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Nora Galli de' Paratesi ^a & Luca Giuliano ^b

^a American University of Rome, Italy

^b Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pronoun morphology, modality and semantics of political communication in presidential debate of two Italian political leaders

Nora Galli de' Paratesi^a and Luca Giuliano^{b*}

^a*American University of Rome, Italy;* ^b*Sapienza University of Rome, Italy*

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The present article wants to be an example of how spin can be profitably analysed not just as far as the content of the utterances is concerned but through their linguistic form as well, and of how mystification can be made transparent through the analysis of the language use of political texts at all levels, including morphology, grammar and syntax. The alleged 'end of ideologies' has brought about new forms of spin based on subtle ideological mystification that can be analysed through forms of language. One such example is the use of figures and expressions borrowed from the language of economics and business, considered the realms of 'objectivity'.

Keywords: presidential debates; political language; political communication; statistical text analysis

Introduction

Regulated political debates have a great tradition in American politics. The first presidential debate took place in 1960 between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Kennedy was young and brilliant, Nixon had just undergone an operation. Kennedy slaughtered his opponent and since 1976 debates have regularly been organized, creating the typical expectations of media events.

In France, a country with a strong presidential electoral system, the first *grand débat* between the candidates of the second voting round, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and François Mitterrand, took place in 1974. In Germany, the first candidates to face this kind of political confrontation were Gerhard Schröder and Edmund Stoiber during the 2002 elections.

Face-to-face debates between candidates have often caused difficulties and brought reciprocal accusations of wanting to avoid the 'test' in front of the voters. In 1961 Konrad Adenauer refused the face-to-face debate with Willy Brandt because he thought that this would legitimate his opponent. For the same reason, in 2002, Jacques Chirac refused to measure himself face-to-face with Jean Marie Le Pen. During the 2001 electoral campaign, Silvio Berlusconi refused the face-to-face debate with Francesco Rutelli, while during the 2006 elections, to the perplexity of Romano Prodi's staff, Berlusconi himself demanded a 'face-to-face' debate and the centre-right press accused the centre-left leader of being afraid of his opponent, of his opponent's greater dialectical capabilities and television communicative effectiveness.

*Corresponding author. Email: luca.giuliano@uniroma1.it

Finally on 2 February 2006 the 'Commissione di Vigilanza Rai' (the commission which supervises the activities of the Rai), after many disputes, approved the equal access to media regulations for the electoral campaign which took effect from the 11 February. The text, among other things, planned five face-to-face debates: two, the first and the last, between Berlusconi and Prodi; in the middle three debates reserved for the other leaders of the two coalitions: Rutelli and Fini, Bertinotti and Maroni, Casini and Fassino. Every debate was to last 1 hour and 15 minutes and be shown on Rai Uno between 9:00 and 10:30 pm. The presentation of the event would have been assigned to a journalist of the Rai.

The rules applied in these political debates are inspired by those used during the American presidential campaigns: no stage décor; prohibition against using notes or any kind of graphic or written material; scanning of the speaking time regulated by a moderator; journalists must ask questions in less than 30 seconds; candidates must answer in a maximum of 2 minutes and 30 seconds; interruptions are not allowed; final appeals to the voters are to be 2 minutes and 30 seconds long.

These are strict rules which certainly favour correct and orderly debates where each candidate can express his/her point of view and political program, but, according to some commentators, they risk making the television debate boring and 'bureaucratic'. Berlusconi, also during the debates, will show more than once his intolerance for what he considers restrictions introduced to prevent his communicative capabilities and his quickness in making remarks creating difficulties for a political opponent such as Prodi, known to be a slow and donnish speaker.

In the highly charged atmosphere of the electoral campaign, the debates have a considerable number of spectators, especially the first and the last ones reserved for the main leaders of the two coalitions: a share of over 50%, that is more than 16 million spectators, for the debate of 14 March, and a share of 45% for that of 3 April (Fornari 2006, p. 143).

Mass means of communication tend to emphasize the importance of political language. 'Politics as a show' is not only a tool capable of creating consensus for certain political choices. Leaders are more and more inclined to attribute importance to 'communication' as such, regardless of what should be the plan of concrete action. The perception that words 'build' reality is so strong that the circumstances and the conditions in which debates take place during election campaigns are subject to all kinds of restrictions and regulations (Edelman 1992). In general, sensitivity and attention to the use and the misuse of political communication have become fundamental in democratic systems, where a strong risk of media manipulation can result, as has already occurred, in the manipulation of public opinion (Manheim 1991).

