

Positioning acts as semiotic practices in TV debates

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Abstract

The paper examines the way in which social actors exploits different semiotic resources to position themselves discursively during final debates for presidential elections, from the perspective of positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Moghaddam, 2010). Positioning theory activates a tridimensional semiotic model, which includes positioning acts – semiotic configurations with a certain stability in the communicational practices of the community –, storylines and the implicit illocutionary force of any discursive exchange. In this article, the role can be regarded as the continuous aspect of the discursive performance of a social actor, and positioning is the discreet aspect of the discursive exchange. The paper allow understanding of dialogue in televised debates as a form of “living” communication, as opening towards the other (Ponzio, 2006; Pleșu, 2010), and can be considered a plea for the reconfiguration the culture of dialogue in the Romanian public space.

Keywords

Positioning theory, role, political semiotics, TV debates

Introduction. Discursive Positioning

We are all caught in the “semiotic web” (Roven a-Frumu ani, 2012, p. 32) of other people’s discourses, “in a world of others’ words” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 143). How can one find one’s natural, logical way in such a world? The solution of the dialogue as a meeting point of identities, as a primordial social practice (Lotman, 2005, pp. 218-219), comes naturally. Having a dialogue entails a natural positioning in the intertextuality of the discourse, understood as “semiotic web” of other discourses (Foucault, 1971/1998, p. 13). This is exactly what Socrates seems to have done when he was looking for the right place to have a dialogue with Phaedrus by the banks of the Ilissus, both of them barefoot. Phaedrus seems to have found the “magic cure” that made Socrates leave the city and “positions” himself naturally in what his interlocutor had to say (Phaidros, 230b-230e).

During this “meaning production process” (Kristeva, 1984), any social actor “build/takes a position (identity) in relation to their interlocutors” (Beciu, 2009, p. 35). Socrates chooses to sit (position himself), usually, inside the interlocutor’s discourse. Any discourse signals a position towards the content of communication (what it enunciates), as well as a (relative) position towards the participants to the discursive act. Therefore, in communication acts, social actors communicate not just content, but also the way they relate to that content (positioning).

Thus, positioning becomes individual practices in the discursive behaviour, which can configure a certain communication style. For instance, while for Socrates it is important for the “mind of the speaker know the truth of the matter about which he is going to speak” (Phaidros, 259e), for Phaedrus “he who would be an orator has nothing to do with true justice, but only with that which is likely to be approved by the many who sit in judgment” (Phaidros, 260a). For Phaedrus discourse is a performance before the audience (dramaturgical positioning), while for Socrates what is important is to be authentic, i.e. to be naturally present within one’s own discourse (natural positioning). Political actors often forget the fact that the audience has this sense of the natural, of the authentic dialogue, which they seek to find in any discourse.

We will analyse the way in which social actors are placed and they act discursively (strategic positioning) in one of the most important forms of political communication, final debates for presidential elections.

Position, Places report, Role

The replies of political actors are not mere verbal statements, but significance connections that are not visible at a surface of the text. In an effort to define and build identity, any subject can take contradictory, inconsistent discursive positions (Belsey, 2002, p. 51). Michael Holquist (2002), commenting Bakhtin’s Dialogism, introduces the

concept of "law of placement" in order to explain this phenomenon, which becomes relevant for understanding the identity-alterity relationship, I-Other:

"Bakhtin explicates this law with a just-so story that uses seeing as a means for grasping what is essentially a non-visual situation. He begins with a simple datum from experience; not an observer looking at trains, but an observer looking at another observer. You can see things behind my back that I cannot see, and I can see things behind your back that are denied to your vision. We are both doing essentially the same thing, but from different places: although we are in the same event, that event is different for each of us. Our places are different not only because our bodies occupy different positions in exterior, physical space, but also because we regard the world and each other from different centers in cognitive time/space" (p. 20).

According to Holt (2003) "each person is in a unique place for seeing the world as the fundamental condition for understanding" (p. 226). Basically, any individual is located inside a system of positions that engage his identity and claim a correlative position (place) from the interlocutor. According to positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1990; Harré and Gillett, 1994; Harré and Moghaddam, 2008, 2010; Harré and Langenhove, 1998), identity and self are discursive constructions. Positioning can be reproduced in social practices, bargained in various moments, discursive or ideological rules can be attached thereto, which make them socially recognisable:

"What I have been suggesting above can be summed up by saying that institutions construct their ideological and discursive subjects; they construct them in the sense that they impose ideological and discursive constraints upon them as a condition for qualifying them to act as subjects. For instance, to become a teacher, one must master the discursive and ideological norms which the school attaches to that subject position – one must learn to talk like a teacher and "see things" (i.e. things such as learning and teaching) like a teacher" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 39).

