PHD THESIS

The rhetoric of hostility in political communication
(Abstract)

Coordinator: Prof. Dr. Constantin Sălăvăstru Ph.D

Candidate: Georgiana Alexandrescu-Fieraru (căs. Ghiciuc)

Iași
2013
The rhetoric of hostility in political communication

Abstract

Incivility in politics is a constant that appears regardless of the cultural background in which the speech is uttered. “Mockery”, “ad hominem attacks”, “positive self-negative other strategies” and sarcasm are some of the variables this study investigates as patterns for incivility (Sobieraj and Berry: 2010).

The method tackled is a qualitative – textual analysis. Scrutiny was undertaken during several weeks in which a number of approximately 240 blogs belonging to French, British and Romanian politicians were analysed for the presence of incivility instances. The MPs were representative of two to three important political parties in each country. The analysis is comparative only to the extent in which some variables are present in all of the three political blogospheres investigated.

An analysis of 969 blog posts showed that, in 82% of the cases, “reference to other” is synonymous with displays of incivility. All three countries investigated resort to some patterns of incivility, but the Romanian political class engages in insults that are particularly brutal.
The study of incivility can be attributed to many disciplines, among which psychology and linguistics are but a few. The field of politics doesn’t escape the negative dimensions of verbal or non-verbal communication either. Studies focusing on effects of negative campaigning on an audience (Brooks: 2006; Lemert, Wanta, Lee: 1999) or on stereotypes and determinants in message reception (Fridkin, Kenney, Serignese Woodall: 2009; Goren: 2006; Brader: 2005; Stevens: 2009) all implicitly tackle the aspect of insult, accusation or negative emotional display, in general. Deconstruction of political artifacts today also reveals the presence of more or less uncivil constructions (Cho and Benoit: 2005; Harris: 2001; Freelon: 2010).

Nevertheless, our interest does not lie in the area of the audience and of the turnout these negative messages may have on elections. Although operating with mechanisms tangent to critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, Wodak, Van Dijk), rhetorical criticism (Foss) or political discourse analysis (Chilton, Chilton and Schäffner, Lakoff), our endeavor is purely descriptive. What it attempts to discover is how patterns of incivility unfold in French, British and Romanian political
blogs. This is correlated with the better understanding of how politicians express themselves when referring to their opponents. Romania, France and Great Britain were chosen according to criteria that concern the researcher’s ability to fully comprehend the subtleties of a specific language. A parallelism of geographical or cultural specificity was envisaged only to the extent in which Romanians have always looked up to Great Britain and France as the countries being the “models” of Occidentalism.

A common-sense stereotype that springs to mind to whoever is familiar with the Romanian political environment would indicate the British and the French as less uncivil when referring to their colleagues, due to a certain lack of political emancipation in a country that has just escaped the bail of communism. Results proved the stereotype correct.

Political discourse will only be referred to as “chunks” of discourse on diverse themes, belonging to political people exclusively and always posted on their blogs.

On the one hand, the term “incivility”, usually used to depict behaviour that neglects morally and socially accepted rules, can cover multiple areas of interest, including corporate communication or social psychology. Politics, at the convergence of linguistics, anthropology, semiotics, communication and argumentation, makes no exception. On
the other hand, what can be coined as “incivility” also relates to what we coin as “insult”.

Although available research mainly focuses on general types of rude political behaviour under the umbrella of “incivility”, Sobieraj and Berry (2011) narrow it down to more dramatic, allusive utterances that are coined “outrage”. Outrage discourse, therefore,

“involves efforts to provoke a visceral response from the audience, usually in the form of anger, fear or moral righteousness through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks and partial truths about opponents (Sobieraj and Berry, 2011: 1)”.

When analyzing political outrage in American media (blogs, talk radio and cable news analysis programs) during a 10-week interval, the two authors narrowed incivility down to thirteen key concepts that are normally part and parcel of the rhetorical and argumentative strategies employed by any political discourse. Our comparative analysis scheme will rely on some of the 13 concepts listed below, among which “insulting language”, “emotional display”, “name calling” and “sarcasm”.
The main study hypotheses regard the extent to which hostility appears within the ranks of opposition and ruling parties:

1. The opposition is ruder than the politicians in the ruling parties; during a potential face-to-face confrontation, roles are necessarily switched.
2. Reference to the political opponent is, 99.8% of the cases, synonymous with manifesting an instance of hostility. As an environment currently unaffected by drastic laws regarding slandering, the political blog serves as a means for exposing politicians’ negative feelings towards their opponents.