Political speech, whatever way we consider it, is by definition based on an ideology (Van Dijk 2006). 'Ideology' is a word with negative connotations and not only in its common meaning. In political thought, but also in the social sciences, ideologies have often been contrasted with so-called 'objective knowledge' (Eagleton 1991, Žizek 1994). A lot has been said and written in recent years about the 'end of ideologies', to then admit that it is not so, but that we are rather assisting in the appearance of totally new ideological forms, not immediately recognizable if we follow the old frames handed down from the 1900s (Freedon 2005). The transformation of political leadership into mediatic leadership has apparently brought the simplification of political communication, but it has also increased the criticism of political speeches in which a more or less explicit manipulation of

consensus (Fairclough, 2000) or a real distortion can be noticed (Bolasco *et al.* 2006). The use of a language ‘near to the people’ can easily result in the exaltation of the leader as the person who can explain a complex reality and hand it back ready-made. The detested powerful ideologies of the twentieth century are therefore replaced by weaker ‘reference frames’, which seem rational categories deriving from economic and financial language, but which also have a gifted symbolic power, exactly as – and perhaps even more so because presented as necessary – the ideologies themselves.

In an automatic analysis of a text, such as the one carried out in this article, the style of the communication and the reconstruction of the contents must be indicated beforehand in order not to be considered instrumental or the result of an inductive exploration of the textual data. The strength of the empirical data, expressed in a quantity which can be compared, must be supported by a clear formulation of the hypotheses.

Face-to-face debates (in international literature: presidential debates) are relevant moments of an election campaign. The voters who follow the television debates to form an opinion on the electoral programs of the candidates are those with mature political ideas and with an income/education above average (Kenski and Stroud 2005). Face-to-face debates between the candidates can change vote preferences, even though they do not have a significant effect on the perception of the candidates’ competences (Benoit *et al.* 2003). For this reason they are carefully analysed and their overall impact on the public is considered (Coleman 2000, Schroeder 2000, Benoit *et al.* 2001, Beom *et al.* 2005, Maier *et al.* 2007).

Aims of the article

The object of this article is a comparison of Prodi’s and Berlusconi’s language at the oral level, in face-to-face interaction.

After having carried out previous research (Bolasco *et al.* 2006) on Berlusconi’s speeches that were prepared in advance and delivered in rallies during the previous years (*scritto-parlato*), we wanted to enlarge the analysis of Berlusconi’s oral performance to the particular area of face-to-face interaction.

In particular we tried to find empirical evidence of some traits of Berlusconi’s and Prodi’s political discourse that we had encountered in our previous work and in the reading of the transcription of the debates themselves.

In particular we wanted to analyse data concerning:

- (1) a different conception of the speakers’ position with respect to ‘others’, be it the political opposition in general or the public they talk to or about, as is revealed by the use of deixis of pronouns, personal adjectives and persons of verbs;
- (2) differences in the use of modality both in terms of frequencies of items and in the semantic contents; modality is usually taken as giving interesting information about the attitudes of the speaker towards the object of discourse;
- (3) differences in the use of particular lexical items of the general political language in terms of frequency, context and connotation;
- (4) differences in use of figures and statistics; this particular trait is seen as interesting in the study of spin and mystification, and has become very

common in recent times, as, especially in Italy, political language has been flooded by the language of economics and business. Berlusconi himself has been identified with the mixture.

Description of the corpus

The texts analysed (see Table 1) are the transcriptions of two debates between Berlusconi, then prime minister, and Prodi, candidate for the opposition, that were held on television, transmitted by the national broadcasting corporation (Rai Uno), during the last general election campaign on 14 March and 3 April 2006.

The rules applied to these debates were derived from those used in the last American presidential campaign: there was no decoration in the studio; notes, diagrams, written materials were not allowed; turn-taking was regulated by a moderator; the journalists' questions could be no longer than 30 seconds and the responses were limited to 2 minutes 30 seconds; absolutely no interruptions and a final appeal to voters also of 2 minutes 30 seconds.

The linguistic and textual consequences of this debate structure are obviously constraining:

- spontaneity was limited (Berlusconi kept complaining about it and showed much impatience);
- choice of words, and therefore their frequency, was determined by the questions asked.

