



HWA CHONG INSTITUTION (HIGH SCHOOL SECTION)

CATEGORY 2A PROJECT WORK WRITTEN REPORT

Topic: Analysis of United Kingdom general elections using the functional theory of political discourse

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Declaration

I declare that this assignment is my own work and does not involve plagiarism or collusion. The sources of other people's work have been appropriately referenced, failing which I am willing to accept the necessary disciplinary action(s) to be taken against me.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

The 2010 United Kingdom General Elections was held on Thursday, 6 May 2010, with 45,597,461 registered voters entitled to vote to elect members to the House of Commons. The election took place in 650 constituencies across the United Kingdom.

The winner of the election was the Conservative Party led by David Cameron. He won the largest number of votes and seats, but still fell 20 seats short. This resulted in a hung parliament where no party was able to command a majority in the House of Commons. This was the second general election since the Second World War to return a hung parliament, the first being the February 1974 election. The Cameron-Clegg coalition government was subsequently formed and this was the first coalition in British history to eventuate directly from an election outcome. David Cameron became the prime minister of the United Kingdom while Nick Clegg of the Liberal Democrats Party acted as his Deputy Prime Minister.

None of the three main party leaders had previously led a general election campaign, a situation which had not occurred since the 1979 election. Nick Clegg was judged the clear winner of the first debate. In the second debate, Nick Clegg and David Cameron came out best in the instant polls. And in the final debate, David Cameron was widely regarded as the party leader who made the best impression to the audience at home. This allowed the Conservative Party to pull ahead, allowing them to achieve victory in the election.

1.2 Rationale

Benoit's functional theory of political discourse has been used to analyse mainly American politics and was rarely used outside of the United States, however it has recently been applied to political campaigns in other countries such as the presidential debates in Korea, Ukraine, Taiwan, Finland, etc. The functional theory has yet to be implemented to the political culture of the United Kingdom.

This reason as to why this theory has been implemented into the USA and so many countries other than the United Kingdom may be because of differing parliamentary types. The United States along with the countries mentioned above (Korea, Ukraine, Taiwan, Finland) have a presidential system of government whereas the United Kingdom operates under a constitutional monarchy. This means in the United Kingdom, there is no president. Instead, there is a monarch in the country, meaning that the next most powerful person in English politics is the country's Prime Minister. The Prime Minister unlike presidents from other countries mainly has superiority over domestic affairs and politics.

Thus this paper aims to add on to existing literature of Benoit's theory and to see whether or not the theory can be used upon the debates from the United Kingdom. As well as to use Benoit's theory to analyse the 2010 United Kingdom General Election to observe the decisions Prime Minister David Cameron made during the General election debates to present his campaign messages or ways he articulated his answers.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What were the methods David Cameron used in his message during the debates
2. To what extent did David Cameron use acclaims during the election debates
3. How far did the use of acclaim allow him to attain victory in the 2010 United Kingdom General Election

1.4 Thesis Statement

David Cameron's use of acclaims during the 2010 United Kingdom general election debates helped him win the election.

1.5 Scope of research

Benoit's functional theory of political discourse has been built on the basis of six axioms. Only the fourth axiom of his theory which is Candidates Establish Preferability Through Acclaiming, Attacking, and Defending. will be used in the analysis of this paper. Only the fourth axiom of Benoit's functional theory will be used as it is the most predominant axiom in affecting the candidates during the debate. The reason as to why this will be so is because the fourth axiom directly impacts the decisions candidates make during the debates and how they present their campaign messages. Whereas the other axioms are either about how the candidates differentiate themselves from their opponents and whether they should or should not. (Axioms 2, 3 & 5) Or about the act of voting (Axioms 1 & 6)

This paper will take and analyse 3 presidential debates conducted in England during the 2010 United Kingdom General Elections. The debate transcripts provided by Wikipedia would be used in my analysis. The first debate was produced by ITV studios. The main theme for debate was domestic affairs. The second debate was produced by British Sky Broadcasting. The main theme for debate was foreign affairs. The third and final debate was produced by BBC. The main theme for debate was economic affairs. All three debates had different moderators but every one of them included the party leaders of the main parties from the United Kingdom. (David Cameron, Gordon Brown and Nick Clegg)

1.6 Significance of research

Benoit's functional theory of political campaign discourse derives from American background (Dudek & Partacz 2007) and is used to mainly analyze presidential debates in the United States of America. However, this theory has started to reach out towards many different foreign countries outside of the United States. Yet, it has not been used to analyze the political culture of the United Kingdom, so this paper aims to allow readers to know if Benoit's theory can be applied and used on the General Election debates from the UK.