The rhetorical devices we used during the two analyses undertaken were chosen from two analytical models we described along the research process: Sobieraj-Berry and Culpeper - Lachenicht – Bousfield. Categories were classified, during the first study, according to common sense, in linguistic (metaphor, sarcasm, unjustified exaggeration, implicature), ethical (accusation, insult, condescending titles, positive portrayal of the self/negative portrayal of the other) and procedures that regard the political status (extreme ideologic reference). For the second model used, insult categories gathered around positive strategies (ignoring the opponent, disassociation from him, the seek of disagreement), negative
strategies (threats, taboo words) and sarcasm. For an easier coding of the data in the TAMS analyser, the second study made use of a secondary classification of rhetorical devices: appreciation (of the self or of the opponent), attacks, appraisals.

Throughout the analysis tackling the political blog, a very important role was that of the metaphor. Surely, on a first notice, this figure of speech may seem unimportant when it comes to hostility. However, theory shows (and our study confirms) that metaphor in politics introduces perennial themes, such as the athletic competition, the enemy that needs to be taken down, the battle between two sides, that always triggers the display of hostility.

Preference for direct accusation seems to be another constant of online political discourse. Its presence among leftist parties is another one. The presence of suggestion – implicature – is thin among politicians and seems minimal in comparison to direct figures of speech. Băsescu, Sarkozy, Cameron are directly criticised for their policies in the fields of healthcare, justice or social services.

One of the main suggestive figures of speech is sarcasm, that seems to find itself among politicians’ preferences, regardless of the origin. The Romanian president is presented as “a great chevalier on his horse” (Năstase,
2011c), as a liar, a “hare” that launders public finances for benefitting the LDP’s campaigns, and his party colleagues are “a bunch of vain turkeys”. The French president is the inventor of “social assistance for the rich”, and the British Labour members compare members of the opposition to Kim Jong Il, Mao Tze Dong or with a “guru of a secret society”. Romanian headings are the bravest though: “The chauchist attorney Mcovei thinks he is Snow White” (Năstase, 2011d), “If only stupidity hurt” (Știrbu, 2011), “The realm of Băsescu Vodă” (Gerea, 2011a).

Preference for irony is almost absent and only accounted for in the case of French politicians. If we consider the fact that fine irony is one of the rather elegant manners for expressing disagreement towards something, we can conclude that it mostly remains used during face-to-face interactions and less on blog posts. Very low interest is manifested for actually criticising the opponents’ policies - only in the case of France (and not in the case of the other two countries analysed) we came across the phrase “fiscal gift”\(^1\), apparently made by Sarkozy and the UMP to the rich. More interest is noticed in criticism of their personality or their physical aspect. In the case of Great Britain there was however debate on the subject

---

\(^1\) Set of measures meant to diminish taxes for the French upper class.
of healthcare. 11 instances out of 49 refer to the government’s plan of actually eliminating social care, and the others mention the unexpected turnout of the government’s reform. The Conservatives only point towards the policies of the former government and to its lack of moderation.

When it comes to insult, Romanian socialists mention Boc’s incapacity of telling the truth, president’s Băsescu’s less memorable past, the inefficiency of the LDP government, their “foolishness”, their “idiocy”. The French socialists rarely make use of accusation, but, when they do, hostility is enhanced exponentially: the UMP propositions “stink of class contempt”. The British Conservatives are “incompetent”, “chaotic”, “anti-progress”, “putrid”, “rednecks”, “political donkeys”.

Another constant in contemporary political speech is the need to approach one’s own party in complete antithesis with the opposing one. Nothing out of the ordinary, since de facto all political parties stand for is to point out and to comment upon discrepancies and resemblance between the programs proposed. Our approach of inventoring strategies by means of which politicians look at their opponents makes sense since we discovered lots of destructive criticism and insult, when a more constructive tackling would have been appreciated. In Romania, Băsescu and the Liberal Democratic Party are “the root of all evil”, in complete opposition with the
social democratic party. On the other hand, LDP’s measures are meant to repair vicious choices in the time of the leftist governance.

France and Great Britain show similar manners of governing, only they gravitate around left or right values. Homosexual marriage, the integration of immigrants or fiscal shielding are but a few of the ideas that differentiate the paradigms of the major French political parties, and not just gratuitous criticism, on the basis of a communist or a liberal past.

In Great Britain, the growth of the criminality rate is attributed to fallacious policies of Cameron’s party, as is the destabilizing of the national public healthcare structure. The Labour Party constantly tries to work alongside the government for the greater good, for the improvement of the state in which the country was brought due to Cameron’s market obsession. Unfortunately, their attempts are constantly rejected. On the side of the conservatives, the same reaction as in the case of the Romanian LDP Party: the government does its best to fix the mistakes made during the previous governance.