Results

The first difference that is apparent from the figures in Table 2 is that the speed at which the two speakers talk differs by 15%. The time allotted to them is identical and Berlusconi manages to fill it with a higher number of occurrences. Speed of delivery is thought to be an indication of general competence: the higher the speed, the more competent the speaker is felt to be.

Personal deixis and the relationships between participants

The two speakers show noticeable difference in the use of some pronoun forms, namely *io*, *me*, *lui*, *loro*, *nostr** and *noi* (respectively *I*, *me*, *he*, *they*, *our** and *we*) (Table 3).

- (a) *Io*, the first-person pronoun, and the full object form *me* are used very largely by Prodi and much less by Berlusconi. *Me* is very often the emphatic

Table 1. Lexicometric description of the corpus.

Token words (N)	22,780
Type words (V)	3707
Type/token ratio = (V/N) × 100	16.27
% hapax	53.95
Mean = N/V	6.14

Software used: *TalTac 2.5* by Bolasco *et al.* (2006).

Table 2. Occurrences per speaker.

Speakers	Occurrences (N)	N ₁ /N ₂
1. Berlusconi	12,215	1.15
2. Prodi	10,565	

substitute for the enclitic object form *mi* and can be taken as a sign of a tendency to the emphatic use of the first-person pronoun by Prodi. That would be confirmed by the fact that in particular in Prodi's speech the subject form *io* appears in several cases in illocutionary acts such as:

io cerco di rispondere alla domanda (I am trying to answer the question)

io chiedo a loro il coraggio (I ask them the courage)

io dico ai cittadini italiani (I say to the Italian citizens)

io dico che siamo in una situazione (I say that we are in a situation)

io qui chiedo che ci venga data immediatamente (I here ask to be immediately given)

- (b) *Lui* and *loro* have high occurrences in Berlusconi's speech and they are there to emphasize the distance that he feels and seems to mark between himself on one side and his interlocutor and the opposite coalition on the other.
- (c) *Noi*, *ci*, *nostr** have a higher distribution in Prodi than in Berlusconi. It is worthwhile to make a distinction, within the semantic area of the first-person plural, between what has been defined *inclusive* and *exclusive* *we*, whether or not the public to whom the speakers direct their speech is included or not. In the first case (*exclusive we*) the pronoun includes just the speakers and his immediate circle, i.e. party and cabinet, and leaves out the public. In the case of *inclusive we* the public (and often the country at large) are included.

Table 4 gives the figures for the two different meanings of *we*.

Table 3. Personal deixis: personal and possessive pronouns and adjectives (incidence per % occurrences).

Forms	Berlusconi	Prodi
<i>io (I)</i>	5.83	7.10
<i>mi (me)</i>	2.27	2.15
<i>me (me)</i>	0.48	0.93
<i>mi* (my)</i>	0.89	1.31
<i>noi (we)</i>	6.23	10.65
<i>ci (us)</i>	1.13	2.34
<i>nostr* (our*)</i>	4.37	5.61
<i>voi (you)</i>	–	0.19
<i>vostri* (your*)</i>	0.24	–
<i>lui (Prodi/Berlusconi) (he)</i>	1.78	0.37
<i>loro (opposite coalition) (they)</i>	1.94	–

Table 4. Exclusive and inclusive *we* (incidence per ‰ occurrences).

Forms	Berlusconi	Prodi
Exclusive <i>we</i>	5.58	6.36
Inclusive <i>we</i>	0.65	4.31

Modality

The area of the verb system that shows an evident difference between our two speakers is modality. In general modality shows the attitudes of a speaker vis-à-vis an action. In Italian modality can be quantified mainly through the use of (among other forms) the modal verbs *potere*, *volere* and *dovere* that correspond roughly to the English forms *can*, *will* and *must*. Table 5 shows the occurrence of these verbs. We can see that first of all modal verbs in general have much lower occurrences in Berlusconi than in Prodi and that in particular the latter presents a very high use of *dovere* in particular in the first-person plural *dobbiamo* (Table 6).

In linguistics we distinguish the meaning of the modal verbs which is borrowed from formal logic between *alethic*, *epistemic* and *deontic* modality. To illustrate this difference let us take the phrase:

- (1) *The car must be ready*

The phrase may have three different meaning in different contexts:

- (2) *It follows from what is known that the car is ready* (alethic, i.e. it is a true fact that ...)
 (3) *It is surely the case that the car is ready* (epistemic, in my knowledge ...)
 (4) *I oblige you to make sure that the car is ready* (deontic, I want to, I make you do something)

In (2) we affirm a deduced truth, in the second example (3) I communicate that I know a fact and in the third phrase (4) I have a performative act, i.e. I invite, oblige or exhort somebody to act in a certain way.