This research is also to allow readers to know what methods Prime Minister David Cameron used in his campaign messages which allowed him to become popular amongst the people and the most favored candidate during the general election.

1.7 Limitations

Only one axiom will be used to analyse the 2010 United Kingdom General Election debates. Therefore this will not be a full analysis of everything the participants have said or done.

And only the debates from 2010 are used in this paper, this means that methods used to convey campaign messages may differ as time passes and these methods may completely change in the debates conducted during future general elections

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1: Presidential debates

Presidential debates are a way for 2 or more presidential candidates to present their campaigns messages or promote themselves and their policies. They are usually aired on television for voters to witness. A presidential debate is very much different from a traditional debate, candidates did not give opposing speeches but instead answered questions.. Usually questions are asked by a moderator and/or panel of reporters, occasionally questions are solicited from voters. (Benoit 2007) Thus a more apt description of “debate” might be “joint press conferences” (Aurer 1962; Jamieson, Birdsell 1988). This definition is accurate and one which I personally agree with. Presidential debates are not at all like normal debates. Participants do not present opposing arguments to the topic to argue for the different viewpoints, instead all that happens in a presidential debate is question answering, with statements of conclusion from each participant at the end of the debate.

2.2: Political discourse

Crystal (2006) defines discourse as “continuous stretch of (especially spoken) language larger than a sentence,” “it is a set of utterances which constitute any recognizable speech event” (p.148). The term ‘discourse’ refers to communications either spoken or written. Political

discourse can hence be defined as communications made within the domain of politics. However, political discussion or activity also involves normal citizens of a country, especially voters who take part in political processes. Demonstrators and dissidents, and many more all participate in political exchange as well. This also means that categorization of people and groups should at least be strict, in the sense that their members are participants of political discourse only when acting as political actors. (Amaglobeli, 2018) For easier classification of political discourse, this means that a conversation between normal citizens about a politician or politics would not count as political discourse. True political discourse must be produced by the speaker in his or her professional role of a politician and in an institutional setting, (Van Dijk, 2002) such as government sessions, parliamentary discussions, election campaigns, political debates, etc. There is a need to define this as if not, specific analysis of instances of political discourse would be near impossible since everything we say in relation could be considered as political discourse. Now that political discourse has been established as the domain of activities for politicians, since at many times politicians are willing to do or say anything that will give them an edge in any political standoff, political discourse can also be defined as a communicative act participants of which try to give specific meanings to facts and influence or persuade others, a manipulative linguistic strategy which serves concrete (ideological) goals. (Amaglobeli 2018). This above definition would apply to the case studies of this paper where the General Election debates in the UK between election candidates are now confirmed to be political discourse. To observe how the candidates manipulate their words and/or policies during the debate to increase their popularity or how it positions them in a favorable light.

2.3: Functional theory of political discourse

The functional theory of political campaign discourse is a theory developed in the American culture of political communication (Isolatus 2011) by William L. Benoit to analyse political campaign messages in the United States where message senders are rival political actors (Dudek, Partacz 2007) This functional theory is used in the analysis of entire presidential campaigns but most oftenly in American Presidential Debates.

2.3.1: Assumptions of the functional theory

The functional theory of political discourse is constructed based on 5 assumptions or 'Axioms' The axioms are:

A1: Voting is a comparative act.

A2: Candidates must distinguish themselves from opponents.

A3: Political campaign messages allow candidates to distinguish themselves.

A4: Candidates establish preferability through acclaiming, attacking, and defending.

A5: Campaign discourse occurs on two topics: policy and character

This paper will only explore Axiom 4 of the theory and no more. In an election, a candidate has to appear different from his or her opponents in ways that voters favour. (Benoit 2007). Candidates have to make themselves unique so that voters know who to vote for, if every candidate was the same there would be no point in having an election. At the same time, candidates also need to become more favorable amongst the citizens, if you are unlikeable or unpopular, there is a low chance you would gain the support of the people. In order to achieve this, there are three potential functions that can be used during political discourse. According to Drăgan (2016) he mentions that these functions are discursive tools available

for the candidates to position favorably on the audience preferences scale. They are methods which candidates use to promote themselves. The functions are: Acclaiming, Attacking and Defending.