Apart from a constantly negative and rude opposition, an emphasis on the inherent power rapport was witnessed. Power is natural when it comes to interaction. Every debate
unveils as a zero sum exchange, be it a direct confrontation or a radio talk. However, in the online medium, the degree of aggressiveness always is higher, due to the absence of a real interlocutor. As was shown by the analysis of the French electoral campaign, once facing his opponent (Sarkozy), Hollande loses most of his enthusiasm and courage.

The association of power and hostility is inherent. In order to colour electoral interaction, to separate camps and to delight the audience, political figures almost always choose hostility as their utmost strategy. This occurs mainly among the elderly (who have nothing more to lose), but also among the ones with important roles in the party organisation chart. If insult in texts can be found predominantly with male politicians, insulting titles are found among the vast majority of the elderly politicians. For instance, Năstase speaks of “the circus that Băsescu stages”, and Antonescu of the incompetence of the prime minister: “We don’t have a prime minister. Not that he were bad, we simply don’t have any” (Antonescu, 2011). The French socialists qualify the UMP’s propositions as “irresponsible and coward”.

In Great Britain, the members of the Labour Party accuse the actual government of being “incompetent, chaotic and out of touch”. In the case of UMP, as in that of the
Conservatives, people are rather restrained when it comes to accusations in the title.

_Ideological reference_ occurs mainly in the speech of Romanian members of parliament and is mainly based on metaphors referring to the _old regime_ – explicable through the past that the MPs all lived. Moreover, the manner in which we interact with the world is what generates our referral to it (Zinken, 2003), which makes things understandable in the speech of a country having barely escaped communism. Therefore, ideological metaphor completes the portrait that social-democrats contour for the new political class, in spite of being, themselves, members of the ex National Front.

Out of 969 texts, approximately 82% contain at least one instance of aggressiveness, which helps to conclude that _reference to the opposition is synonymous with the deployment of incivility markers._

Another certainty is that of the existence of two hostility zones, which may constitute an area for further future research. One of Occidentalism, in which hostility coexists with assault and sometimes harsh insult, but which leaves space for civil talks. And another one, characteristic of Eastern Europe, in which problems of the civilians are completely neglected, in favour of insult – such as to distract attention from an important public agenda.
In what regards negative campaign, what comes out most vividly out of the two studies tackled, is the manner in which politicians prefer to refer to their opponents on their personal blog. During the four weeks in which the first study was undergone, but also during the final televised debate between Hollande and Sarkozy (the transcript of which makes the object of an analysis presented in the last chapter), very harsh allegations are made, with participants making use of all rhetorical figures possible, in order to discredit the other in front of the electorate. Therefore, sarcasm, direct accusation, ridicule, negative referral to the other, appear regularly.

Instances of appreciation towards opponents lack completely from both studies and from all of the three countries analysed. During the French electoral campaign, both Bayrou and Sarkozy praise themselves and their own announced programmes, by at the same time evidentiating minuses of the other candidates. The second study clearly shows a very special interpretation of the concept of negative campaign, which the four candidates understand and adapt according to their own personality and their status on the political map.

Although we might have expected eventual alliances or coalitions throughout which candidates create common ground, this doesn’t happen even in the second electoral tour,
when stakes diminish for part of the candidates. An alliance of leftist parties (Mélenchon) with the center-left ones (Bayrou) and (even) with the extreme right (Le Pen) could have, maybe, helped evidentiate policies, programmes that the electors would have more easily understood.

Negative campaign coming from candidates of the opposition towards Sarkozy is permanent. Especially during the second tour, Hollande presents Sarkozy as the author of hidden plans, of conspiracies meant to destabilize national security. Precise information, however, is never provided. What is also quite interesting is that, during the electoral campaign, Sarkozy punctually criticizes the 60 measures presented in Hollande’s programme, whereas his opponent mainly bases his accusations on speculation. The agressivity raised by Hollande’s campaign texts is counterbalanced by a very surprising energetic performance on the part of Sarkozy for the televised debate. Hollande, on the other hand, sticks to rhetorical interrogations and to a mainly defensive approach.

From the side of the opposition several negative identity markers appear. Sarkozy is „the guy”, „the candidate about to leave” (197 times Hollande names him „the soon-to-leave candidate”). The only one who is rather reserved in his accusations is centrist Bayrou, who calls him „the president candidate”.
What could motivate a politician to be so aggressive towards his opponents on his personal blog? Is incivility strategic in its nature? Hinck and Hinck show that a candidate’s will to interrupt and, hence, to be interrupted politely, plays a very important role in the construction of his image as a leader (Hinck and Hinck, 2002: p. 248). This is perhaps why motivation could ultimately reside in the wish to accumulate electoral points.