We will detail this aspect in the next chapter.

From the dramaturgical perspective of communication, in discursive interactions any social actor performs a role. For Erving Goffman (1981), the role "is no longer correlative to the status" – as it was for Ralph Linton (1936) –, but rather "a typical response of the individual in a particular situation" (Drögan, 2007, p. 183).

Initially, the concept of positioning has been introduced to replace the concept of role, considered static and less flexible in understanding the discursive behaviour of social actors (Harré and Gillett, 1994, pp. 33-36; Harré and van Langenhove, 1998, pp. 14-17). Sub-

sequently, authors stated that positioning theory must be understood in complementarity with the theory of role (Harré, Moghaddam & Lee, 2008, p. 9). Additionally, in certain situations, positioning acts can be “the birthplace of roles” (Harré, Moghaddam & Lee, 2008, p. 9).

Therefore, the role can be regarded as the *continuous aspect* of the discursive performance of a social actor, and positioning is the *discreet aspect* of the discursive exchange. The balance between the continuous and the discreet aspect of communication is maintained by the very conflictual relationship between “seeing” and “understanding” (Marcus, 2011, p. 183). We see the role more easily, we perceive its moments of discontinuity, of inadequacy, but we understand better the conjunctural discursive position.

In 1981, Goffman introduces another concept, *footing*, whose significance is associated to that of position and positioning (Harré, Moghaddam & Lee, 2008, p. 9; Marinova, 2004, pp. 211-214):

“Participant’s alignment, or set, or stance, or posture, or projected self is somehow at issue. [...] A change in our footing is another way of talking about a change in our frame for events” (Goffman, 1981, p. 128).

Footing acts, or interlocutors’ roles (Beciu, 2009, p. 43) are just an aspect of positioning. In Goffman’s dramaturgical model, social actors are discursive characters, who perform *roles* through *footing mechanisms*.

François Flahault introduces another concept in 1978, *places report* or *system of places* (*rapport de places* in French), which is close to the positioning concept significance-wise.

“Le sujet se réalise en tant que reconnu à une place, qui elle-même se définit dans un système de places. ‘Se réalise’ et non ‘s’exprime’ puisque est en cause l’existence même du sujet et non pas la simple question de savoir comment il parle de lui. ‘Place’ et non ‘rôle’, car c’est l’identité même du sujet que sa position dans un système de places soutient [...] L’essentiel est qu’étant donné la place d’où je parle, j’assigne une place complémentaire à l’autre et lui demande, en s’y tenant, de reconnaître que je suis bien celui qui parle de ma place” (Flahault, 1978, p. 70).

For Flahault, establishing the relationships between places in a real discursive exchange occurs from a predetermined system of places, from an *experiential matrix of places*. The speaking subject is inevitably caught within a (discursive) system of places. This system is recognisable in communication practice. Individuals are capable of recognising them, they have a certain discursive competence. It is on this relationship between places that the identity of speaking subjects is built. The illocutionary value of statements is the one that determines a certain configuration of the relationships be-

tween places in a discursive exchange. Words operate in a relational logic of the type “qui je suis pour toi, qui tu es pour moi” (“who I am for you, who you are for me”). (Flahault, 1978, p. 50).

Positioning Theory

The theory of positioning can be described using a triangular model. The positioning triangle captures the relational aspects and the significance conditions of any dialogue interaction. The three (de)construction conditions of the significance of the discursive exchange determine each other; there is a dynamic relationship between them.

The first aspect refers to positions and positioning. The way that various categories of people engage in the discursive exchanges (*positioning acts*), the rights and obligations they assume in their communication acts are “positions” (Harré and Gillet, 1994, p. 34). They are predefined, by default. The rights, responsibilities and obligations associated to positions are set in the socio-discursive imagination of the community (within the meaning of Patrick Charaudeau), and they follow a certain moral order established within the society at a certain point: “Positioning Theory is the tool for exploring the relation between what is possible and what is permitted” (Harré, Mbghaddam and Lee, 2008, p. 13). However, the positions are not socially regulated, they are not institutionalised. They are merely socially recognisable. Therefore, positioning is a *semiotic configuration* with a certain stability in the communicational practices of the society.

The second aspect is about the way this positioning is activated. We introduce ourselves to the others, we build our discursive Ego with individual narratives (*storylines*) that we employ in verbal interactions.

