hire lobbyists, but for the nurse, the teacher, the police officer, who, frankly, at the end of each month, they've got a little financial crisis going on" (Obama-McCain 2008a).

On the other hand, it seems that McCain, contrary to Obama, did not pay so much attention to *simplify* his statements which he did 15 times. Surprisingly, he *identified* himself with the American people only 18 times:

[7] McCain: "I want to cut spending. I want to keep taxes low" (Obama-McCain 2008a).

[8] McCain: "We're talking about failures on Main Street, and people who will lose their jobs, and their credits, and their homes (...)" (Obama-McCain 2008a).

By contrast, McCain focused more on his image and employed the strategy *the development of a leadership style* 52 times which helped him to stress his considerable experience:

[9] McCain: "So I have a record. I have a record of being involved in these national security issues, which involve the highest responsibility and the toughest decisions that any president can make" (Obama-McCain 2008a).

Obama, as a less experienced politician, referred to his past initiatives only 12 times. For instance, he reminded the viewers that he did not support the war in Iraq:

[10] Obama: “Now six years ago, I stood up and opposed this war at the time when it was politically risky” (Obama-McCain 2008a).

It seems reasonable to combine the strategy discussed above with another one, i.e. *personification*. Both candidates attempted to create themselves as leaders and activists. Doubtless, McCain did it more effectively as he could present more of his initiatives and actions than Obama. Thus, he referred to his work in the Senate and military career:

[11] McCain: “I have the ability, and the knowledge, and the background to make the right judgments, to keep this country safe and secure” (Obama-McCain 2008a).

Obama, on the other hand, tried to convince the audience that he was the one who could restore the American dream:

[12] Obama: “(...) we are going to invest in issues (...) that relate to how ordinary people are able to live out their dreams” (Obama-McCain 2008a).

It is interesting how both candidates utilized the strategy *don't answer that* while responding to the question: *What are you going to have to give up (...) as a result of having to pay for the financial rescue plan?* Each of them chose a different tactic. Obama decided to *identify* himself with voters, for example young people:

[13] Obama: “And one of the things I think we have to do is make sure that college is affordable for every young person in America” (Obama-McCain 2008a).

McCain also followed this strategy but he combined it with the *development of a leadership style*:

[14] McCain: “I saved the taxpayers \$6.8 billion by fighting a contract that was negotiated between Boeing and DOD that was completely wrong” (Obama-McCain 2008a).

McCain once again used this strategy while answering the question: *Do you agree with that, the lesson of Iraq?*:

[15] McCain: “The next President of the United States is not going to address the issue as to whether we went to Iraq or not. The next President of the United States is going to decide how to leave, what we leave, and what we leave behind (...)” (Obama-McCain 2008a).

Finally, McCain was forced to defend himself when Obama deliberately referred to the embarrassing event in which Senator McCain participated – during a public meeting he was recorded singing “the Beach Boys’ tune «Barbara Ann», but substituted the words «Bomb, Bomb, Bomb, Bomb, Bomb, Iran»” (Smith 2010: 151):

[16] Obama: “But, you know, coming from you, who, you know in the past has threatened extinction for North Korea and, you know, sung songs about bombing Iran, I don't know, you know, how credible that is” (Obama-McCain 2008a).

McCain was *prepared for predictable* and again talked about his experience:

[17] McCain: “But let me tell you, you know, this business about bombing Iran and all that, let me tell you my record” (Obama-McCain 2008a).

All in all, during the first presidential debate McCain tried at all cost to present himself as a mature politician who knew how to lead the country. Moreover, in order to portray Obama as inexperienced and unwise, he frequently took the opportunity to criticize his past and present initiatives. Then, McCain concentrated too much on his image and neglected the audience. Lastly, he was *prepared for predictable* and got out of a difficult situation when ridiculed by his opponent. Obama, on the other hand, did all he could to focus the audience’s attention on his electoral program rather than on his lack of experience. He talked about his initiatives in an intelligible way and directly referred to the American people. It helped him to build the impression of a leader who had a clear plan how to restore the American dream. Finally, both politicians successfully avoid answering an uncomfortable question. None of them used the strategy *better safe than spontaneous*.

It may be concluded that regardless McCain’s political experience, it was Obama who used the verbal strategies more effectively. He (1) consistently explained the elements of his electoral program, (2) more frequently simplified his statements, and (3) often identified himself with various social groups that constituted the debate’s direct and indirect audience. Surveys confirmed that this strategy paid off, for instance according to the CNN’s poll, 51% of the debate-watchers said that Obama was a winner, whereas only 38% indicated McCain (Sargent and Kleefeld 2008:1).

The second debate, moderated by Tom Brokaw of NBC News, took place at Belmont University in Nashville Tennessee on October 7, 2008. The questions referred to domestic and foreign policy.