Acclaiming refers to when candidates emphasize their desirable qualities and stress their policies and beliefs while portraying themselves in a positive light. These statements are positive and are aimed towards raising the self-image of a candidate, so that their desirability can increase and they become more favourable, usually through self-praise. If voters prefer a candidate who is honest, candidates can emphasize that they are very honest. This is so that the people can find a candidate which they feel comfortable with. People often want to find someone who aligns with their own values/qualities or attributes and one they feel safe trusting.

Attacking refers to when candidates criticize their opponents and pick out their flaws so that they can again increase their own favourability while decreasing the opposition's desirability. Attacks focus on the negative traits of the opponents and stresses those which may discourage voters (Dudek, Partacz 2007) When candidates point out the flaws of other candidates' character or policies this can be considered an attack. Even though this function may prove to be useful, it is rather despicable as many a time candidates may exaggerate their statements about others or twist the truth so that voters will lose confidence in the candidate they support and instead vote for the other. These jabs harm the perception voters have of the attacked candidate which may cause them to start showing support to a less optimal candidate.

Defending refers to when candidates try to refute any attacks from their opponents. Defenses attempt to restore or prevent additional damage to a candidate's perceived preferability (Benoit & Hartcock 1999; Benoit et al. 2003; Benoit 2007). They are replies of denial made by a candidate who has been criticized so that voters do not have a bad perception of them. This method allows for candidates to clear misunderstandings yet at the same time if the attackers are proven wrong, they instead will be looked towards negatively for false claims or just acting in spite or being petty.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this paper, Benoit's functional theory will be applied to the analysis of the 3 prime ministerial debates that happened during the 2010 United Kingdom General Elections. All 3 debates included the same participants (David Cameron from the Conservative Party, Gordon Brown from the Labour Party, and Nick Clegg from the Liberal Democrat Party) The first debate happened on 15 April and its topic was on domestic affairs. The second debate happened on 22 April and its topic was on international affairs. The final debate happened on 29 April and its topic was on economic affairs.

Benoit's functional theory of political discourse consists of five axioms on which the theory is founded upon and based on the 5 axioms, and in addition, 5 hypotheses are formulated based on the 5 axioms, in context of the United States Presidential Elections.

H1: Candidates use acclamations more frequently than attacks; and attacks more often than defenses.

H2: Policy comments would be made more than character comments

H3. General goals will be used more often to acclaim than to attack

H4. Ideals will be used more often to acclaim than to attacks

H5. General goals will be used more frequently than future plans

Since only Benoit's 4th axiom: *Candidates establish preferability through acclaiming, attacking, and defending* would be used in my analysis, only hypothesis 1 of the theory will be looked since it is the only hypothesis which relates to the axiom used.

The official transcripts for all 3 debates were taken from Wikipedia and after that they were put into QDA Miner, a qualitative data analysis tool. The qualitative data analysis tool was then used to code all utterances made by David Cameron into their respective categories of functions. These utterances were statements of acclaim, attack or defense made by David Cameron throughout the span of the three general election debates. This is to allow readers to observe which techniques David Cameron used and to what frequency during the debates which ultimately allowed him to win the election and become prime minister of the United Kingdom in 2010.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Analysis

This chapter will present the results of coding each utterance from the three debates into the different categories based on which type of function they are. As well as discuss each individual function's usage by David Cameron, their frequencies and the reasons as to why these frequencies may differ.

Results: Table 1

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses	Total utterances from one debate
Debate 1	32	22	5	59
Debate 2	43	23	2	58
Debate 3	29	36	5	70
Total number of times a specific function was used throughout the 3 debates	104 (52.8%)	81 (41.1%)	12 (6.1%)	197

This table shows the frequency of each function that was used by David Cameron during the General Election debates.

Table 2:

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defenses	Total
Debate 1 -3	104 (52.8%)	81 (41.1%)	12 (6.1%)	197
Total U.S	4,050 (57%)	2,501 (35%)	604 (8%)	7,155

U.S. debate data from Benoit (in press): 1960, 1976-2004

This table shows the comparison of results between the 2010 UK General Election Debates and the results Benoit obtained from analysing debates from the US from 1960 and 1976 to 2004.