“positioning can be understood as the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person’s actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts and within which the members of the conversation have specific locations” (Harré and Langenhove, 1991, p. 395).

It is with these stories that we make our entrance in the context, we present ourselves to the others. The last aspect activates the concepts of “illocutionary force” and “speech acts”. These are taken from the speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1965), in order to describe the social significance of a discourse, gesture or social action (Harré, Mbghaddam and Lee, 2008, p. 10). Any conversational exchange has an illocutionary value by default, a certain social strength. Therefore, positioning acts have the capacity to create social significance (Harré and Mbghaddam, 2010, p. 71).

Positioning theory allows for the sensible space between observation and action to be used in an adequate, intelligent way. The authors of this theory provide a method of analysing processes that occur between socially predefined convictions and practices and the individual way of acting in a particular situation. Basically, positioning theory

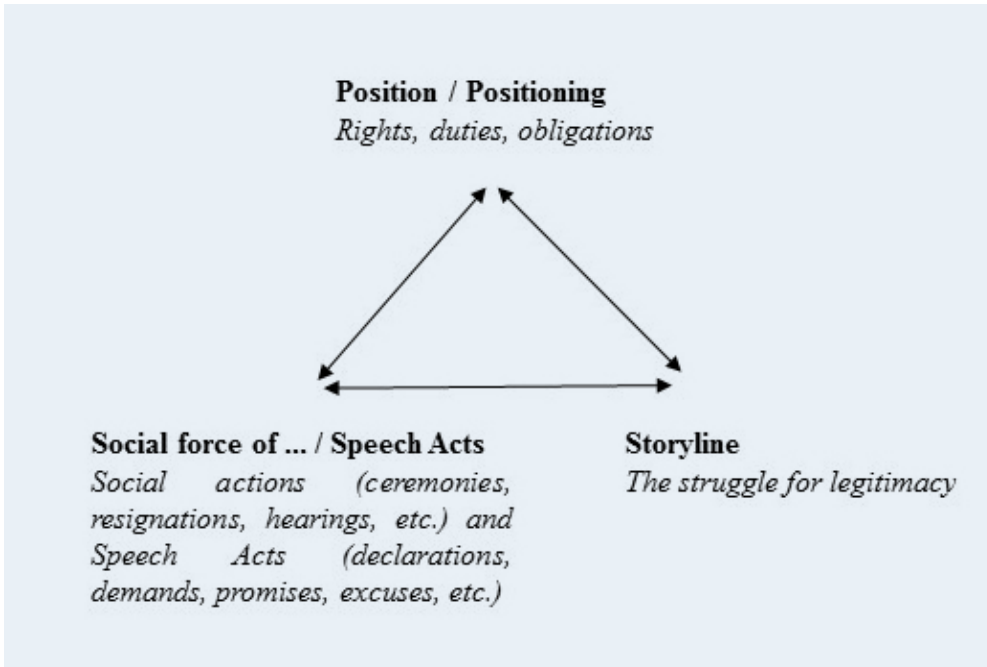


Figure 1. The Positioning 'Triangle' (Harré, Langenhove, 1999, p. 18; Harré, *et. al.*, 2008, p. 12; Harré & Moghadam, 2010, p. 50)

describes the functional aspects of any discursive interaction.

Research Methodology

But how does this mechanism work? Positioning entails a two-step procedure. The first is prepositioning, an act that occurs by default when the interlocutors' attributes are known (or presumed). It is the moment when you guess "who you are talking to". We can speak of reflexive prepositioning (biographic elements, personal narratives, etc.) and prepositioning actions of the other (statements about the interlocutor's character, etc.). The next step is positioning itself and performing the assumed role.

When analysing the positioning, we are looking for answers to some research questions. Which are the narratives that each social actor brings into the context to legitimise himself? Which is the social significance of speech acts (illocutionary force), following the performance of individual narratives? Which rights and obligations have appeared in the discourse and how were they assigned, refused, accepted or contested by the speakers?

The research methodology entails a few steps:

1. Identifying prepositioning moves (reflexive prepositioning and the prepositioning of the Other);
2. Identifying and analysing individual narratives (e.g. the *Common person* – “I am one of you”; the *Saviour*, the *Hero* – “I have the solution, I am your saviour, follow me!”; the *Robin Hood syndrome* – “Moral justifications for certain political acts”, etc.);
3. Confronting positional moves with the ideological profile of the social actors.

