Branding and strategic maneuvering in the Romanian presidential election of 2004

A critical discourse-analytical and pragma-dialectical perspective

Isabela Ieţcu-Fairclough

University of Bucharest

In this article I analyse differences in the legitimation strategies used by, and on behalf of the two presidential candidates in the elections of December 2004 in Romania, using a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis and pragma-dialectics. These differences are seen to lie primarily in the varieties of populist discourse that were drawn upon in the construction of legitimizing arguments for both candidates: a paternalist type vs. a radical, anti-political type of populism. I relate the success of the latter type to more effective strategic maneuvering in argumentation, part of more effective branding strategies in general, but also to existing types of political culture amongst the electorate and to social, economic circumstances. In CDA terms, I discuss the "Băsescu brand" as involving choices at the level of discourse, genre and style; in pragma-dialectical terms, I view its success as partly the effect of successful strategic maneuvering (and of choices at the level of topic, means of adaptation to the audience and presentational devices). I also place the success of this brand within the Romanian context at the end of 2004, where often questionable populist electoral messages were perceived as reasonable and acceptable, as fitting adjustments to the situation and even as means of optimizing the deliberative situation of the electorate.

Keywords: argumentation, Băsescu, branding, critical discourse analysis, fallacy, legitimation strategies, populism, political culture, pragma-dialectics, presidential elections, strategic maneuvering

Introduction

In recent research I have analysed various aspects of "transition" in post-communist Romania (Ieţcu 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, Ieţcu-Fairclough forthcoming) and this paper is a contribution to this line of work, with a focus on electoral discourse in the 2004 presidential campaign.[1] Methodologically, the paper combines *Critical Discourse Analysis* (Fairclough 1989, 1992, 2000, 2003, 2006, Wodak et al. 1999, etc.) with a particular theory of argumentation, *pragma-dialectics* (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, 2004, van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002, etc.), an approach which I started developing in Ieţcu (2004, 2006a).[2]

One of my particular concerns here is with aspects of "political marketing" (Newman 1999), i.e. the post-1989 restructuring of the political field as a form of market or "quasi-market" and the appropriation (recontextualization) within it of techniques of marketing and advertising, such as "branding", leading to changes in political discourse, political genres and the identities of politicians. I analyse electoral material from the final television debate between the two candidates who reached the second round of the election: Traian Băsescu (formerly Mayor of Bucharest), the candidate of the "Alliance for Justice and Truth" (*Alianţa D.A.*, i.e. the National-Liberal and the Democratic Party) who eventually won the presidential election, albeit by a narrow margin (51.23% of the votes); and Adrian Năstase (48.77%), the candidate of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), who had been Prime Minister in the previous government. The 2004 election was fought by the Social Democrats on the basis of their allegedly satisfactory record in government between 2000 and 2004, including a significant growth in GDP (8%), successful entry into NATO, and substantial progress towards membership of the EU. The "Alliance for Justice and Truth" fought the election mainly on the issue of corruption, which they associated primarily with the PSD and their allies – a political and economic oligarchy with roots in Romania's communist past.

Theoretical framework

Branding

One innovative element in the 2004 election was the application of the strategy of "branding" in Băsescu's campaign. In an interview shortly after the elections, *GMP Advertising* director Felix Tătaru, who was responsible for the campaign, claimed that Băsescu was the first Romanian politician to be treated as a "brand". The branding strategies that were used to construct Băsescu as a politician involved cutting across boundaries which conventionally separated the field of politics from the fields of popular entertainment, commercial advertising and from everyday life, through an interdiscursive hybridity (Fairclough 1992, 2003, 2006) which articulated together a wider range of communicative resources than were normally found in Romanian politics. The campaign for the re-election of Băsescu as Mayor of Bucharest earlier in 2004, for example, had the character of a humorous commercial advertising campaign in which Băsescu was symbolized as a red chilli pepper (*ardei iute)*, a symbol which evoked his tendency to flare up at unpredictable moments, suggested that he adds spice to Romanian politics, that he is fast and efficient, that his presence is inconvenient and irritating to the political establishment, etc. (Fairclough 2006: 101-105).