4.1: Use of Acclaims

This part of the chapter will focus on David Cameron's use of acclaim during the 3 debates.

4.1.1: Purpose of Acclaims

In the span of 3 debates, David Cameron made a total of 104 statements of acclaims. This makes up the majority of the total amount of utterances he made at 52.8%. David Cameron used the function of acclaim the most. An example of a statement of acclaim is:

Extract (1) from Debate 2:

David Cameron: "But I think as important as policy is your values. Let me tell you mine. If you work hard, I'll be behind you; if you want to raise a family, I will support you. If you're old and you become ill, we will always be there for you"

This statement of acclaim is David Cameron promising what he would do/ how he would support the people if he was the country's prime minister. This is so that voters would view him as a candidate that is caring and supportive. One that would not let anyone down but instead would do his best to help people in any aspect. This may lead to voters feeling that he is the more favorable candidate. Throughout the 3 debates, David Cameron made great attempts to share his beliefs and mention what his party would bring to assure voters that they would be in safe hands voting for him during the date, as seen from his large use of acclaims.

This is so that voters prefer him over other candidates, causing them to be more inclined to vote for him and his party.

4.1.2: Percentage of Acclaims

In the context of Benoit's functional theory, his hypothesis on how acclaims would be the most common function was proven to be true. As mentioned in the previous section, the amount of acclaims made up 52.8% of David Cameron's total utterances. This comes really close to the results Benoit attained from analysing debates from 1960 and 1976 to 2004, as seen from the tables above. Throughout all these debates, 4050 acclaims were made which made up 57% of the total utterances. This shows that participants from these debates and David Cameron himself preferred to oscillate their discourse in a way more positively than negatively. In the context of David Cameron, this was because he needed to make himself appear more favourable than the other candidates, especially Gordon Brown from the Labour Party. The Labour party had been in power for the past 13 years prior to 2010 and many argued that they did not do a good job. If David Cameron could capitalize on this and make himself seem better than the other candidates, voters would be more willing to vote for him as they began to lose trust in the Labour party. Thus, he promised that he would do a better job, bring beneficial changes and would avoid making the mistakes the Labour government has made. Another reason as to why acclaims were used the most as according to Benoit, this function has no drawbacks. Acclaims just emphasizes one's desirable qualities to make one seem better than the rest.

4.2: Use of Attacks

This part of the chapter will talk about David Cameron's use of attacks during the 3 debates.

4.2.1: Purpose and Percentage of Attacks

Across the 3 debates, David Cameron made 81 statements of attack. These were his second most used function which makes up 41.1% of his total utterances. An example of an attack he made is:

Extract (2) from Debate 3:

David Cameron: "13 years of economic failure, 13 years, sadly, of quite a lot of educational failure, 13 years in which inequality's got worse, in which deep poverty's got worse, in which they haven't got to grips with the problems"

Extract (3) from Debate 2:

David Cameron: "I thought all that sounded slightly desperate and an attempt to frighten people, instead of doing what I think we need to do in our country, which is to take and make a clean break from the last 13 years"

This statement of attack was directed at Gordon Brown. David Cameron was trying to tell the audience that for the past 13 years, the Labour Party has done nothing but negatively impact multiple aspects of the country under their control. He wants to try to make Gordon Brown and his party look like failures who are unable to help the people so that he and his party can be seen as the more favourable one. In fact most of David Cameron's attacks were directed at Gordon Brown and the Labour Party. Every time he did so, he would mention the 13 years of

Labour government and how badly they did, blaming all of the country's problems on them. David Cameron made a great attempt to keep reminding the audience that life under the Labour Party was not good and that they should not vote for Gordon Brown again.

The second part of Benoit's hypothesis was proved positive that attacks would be used less than acclaims but more than defenses. Attacks were David Cameron's second most used function at 41.1%, this was similar to the results obtained by Benoit. Across the US presidential debates he analysed, there were a total of 2501 attacks which made up 35% of the total utterances, making it the second most used function as well. David Cameron wanted to put the Labour Party in a bad light so that they lose popularity.

4.2.2: Disadvantage of Attacks

The reason as to why attacks may have been used less than acclaims is because according to Benoit, this function has one disadvantage. That is: voters may dislike mudslinging. Mudslinging refers to the making of malicious allegations to decrease an opponent's popularity. Voters may not like it when candidates are too aggressive and try to attack their opponents whenever they have the chance. Candidates like this may spend more of their time trying to bring down other candidates than actually speaking about what they can bring. David Cameron's attacks were mainly targeted at only Gordon Brown but he spent more time convincing the audience with his policies and how he would support them and solve their problems, acclaiming for himself and his party.