By analysing the positioning, we can capture the dynamic relationship between the three dimensions of the positioning of social actors during a discursive exchange (individual narratives, social significance and position). The proper positioning, along with an authentic performance (credible individual narratives) make the social significance of the candidates’ discursive behaviour acquire consistency before the audience.

An interdisciplinary approach, which also includes *multimodal analysis tool* (O’Halloran, 2011), allowed us to capture the dynamics of discursive exchange. In a recent study (Drăgan, 2016), we have conducted such research. We are briefly presenting the results of the research.

Results and Discussion

In the study, we took into consideration a 30-second sequence from the end of the last debate ahead of the presidential election in Romania, of 12 November 2014, on B1 TV channel. The protagonists were Victor Ponta, incumbent prime minister at the time and PSD (The Social Democratic Party) president, and Klaus Iohannis, former mayor of Sibiu, PNL (The National Liberal Party) president.

The sequence from this debate was not chosen randomly. During the final televised debates for presidential elections in Romania in recent years, such “nodal” episodes (sequences) that decided the winner’s fate have been frequent. We proceeded on the assumption that such episodes concentrate the candidates’ discursive strategies, and the manner in which protagonists manage these moments can be decisive in directing the viewers’ preferences. We briefly analysed the prepositioning moves, the positioning and the individual narratives that social actors assume during said sequence of the discursive exchange.

From the analysis of the speech acts of candidate Victor Ponta, combined with the significance of gestures provided by the multimodal analysis (for instance, the piece of paper he shows to his interlocutor), we notice that in the first discursive sequence (see Figure 2, Frame 1) he takes on the position of *expert*, with the related rights and obligations (competent, responsible, knowledgeable, capable of coherent action) *versus* a pre-positioning of the other, of the competitor Iohannis, as a *dilettante*, *pupil* or *trainee* (not knowledgeable).

RELEVANT VISUAL FRAMES	Frame 1	Frame 2	Frame 3	Frame 4	Frame 5	Frame 6
SEMIOTIC RESOURCES						
VERBAL Victor Ponta (V.P.)	I want to explain something. According to the law in Romania - Mr. Iohannis, the mayor should know the law, the more so as President -	I just wanted to say one thing.	Mr. Iohannis, now I saw Basescu again,		I want to explain something. According to the law in Romania - Mr. Iohannis, the mayor should know the law, the more so as President -	I just wanted to say one thing.
Klaus Iohannis (K.I.)						
KINETIC						
Gaze	V.P. Off-screen / directly to the interlocutor / employee in dialogue K.I. Off-screen / directly to the interlocutor / attentive listening	V.P. Off-screen / directly to the interlocutor / employee in dialogue K.I. Off-screen / directly to the interlocutor / attentive listening	V.P. Off-screen / directly to the interlocutor / employee in dialogue K.I. Off-screen / directly, slightly sloped / attentive listening, slightly menacing look	V.P. Off-screen / directly to the interlocutor / employee in dialogue K.I. Off-screen / directly to the camera, viewers / ironic, accomplice, easy fun	V.P. Off-screen / directly to the interlocutor / employee in dialogue K.I. Off-screen / looking down, absent from eye dialogue	V.P. Off-screen directly to the interlocutor / employee in dialogue K.I. Off-screen / directly / detached, ironic
Posture	V.P. Slightly tilted to the interlocutor	V.P. Slightly tilted to the interlocutor	V.P. Slightly tilted to the interlocutor	V.P. Slightly tilted to the interlocutor K.I. Slightly tilted to the camera (viewers)	V.P. Slightly tilted to the interlocutor K.I. Slightly tilted to the interlocutor	V.P. Slightly tilted to the interlocutor K.I. Slightly tilted to the interlocutor
Gestures	V.P. shows a document to the interlocutor and audience	V.P. Reduce distance K.I. Reduce distance	V.P. Reduce distance K.I. Reduce distance	V.P. Reduce distance K.I. Reduce distance	V.P. Reduce distance K.I. Reduce distance	V.P. Reduce distance K.I. Distances itself easy to the interlocutor
CINEMATIC DEVICE						
Camera angle (horizontal perspective)	Oblique / Detached	Oblique / Detached	Oblique / Detached	Oblique / Detached	Oblique / Detached	Oblique / Detached
Frame size	Medium / close-up	Medium / close-up	Medium / close-up	Medium / close-up	Medium / close-up	Medium / close-up

Figure 2. Multimodal Analysis (O'Halloran, 2011) for Media Sequence: Final statements, B1TV station, 12 Nov. 2014

In the following frames (from Frame 2 to Frame 5), Victor Ponta takes on the position of *Hero* speaking on behalf of the “fooled” people. *The Hero* identifies the public enemy, Traian Băsescu, former Romanian president, in the person of his interlocutor Klaus Iohannis. This association of images was basically the main strategy that the candidate of the governing party has chosen throughout the election campaign. In frame 6, Victor Ponta makes a new positioning move and takes on the position of *Hero-Saviour*, who promises a *New World*. He proposes a new representation to the audience. He wants to live in a Romania without Traian Băsescu and without the other candidate, Klaus Iohannis. What illocutionary force can such a promising act have in relation to the illocutionary force of the speech acts subsequently employed by Iohannis?