As far as the use of verbal debate strategies is concerned, the second debate is to a large extent similar to the first one. Nevertheless, few differences may be observed. First of all, it may be noticed that Obama was less critical as he touched upon the McCain’s actions 22 times – the majority of them (13) again dealt with the past initiatives, such as:

[18] Obama: “What Senator McCain doesn’t mention is he’s been there 26 of them. And during that time, he voted 23 times against alternative fuels, 23 times” (Obama-McCain 2008b).

McCain, on the other hand, employed the strategy *know thy opponent* 23 times, and, what is vital, referred to the Obama’s present initiatives only 4 times, for instance:

[19] McCain: “But he wants to raise taxes. My friends, the last president to raise taxes during tough economic times was Herbert Hoover (...)” (Obama-McCain 2008b).

Secondly, it was striking that the candidates *simplified* their statements more frequently than in the previous debate – Obama once again did it more often (48 times), whereas McCain used this strategy only 27 times:

[20] Obama: “(...) Right now, the credit markets are frozen up and what that means, as a practical matter, is that small businesses and some large businesses just can’t get loans” (Obama-McCain 2008b).

[21] McCain: “When you announce that you’re going to launch an attack into another country, it’s pretty obvious that you have the effect that it had in Pakistan: it turns public opinion against us” (Obama-McCain 2008b).

Finally, both candidates decided to pay even more attention to the audience than in the previous debate. It was particularly visible in the case of Obama who *identified* himself with the problems of ordinary Americans 46 times, his opponent did it 39 times. This strategy is noticeable in the examples below:

[22] Obama: “For many of you, it is getting harder and harder to save, harder and harder to retire” (Obama-McCain 2008b).

[23] McCain: “Americans are angry. They’re upset, and they’re a little fearful” (Obama-McCain 2008b).

As concerns the rest of verbal strategies, the candidates followed the tactics from the previous debate. They both stressed their past actions and presented themselves as active leaders (McCain touched upon his record 38 times, Obama 10 times). Further, the candidates again used the strategy *don’t answer that* only once while referring to the question: *How can we trust either of you with our money when both parties got us into this global economic crisis?* However, they reacted differently. Obama blamed President Bush and partially McCain for the crisis, then he talked about the problems of ordinary Americans:

[24] Obama: “we have had over the last eight years the biggest increases in deficit spending and national debt in our history. And Senator McCain voted for four out of five of those George Bush budgets” (Obama-McCain 2008b).

[25] Obama: “We are mortgaging our future” (Obama-McCain 2008b).

By contrast, McCain referred to his past initiatives and criticized Obama for his past actions:

[26] McCain: “And I have been a consistent reformer” (Obama-McCain 2008b).

[27] McCain: “He [Obama] voted for nearly a billion dollars in pork barrel earmark projects, including, by the way, \$3 million for an overhead projector at a planetarium in Chicago, Illinois” (Obama-McCain 2008b).

Finally, Obama one more time tried to embarrass McCain by mentioning his singing “bombing Iran” but this attack was again successfully refuted by the senator who referred to his great record. Similar to the first debate, the strategy *better safe than spontaneous* was not implemented.

Summing up the second debate, it should be noted that the candidates concentrated mostly on their strong points. McCain constantly reminded the audience about his record, whereas Obama emphasized the uniqueness of his electoral program, which could bring the change to the American people. Interestingly, McCain corrected his mistakes from the previous debate – he more often *simplified* the statements and *identified* with the audience. However, it was Obama who again used these verbal strategies more effectively. Consequently, it may be argued that Obama was more convincing since he understood the

problems of ordinary people and presented his ideas in a more approachable way. Numerous polls conducted after the debate seem to confirm this assumption, for instance according to the CNN's survey for 54% of the respondents Obama was the winner of the debate and only 30% claimed that McCain did better (Steinhauser 2008: 1).

The third debate, moderated by Bob Schieffer of CBS News, was held at Hofstra University in Hempstead New York on October 15, 2008. The questions concerned domestic policy.

This decisive debate revealed significant differences in the use of the verbal strategies by both candidates when compared with the previous two debates. Considering Obama, he criticized the McCain's actions only 8 times which was a considerable change. Instead, the senator focused on his own past and present initiatives 20 times that finally helped him to strengthen the impression of an experienced politician, a real fighter:

[28] Obama: "These are the policies I have fought for my entire career. And these are the policies I want to bring to the White House" (Obama-McCain 2008c).

Further, Obama *simplified* complex issues 42 times and, what is more important, he paid attention to problems of ordinary people 53 times. These two strategies are visible in the example below:

[29] Obama: "And what I want to do is to make sure that the plumber, the nurse, the firefighter, the teacher, the young entrepreneur who doesn't yet have money, I want to give them a tax break now" (Obama-McCain 2008c).