The occurrences of modals were analysed in their context with the help of their co-occurrences and it is clear that Prodi's use of *dobbiamo* (*we must*) is deontic.

Lexical analysis

The study of the lexicon of the two speakers is based on the frequency of words as well as their value vis-à-vis the context. The semantic fields, and therefore the

Table 5. Modal verbs (occurrences).

Verbs	Berlusconi	Prodi
<i>dovere</i> (<i>must</i>)	43	82
<i>potere</i> (<i>can</i>)	53	62
<i>volere</i> (<i>will</i>)	45	57

Table 6. First person plural of modal verbs (incidence per ‰ occurrences).

Verbs	Berlusconi	Prodi
dobbiamo	0.32	2.99
possiamo	0.08	1.31
vogliamo	0.08	0.65

political themes, that emerge through the quantitative and semantic comparison in the use of terms are the following:

- taxation
- magistrature
- school
- the left
- communism.

Taxation

As regards the semantic field of taxation, the two speakers present a different choice of items: Prodi prefers the term *imposta* (32) to *tassa* (1), which is technically more correct when talking of the percentage that is taken by the state from earnings. Berlusconi in contrast uses *tassa* 13 times. This is partly due to Prodi being an academic economist but the examination of co-occurrences shows that in fact Berlusconi prefers *tassa* not only because it is a term belonging to everyday language but because it also has negative associations and he uses it in fact in connotated and specified ways, such as *tassa di successione* (*death tax*) or *tassa patrimoniale* (*wealth tax*) and in contexts in which the concept is presented in extremely negative ways.

Magistrature

In Berlusconi's lexicon the words *magistrato* (*magistrate*) and *magistratura* (*magistrature*) appear a total of 8 times as opposed to 0 in Prodi. Of these occurrences 7 are connotated negatively, as in *magistratura democratica organica* (*organic democratic magistrature*, i.e. sympathising with the left), *magistratura politicizzata* (*politicized magistrature*), *magistratura di sinistra* (*leftist magistrature*). This is a very sensitive topic for Berlusconi because of his problems with Italian justice and his tendency to become impatient with the independence of the magistrates from the executive.

School

This is a very important political point for both politicians because they both know that the public cares about it and is not happy. It recurs more frequently in Prodi (24) than in Berlusconi (16), whose government at the time had passed a much-criticised reform. If we analyse other items belonging to the same semantic field we can see that Prodi mentions the teachers 6 times against 0, showing a social interest in one of the protagonists of teaching, while the other ones, the students, do not get a mention from either.

The left

Among the items belonging to strictly political jargon *sinistra* (*the left*) appears with a rather high frequency in Berlusconi's lexicon (42) as opposed to Prodi's lexicon (8). In his speeches he always refers to the centre-left coalition as *the left*, which increases the occurrences, while in fact it should only be used for the two small parties in the coalition at the extreme left. Needless to say this use, on top of being inexact, is also strongly connotated and it tends to appear in negative contexts.

Communism

The figures for items belonging to this field (*comunismo, comunista, comunisti*) are 14 for Berlusconi and 1 for Prodi. As in the case of *sinistra* (*the left*) Berlusconi's use is greater because it is overused (anybody that belongs to the centre-left coalition is a communist; it is used properly only four times) and strongly connotated.

Vocabulary of address and mention of the opponent

The way the two speakers address and mention each other presents striking differences. Prodi refers to Berlusconi as the *Presidente del Consiglio* (*Prime Minister*) 16 times and addresses him as *Mr. President* twice. Berlusconi calls his adversary *Prodi* 34 times without a title, *professor Prodi* (13), *professore* (3), *signor Prodi* (5).

The Italian system of address is very different from both the English and the French ones and needs some explanation. Obviously the name without a title is less respectful than the name with a title. Apart from being an academic (*professore*) Prodi was in fact twice a '*presidente*', once as '*Presidente del Consiglio*' (Italian for *Prime Minister*) and later as '*President of the European Commission*'. The Italian use is generally speaking that *presidente* at very high political level remains a title after office. The use of *professore* in its place relegates the opponent to a lower status as well as sounding like a less political title. As for the use of *signor Prodi*, unlike in French and English, it is in Italian the lowest from a social point of view but above all its use here is strongly sarcastic and disparaging.