In most electoral materials, Băsescu addressed his electorate *directly,* often in highly colloquial language. On the whole, he emerged primarily as an open, straightforward man, with a keen sense of humour, an essentially "outlaw" character calling on the electorate to support him against the corrupt power system. This *persona* was very much akin to the comic characters of traditional folk-tales: the subversive peasant anti-hero, who, through the power of his own wit and cunning, succeeds in humiliating and punishing the greedy and dishonest rich. The distance Băsescu took from more conventional, formal political styles, in his manner of talking and public behaviour, as a fundamental element of the "Băsescu brand", was of a piece with the more general radical, anti-political variety of populism of his campaign and resonated well with the anti-political feelings of the Romanian electorate, with the prevailing orientations towards the political system of large segments of the electorate. As I will argue below, Băsescu's success was partly ensured by the way in which, in his manner

of talking, in his behaviour, he seemed to embody or enact the (moral-political) values of the brand that was created for him: primarily *justice* (punishing the corrupt political system), *honesty*, an *anti-elitism* and *radicalism* directed at the entire political class, a feeling of *solidarity* with the population along a clearly defined "us" vs. "them" dividing line.[3]

Populism

The 2004 election reconfirmed the electorate's affinity for a "radical" form of populism, directed against the entire political class, i.e. for a fundamentally "anti-political" form of protest (Mungiu-Pippidi 2002), but also for other varieties of populist message, most notably for a paternalist message of stability, continuity and social consensus.

In the tradition inaugurated by Ionescu and Gellner (1969), there are several distinct ways of understanding populism: as an ideology, a pseudo-ideology, a political movement, a political style, a set of attitudes, etc. A widespread view is that populism is *not* an ideology in its own right, but a "*syndrome"* (Wiles 1969), a "*meta-doctrine*", a "recurrent ideological structure of a very general type that can be parasitic on other more clearly defined doctrines and push them towards eccentric positions" (Ioniţă 1998: 198). Populism is also often viewed as a *pathology* of western democracy, a corrupt form of democratic ideas, and therefore a threat to a liberal-democratic society.

Mudde (2004) rejects the "pathology" thesis and argues that populism has now become mainstream in the politics of western democracies, that there is and will be a prevailing "populist Zeitgeist". For Mudde, populism *is* an *ideology*, namely, "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the "pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people". (Mudde 2004: 543-544).

Jagers and Walgrave (2005) reject the ideology view of populism and suggest instead that populism is a "*political communication style*", or a communication "master frame", a way of talking about a variety of issues by appealing to and identifying with the people and pretending to speak in their name. As a political style

which merely makes reference to the people and their problems in this way (a "thin" conception), populism has no particular political colour, it can be either left-wing or right-wing. It is primarily a "conspicuous exhibition of closeness to (ordinary) citizens", achieved both by talking *to* the public in a certain *manner* and by a certain *content* of discourse, i.e. by talking *about* the people, and thus showing care and concern for their problems. A "thick" conception involves two additional features: (a) populism gives expression to anti-establishment, anti-elite feelings, and (b) is based on a particular homogeneity/ exclusion logic (Jagers and Walgrave 2005: 3).

Whatever view they take, most theorists seem to agree that some form of *dichotomy*, e.g. between "the people" and the corrupt economic or political "elite" or "oligarchy", or between "the people" and some "enemy" or other, is a minimal characteristic of all varieties of populism. Băsescu's populism drew very clearly on the dichotomy between the "people" and the ex-communist political and economic oligarchy in order to put forward a radical political message.

The argumentum ad populum as fallacy and rhetorical ploy

Populism correlates most obviously with the fallacy of the *argumentum ad populum*, broadly defined as an unjustified appeal to popular sentiment or opinion. The *argumentum ad populum* may function as a "rhetorical ploy" or as a fallacious argument (Bowell and Kemp 2002). In the former case, it will involve a purely emotional (non-argumentative) appeal to the audience's feelings and social instincts; in the latter case, it will involve a fallacious appeal to premises that ought not to persuade anyone (appeals to majority belief or to common practice). In the case of this fallacy, the premise that makes the argument valid, i.e. "*Any* belief shared by a majority of the people is true", by being false, also makes it unsound.