Finally, he managed to defend himself when McCain brought up the conversation with Joe Wurzelbacher, the plumber. McCain implied that Joe, who wanted to work on his own, would pay higher taxes if the Obama's tax plan was implemented. As the following Obama's answer indicates, he was prepared for this attack:

[30] Obama: "Now, the conversation I had with Joe the plumber, what I essentially said to him was, «Five years ago, when you were in a position to buy your business, you needed a tax cut then»" (Obama-McCain 2008c).

By contrast, McCain followed his aggressive tactic and criticized the Obama's present and past initiatives 9 and 19 times, respectively. Next, it seems that he finally drew conclusions from the two previous debates as he more frequently (41 times) *simplified* his statements and referred to the problems of American people at the time of crisis 42 times. The following instance presents these two strategies combined:

[31] McCain: "But I want to give every American family a \$5,000 refundable tax credit. Take it and get anywhere in America the health care that you wish" (Obama-McCain 2008c).

Lastly, he did not do so well as far as *the development of a leadership style* is concerned – he talked about his achievements only 16 times.

As in the previous debates, the *strategy better safe than spontaneous* was not implemented and the strategy *don't answer that* was used only once by the candidates while replying to the question: *Are each of you tonight willing to sit at this table and say to each other's face what your campaigns and the people in your campaigns have said about each other?* This time both politicians decided to attack the opponent:

[32] Obama: “And 100 percent, John, of your ads – 100 percent of them was negative” (Obama-McCain 2008c).

[33] McCain: “You’re running ads that misportray completely my position on emigration” (Obama-McCain 2008c).

To sum up, the change in the use of the verbal strategies during the last debate may result from two reasons. First of all, both candidates, aware of the fact that this encounter was decisive, attempted to stress their strong points as often as it was possible. Thus, McCain presented himself as an experienced leader who would be a better choice than his younger opponent. Obama, on the other hand, wanted to be perceived as a politician who had a clear electoral program, which was the answer to the problems of ordinary people. Secondly, both senators tried to correct their mistakes from the previous debates – McCain talked in a more intelligible way, whereas Obama frequently referred to his past initiatives. Although Obama won the debate, many commentators agreed that it was McCain’s best performance (see for example Stephanopoulos 2008).

Conclusion

The major objective of the present paper was to analyze the verbal debate strategies used by the politicians during the Obama-McCain debates. The paper presented definitions of political discourse, followed by the characteristics of its functions and constituents. Next, a brief history of presidential debates was discussed. Lastly, various verbal debate strategies implemented by politicians were enumerated and the analysis of the Obama-McCain debates was carried out. The analysis has showed changes in the use of verbal debate strategies on the part of both presidential candidates. The change was significant in the case of the following strategies: *know thy opponent*, *simplify*, *the development of a leadership style* (connected with *personification*), and *identification*.

Thus, in the first debate McCain focused mainly on his numerous past actions and initiatives. He presented himself as an experienced leader with a clear record. The candidate did not pay too much attention to criticize his opponent, simplify his statements and identify himself with the listeners. His performance changed in the next debate. He offered negative opinions on the Obama’s present and past actions and referred to his own achievements. Moreover, he tried to present his electoral program in a more approachable way and more often talked about his audience’s problems. It should be emphasized, however, that McCain’s performance in the last debate was very impressive as he attacked successfully his opponent a couple of times, expressed his ideas and opinions clearly, and identified with Americans as often as he could.

Nevertheless, the change in the use of verbal debate strategies was particularly visible in the case of Barack Obama. In the first debate Illinois Senator, who was not so experienced a politician as his opponent, criticized the McCain’s present and past initiatives more often because the list of his own achievements was short. He simplified his ideas frequently and turned directly to the American people, their problems and hopes. The next debate revealed more changes – Obama criticized McCain less, paid more attention to the problems of ordinary people, and used language that his audience could easily understand. In the last debate Obama’s communicative strategies changed radically. He (1) did not bother to criticize McCain so often as he did in the previous debates, (2) talked about his own numerous past initiatives, (3) even more frequently simplified his statements while explaining his electoral program, and (4) even more often expressed his understanding of the problems of the audience.

To sum up, it may be concluded that it was Barack Obama who used the verbal debate strategies more effectively and managed to present himself as an experienced leader, fully aware of the voters' problems. This conclusion is confirmed by the polls – according to them Illinois Senator won all three debates.

In the light of the above claims it may be stated that politicians are trained how to speak in different situations. This analysis of the verbal debates strategies has revealed that if these techniques are followed by candidates, they will be favorably perceived by the mass audience. Proper words used in proper situations serve as powerful instruments which may shape people's beliefs and ideas.

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