Figures and percentages

The extensive use of numbers and percentages is a recent trait of political speech that seems to have penetrated from economics and business jargon after the so-called 'end of ideologies'. Politicians seem to try to base their arguments not so much on a political credo or different views of the world, but on an alleged 'objectivity' and efficiency that they borrow impressionistically from economics and business.

The use of figures without references in televised speeches and in rallies, under conditions in which it is impossible for the hearer to verify them, is unfair and no doubt a form of mystification.

Table 7 gives the figures for our speakers. In fact Berlusconi's excessive propensity towards the use of figures caused a bitter verbal clash during the 3 April debate (Bruno Vespa, famous journalist and anchorman, is the moderator).

Table 7. Use of figures per speaker.

Speakers	Occurrences	Incidence per ‰ occurrences	Type words
Berlusconi	253	20.71	97
Prodi	123	11.64	44

Prodi: *A me sembra che il Presidente del Consiglio si eh affidi ai numeri un po' come gli ubriachi si attaccino si attaccano ai lampioni, non per farsi ...*

Berlusconi: *Grazie ...*

Prodi: *... illuminare, non per farsi illuminare ma per farsi, ma per farsi*

Berlusconi: *Grazie professor Prodi, dell'ubriaco se lo può tenere per lei, se lo può tenere per lei dell'ubriaco, casomai è ...*

Vespa: *Signor presidente la prego la prego ...*

Berlusconi: *... lei che parla da ubriaco non il sottoscritto e allora rispetti il presidente del consiglio, questo non lo accetto Prodi Vespa e allora ...*

Vespa: *La prego di replicare subito dopo presidente presidente la prego*

Berlusconi: *Faccia il moderatore, lo moderi!*

Vespa: *Professor Prodi ...*

Prodi: *È Bernard Shaw che dice che spesso ci si affida ai numeri come gli ubriachi si attaccano ai lampioni non per farsi illuminare, ma per farsi sostenere, non mi sembra un insulto di nessun tipo, è questa valanga di numeri, che vuole celare una verità molto semplice, che il paese è a crescita zero e il mezzogiorno è cresciuto meno del resto del paese.*

Prodi: *It seems to me that the Prime Minister hangs on to his figures the same way in which drunkards hang on to lampposts, not to be ...*

Berlusconi: *Thank you ...*

Prodi: *... enlightened, not to be enlightened but to be, but to be*

Berlusconi: *Thank you professor Prodi, the drunkard you can keep it for yourself, you can keep the drunkard for yourself, if anything it is ...*

Vespa: *Mr. President please, please ...*

Berlusconi: *... you who speaks like a drunkard not I and so show respect to the Prime Minister, I cannot accept this Prodi Vespa and so ...*

Vespa: *I ask you not to reply immediately after President President please*

Berlusconi: *Be the moderator, moderate him!*

Vespa: *Professor Prodi ...*

Prodi: *It is Bernard Shaw who says that we often hang on to figures like drunkards hang on to lampposts not to be enlightened, but to be held up, it does not seem an insult of any kind, it is this stream of figures, which wants to hide a very simple truth, that the country is not growing and that the south has grown less than the rest of the country.*

Conclusions

The quantitative and qualitative analysis seems to confirm our predictions: there is indeed an appreciable difference in the use of pronouns, modality, lexicon and figures in the two opponents and this seem to show interesting characteristics, positive as well as negative, in the two politicians.

Berlusconi's discourse projects an image which is more sparkling (higher speed of diction), contains more connotation and more figures, both typical traits of spin in politics, is centred on *we*, the political group (party and cabinet) as opposed as *you*, the public, and *he*, Prodi, or *them*, the opposition. His political language is centred on the enemies, the magistrature, the *communists* and *the left*. He conceives of his

opponent as someone who has a lower status than himself and who provokes his sarcasm and as someone who can be spoken down to and looked down on.

Prodi's discourse is on the whole more anodyne and less connotated, shows social concerns (like towards the teachers) and seems to possess the good and bad sides of a 'professorial' more modest personality: his speech is slower, more hesitant and less sparkling; he has a higher use of words such as *capire*, (*to understand*), (9) as opposed to (0); his extensive use of the illocutory act and of the pronoun *io* is a way of trying to be clear and explicit and also of committing himself, but in some of the phrases also indicates a desire to affirm himself as though made shy by the situation: *sono io il capo della coalizione* (*I am the head of the coalition*).

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