In pragma-dialectics, the *argumentum ad populum* (the populistic fallacy) is a variant of the *argumentum ad verecundiam* (argument from authority): the authority of a body of people is invoked in support of a standpoint. As a fallacious argument, the *argumentum ad populum* is a violation of *Rule 7* (the *argument scheme* rule) at the argumentation stage, i.e. an instance of using an inappropriate argument scheme

(symptomatic argumentation) by presenting the standpoint as being right or true because everybody (most people) think it is right or true. As a rhetorical ploy or appeal to emotions, the *argumentum ad populum* is dealt with in pragma-dialectics as a violation of *Rule 4* at the argumentation stage (the *relevance* rule). It is a fallacy in choosing the means of defence: the standpoint is defended by non-argumentative means, by playing on the emotions and prejudices of an audience (a fallacy of *pathos*) (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992: 132-135).

Analysis: The final debate between candidates

The final televised debate of the second round of the presidential campaign (the show *Destinaţia Cotroceni*), hosted by the national channel TVR1 on December 8, 2004, included a widely commented on moment of "sincerity" or "confession", in which Traian Băsescu raised the issue that both himself and Adrian Năstase had been, after all, "communists" before 1989. While the emergence of the topic as such was probably not as unpremeditated as it seemed to be, the way in which Băsescu developed it was an excellent illustration of the more general type of interaction with the electorate that he engaged in during the campaign, of the types of strategic maneuvering he pursued in argumentation, and of the strategies of political marketing and branding that were successfully employed on his behalf.

Strategic maneuvering in the "two communists" episode: the Băsescu brand in action

Here is an extract from the "two communists" episode (my translation from my own transcript):

Băsescu: No, Mr. Năstase, we both have a big problem, on my word of honour, let's discuss it honestly.
Năstase: Just one?
Băsescu: No, we have more, but we have one which can explain why there is so much passivity in the population. I don't know why it's occurred to me to say this …

Năstase: But you agree with the decision we have taken?

Băsescu: … but I think that in an electoral race it can be good to say something like this. I was discussing it with colleagues at the beginning of the campaign. What kind of curse is there on this people that in the end it comes to a choice between two former communists? Between Adrian Năstase and Băsescu. In 15 years, not one man has appeared who comes from this world that was not touched by the vices of communism, who has not been affected by anything. What curse is this? And on my word of honour, I felt sorry about it. Then I kept looking at myself,… sometimes I was looking at myself in the mirror, and I say, "Hey, Băsescu old son, do you have respect for the Romanian people?" I was asking myself. I say: "I do." "Have you made a mockery of the Romanian people?" I don't have the feeling that I ever did that. I think that if we think in these terms this discussion should have been – should not have taken place. Maybe now was the time when another type of candidate than the two of us should have come before the Romanians. It's true that I did not live off political work, but I was a party member. But the big drama is not that I was a party member …

Năstase: I did not live off party work either.

Băsescu: No, you just supported Ceauşescu for no reason, just so there wouldn't be any opposition.

Năstase: If you want us to start talking about this …

Băsescu: No, I don't want to talk about it.

Năstase: …. about who you were supporting when you were in Anvers, if you want we can talk about these details.

Băsescu: We can talk about it. In Anvers I was serving my country.

Năstase: You mentioned a problem that we have. Let's see what the problem is.

Băsescu: Yes we have a problem. Do you know what the big problem is?

Năstase: The mirror.