A study undergone on a cluster of electors in Delhi in 1999 (Gupta) took into account the hypothesis that negative campaign speech informs electors a greater deal than neutral one (1999: p. 259). Therefore, exposing certain character traits or fallacious policies belonging to an MP may follow the trend of accurate information. All of those interviewed with regard to an aggressive poster claimed to be against the hypothesis.

As to what regards the effects, contradictions are at least as numerous. Negative campaign advertising constituted the subject of many studies, which showed that effects differ according to the sex of the person who endorses the campaign. Whether they are prone to create an image of a strong candidate, who knows how to fight for his cause or, adversely, they can be of a “boomerang” type.

Other studies consider that negative advertising during the campaign is only significant to informed voters, whereas
for the less informed it almost doesn’t matter at all (Stevens, 2005). This hypothesis contradicts previous research, which proved that negative advertising increases voters’ level of political knowledge, by depicting hard to forget images of the candidate (Stevens, 2009: p.414).

The same question rises: why choose hostile, uncivil discourse when the great majority of voters don’t really appeal to this type of technique? The answer is rather sad – incivility in political discourse is mostly tied to the politician’s way of being, to his education level and to his manner of understanding political competition.

When it comes to women, however, there is the widely accepted opinion that they are lowly represented and that the electorate doesn’t really get to know much about them. Since women in Great Britain and in France (highly developed countries in which gender policies tend to have a history) are the most prone to using negative reference in their speech, we believe this to remove certain gender stereotypes – the woman as a delicate, sensitive creature, little capable of defending herself in the electoral fight (Gordon, Shafie and Criegler, 2003).

In Romania, on the other hand, women’s aggressive speech is almost inexistent. This may be explained by the huge differences in political representation (only 11% of the
Romanian MPs are women, with a European average of 23.4%). Moreover, in a profoundly masculine society, women tend to be little attracted by negative speech (mostly regarded as masculine).

Although, in the US, negative campaign strategies increase as the years go by, women are advised to keep potential accusations at a low level, in order not to diminish their chances in the electoral competition (Gordon, Shafie and Criegler, 2003: p. 36). The same study proves that, when a candidate is perceived as having “feminine” traits, his/her chances of convincing the electorate are a lot higher than those of a candidate trying win by behaving verbally aggressive.

As regards the aggressive MP’s motivation to post hostile texts on his blogs, another explanation springs to mind. Blog posts only reinforce already settled opinions (Bimber and Davis, 2003: p. 144). Being destined almost exclusively for those whose opinions are already crystallized, their effect can not be massive. Hence, what mass media does is to “preach to the already converted” (Norris, 2003: p. 24). Other recent studies have showed that an online campaign has little chance of actually persuading, while concentrating on the active mobilization of supporters, since “loyalty towards a party can not be assumed, but has to be constantly reinforced” (Gibson and Rommele, 2001: p. 33). This is also due to the fact that
people tend to reason with information in accordance to their attitudes more than with contradicting one (Holbert, Garrett and Gleason, 2010: p. 19).

Zaller’s RAS model (Reception-Acceptance-Spread) for changes in attitude (1992) shows that, for triggering attitude changes, messages should first be received and then accepted. When coming across change-inducing messages, people can choose to resist them in three different ways: by admitting they are in disagreement with their prior beliefs (partisan resistance), by accepting that they already are aware of information that can prove new knowledge to be in accordance with old one (inertial resistance) and by accepting that they are capable of finding counter-arguments offered by mass media (counter-value resistance). Therefore, a very interesting paradox occurs: the most politically aware will be the hardest to convert, since they already are partisans of a certain party.

Last but not least, what an eventual future paper could tackle regards the strategy of the political blog in the economy of the electoral campaign, its capacity to surpass the MP’s intimacy in order to became a tool similar to – let’s say - the press release or the electoral video. In the same line of thought, how can hostility on blogs be eliminated? While their effects on the electorate are debatable, their capacity of being
spectacular to the public is a given. Otherwise said, negativity during the electoral campaign is despicable for certain, since it causes ethical dilemmas among an already amorphous mass of people; but, as long as it activates and coalesces people, its role is not at all negligible. When and – especially – how blogs will complete the mass media scenery in the context of more and more strict laws of the audio-visual, remains to be seen. In another paper, which would tackle the comparison between the degrees of hostility present on several means of communication.