4.3: Use of Defenses

This final part of the chapter will talk about David Cameron's use of defenses during the 3 debates.

4.3.1: Purpose and Percentage of Defenses

Across the 3 debates, David Cameron only made 12 statements of defense. This is the function he used the least, making up only 6.1% of his total utterances. An example of a statement of defense is:

Extract (4) from Debate 1:

David Cameron: "And I think one of the things I've heard during this debate is just repeated attempts to try and frighten you about a Conservative government"

Extract (5) from Debate 3:

David Cameron: "As I say, last week in these debates he tried to frighten people, saying the Conservatives would take away benefits ... He's trying again to frighten people, and actually he should be ashamed of what he's doing."

This statement of defense is David Cameron trying to assure the audience that the things Gordon Brown says about him is not true and that he was trying to scare them into not voting for him. This is so that David Cameron and his party would not be pushed into an unfavourable position. By telling the audience that everything targeted at him is false, voters would less likely believe Gordon Brown, keeping their support for David Cameron. Defenses were the least used throughout the 3 debates. They were used to respond to and refute

statements of attack from the other candidates, but most of them were to reassure the audience that what Gordon Brown says was his attempt of trying to frighten the voters and that in reality, the Conservative Party would never do the things Gordon Brown brings up.

The last part of Benoit's hypothesis is thus proven true that defenses would be the least used. Defenses only made up 6.1% of David Cameron's utterances, making them the least used function. However this result was similar to the results obtained by Benoit. Across the US presidential debates he analysed, 601 statements of defense were made. This made up 8% of the total utterances, making it the least used function as well. This may be because the other candidates do not attack David Cameron as much but when they do, David Cameron would use defenses to ensure that his party's image and popularity is not affected.

4.3.2: Disadvantages of Defenses

Other reasons as to why defenses were the least used function may be because of the drawbacks they have. Thus David Cameron may have ignored some attacks made by his opponents instead of defending himself every single time. According to Benoit, defending has three potential disadvantages.

Firstly, defending may let a candidate sound too defensive or reactive instead of proactive. Voters may not like this in candidates. If one were to defend all the time, voters may see the candidate as scared or not bold enough to stand up to the other candidates, attacking them instead. Voters may also see the candidate defending as weak or incapable because they make for an easy target for other candidates and have to constantly try to save themselves.

Secondly, defending a statement of attack may lead the candidate “off topic”. Usually candidates will attack their opponents using a topic they are well-versed in or a topic they know their opponent did not focus on and has little knowledge of. If candidates try to defend these attacks, they may be seen as talking about an unrelated or irrelevant subject, since what they are being attacked by may not be an aspect they are pushing out in their campaign.

Lastly, defending may remind voters of the candidate's potential weakness. To refute an attack, one has to mention it again. Mentioning an attack, in preparation for defending against it, could inform or remind voters of the very weaknesses the attacker is trying to combat. The audience may have forgotten about an attack made but when a candidate brings it up again to defend himself, the voters are able to take note of the attack again and this time they may start to agree with it.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In conclusion, David Cameron used all three functions during the 3 United Kingdom General Election debates from 2010, all of which at different frequencies. He used acclaims the most (52.8%), followed by attacks (41.1%) and finally, he used defenses the least (6.1%). His great use of acclaims allowed him to put himself in a favorable light, improving the party's overall image. The people of the United Kingdom thus felt that they preferred David Cameron more than the 2 other candidates, being either attracted to the policies he plans to initiate, his values and beliefs aligning with theirs, or that the 2 other candidates, Gordon Brown and Nick Glegg, were just not as outstanding in comparison. This led to David Cameron being favoured in the election, allowing him to attain victory. This paper also shows that Benoit's functional theory of political discourse can be used in a country such as the United Kingdom. His theory and hypotheses are proven positively when used to analyse the debates from the UK. Even though the UK may operate under a different parliamentary style, debates from the UK are conducted similarly to the ones in other countries such as the United States. They have similar styles of operation and ultimately have the same purpose, that is to allow voters to know more about the different candidates and what they can bring so that a correct choice can be made during voting.

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