In this study we only present frames 1-6 from the analysed sequence (see Figure 2). The semiotic resources employed by Klaus Iohannis, the opposition candidate, were detailed in a previous study (Drăgan, 2016).

As regards the second dimension of the research methodology, both political actors build themselves discursively through narrative sequences specific to the position assumed in each of the considered moments. For instance, in the case of Klaus Iohannis, we notice a narrative construction from the position of victim. He takes over the narrative thread proposed by his opponent (Victor Ponta) and resemanticises it with a simple reasoning, using concrete facts. Therefore, he proposes the audience a speech act with a consistent illocutionary force. Besides, the opposition candidate leaves the audience the freedom to interpret the narrative: “The conclusion, dear Romanians, is yours to draw”. (Re)telling from the perspective of the victim, but using the arguments of reality, is much more convincing than proposing the audience a story which has nothing to do with reality.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the analysis of the positioning captures the dynamic relationship between individual narratives, the social significance and position of the political actors in a discursive exchange. Complementarily, the multimodal analysis, presented for illustration purposes in this article, has allowed us to notice how social actors make use of various semiotic resources to assign themselves certain positions during the verbal interaction, which the correlative positions are, as well as the manner in which the two candidates build their discursive Ego. In short, we deconstruct the discursive behaviour of the social actors in key moments of the televised debate. From the multimodal perspective, the analysis of such moments allowed us to capture on the one hand, the dynamics of the discursive exchange, and on the other hand to observe how political actors manage different semiotic resources in an effort to persuade the public. Practically, the multimodal aspect of such semiotic strategies highlights how political actors appeal to different senses of the viewers to influence the decision of a candidate's preferability.

During the two televised debates the candidate of the incumbent party most wanted *to seem he was a certain way*, often omitting the aspect of authentic involvement in the dialogue. The candidate of the opposition's party *looked as he was*, relying on emphasising touchy, conjunctural topics, to the detriment of others. The journalist Cristian Tudor Popescu (2014) captured this aspect in an article published in the daily newspaper *Gândul (The Thought)*, on the day of the second televised debate:

"The presence of Mr. Iohannis in the show last night on RealitateaTV is contradicted blatantly by his own image, the one he struggles to deliver to voters for months: the settled, calm, serious "German", the man of "things well done". [...] Victor Ponta wanted to pass for a professor asking a student loads of questions. He threw a wave of numbers and statements over Iohannis, in some cases adding and bluffing, as the verifications of the newspaper *Gândul* show. And the mimic of his face, his gestures, his fussing, his chattering, his eye movements made him look like a fretting apprentice. Mr. Iohannis looked like a professor, even like a master: he spoke much less, with long breaks between the words uttered hard, *magister dixit*, showing an impenetrable face and a fixed gaze. On the contrary, the content of his utterings was that of a scoundrel student, who is trying to get away with cheap verbal tricks. In short, Ponta was the way we knew him, bold, superficial, cunning, boarish, Iohannis was unlike what we knew of him – improvised, inconsistent, bombastic, the man of things done in a rush. Victor Ponta did not manage to save his appearance, Klaus Iohannis revealed, for the first time, his essence" (November 12, 2014).

As I mentioned earlier, the way in which social actors manage the "nodal" episodes of the debate, the emotional dimension that prevails over the rational decision for these moments, can focus the undecided or easily influenced audience's preferences (Corbu & Boțan, 2011). As we have already noticed, an interdisciplinary approach – analysing the positioning complementarily with the tool of the multimodal analysis – allows us to capture on the one hand the dynamics of the discursive exchange in the episode we considered, and on the other hand to disambiguate the positioning (and the interpretation thereof) of the political actors involved in the debate.

The paper allows understanding of dialogue in televised debates as a form of "living" communication, as opening towards the other (Ponzio, 2006; Pleșu, 2010), and can be considered a plea for the reconfiguration of the culture of dialogue in the Romanian public space.

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