Băsescu: No, this was just a question I was asking myself. But the big problem that we two have is not just that we were both party members. Maybe after all it's not such a shameful evil thing to be a party member in a communist state. This is what the state was like at the time. The drama is that we can't stay with the same mentalities 15 years after communism in Romania. And you convince me every day that you are not capable of understanding that these institutions have to function by themselves. (…)

The "confession" moment is relevant for a certain type of criticism aimed at contemporary politicians: instead of substantive debate on matters of policy, they offer

themselves, as personalities; instead of public deliberation they exploit the attractions of the intimate, private sphere. Thus, discourses and arguments grounded in the private sphere are eroding the domain of public sphere debate, masquerading as deliberation (Goodnight 1982: 206). A crucial part of the success of Tony Blair's style, for instance, was seen to lie in his capacity to 'anchor' the public politician in the 'normal person', to combine formality and informality, publicness and privateness, ceremony and feeling (Fairclough 2000), and the success of that highly personal style (itself part of the "Blair brand") often helped to legitimize or obscure various controversial matters of policy.

In the extract above, a variety of choices in terms of discourse, genre and style made their own contribution to the overall success of Băsescu's (self-)legitimation strategies and to the consolidation of the "Băsescu brand". In particular, his choice to frame the argument as an alleged intimate conversation with himself in front of the mirror, to draw on narratives of personal experience and on the colloquial register, together with his improvised manner of talking, created a highly reflexive, expressive type of political discourse, which was apparently converted by the audience into moral qualities of honesty, sincerity, authenticity.

Băsescu's manner of speaking is markedly colloquial in this extract. In Romanian, *Mă, tu ai respect pentru poporul român, Băsescule?* ('Hey, Băsescu old son, do you have respect for the Romanian people?') includes the highly informal interjection *mă* and the inflected colloquial vocative *Băsescule*. Băsescu also initiates a shift from the second person plural to the familiar second person singular (*tu*, *Adrian*), and only corrects back to "Mr. Năstase" towards the end of the confrontation. He is being characteristically populist here in terms of style, not only because he exhibits a particularly close relationship with the audience and with his interlocutor and shows concern for people's problems, but also because he deliberately suspends the normal rules of the political game he is involved in and, in a typically populist, anti-political manner, engages in man-to-man, informal conversation on an apparently highly personal (and apparently non-political) issue. Throughout the extract, Băsescu is not fully coherent, his speech is halting, he gives the impression of searching for the right word without always finding it, and his body language and facial expression are consistent with these hesitations. He comes across as an authentic personality, a man

speaking from the heart in an unprepared way, who is not trying to assume an identity or style that does not come naturally to him. He was also perceived at the time as a man who is honest enough to have doubts about himself and to "confess" them in a public context (see also Fairclough 2006: 104-105). By contrast, Năstase's more elegant, fluent style, his more abstract language were rejected as "arrogant" and perceived to be closest to the "wooden" language of communism, i.e. as language without a concrete referent, ultimately a form of deception.

On the whole, as I am arguing further on, the "Băsescu brand" drew on a variety of populist resources, at the level of discourse (topical choices, e.g. the Romanian people as victim, the "us" vs. "them" dichotomy – see below), genre (e.g. narratives of personal experience) and style (register, body language, display of emotions, etc.). It is also part of the argument I am developing here that Băsescu's argumentative success was to a large extent due to the particular way in which these resources were embedded in a coherent argumentative and political legitimation strategy, that benefited from effective "strategic maneuvering" (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002) and thus successfully and coherently expressed the "Băsescu brand". Băsescu thus seemed to "embody" the moral-political values he claimed to stand for, and to naturally "inhabit" the brand that was constructed for him.

In pragma-dialectics, strategic maneuvering is defined as the process whereby arguers try to maintain a balance between their so-called "rhetorical" and "dialectical" objectives. People engaged in argumentative discussion are viewed as oriented simultaneously towards concluding their differences of opinion *their way* (thus winning the argument) but also towards reaching this conclusion *in a reasonable way*, i.e. by adhering to a set of norms that define reasonable argumentation practice (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002). It is, in my view, part of the distinctiveness and success of the "Băsescu brand" and of Băsescu as a politician that this balance between potentially conflicting aims was effectively managed and maintained: Băsescu succeeded in persuading his audience and at the same time did not appear to disregard a commitment to reasonableness. This was evident in the choices that he made (or were made on his behalf) in terms of all the three aspects that pragma-dialectics discusses in connection with strategic maneuvering: topical choices (e.g. what to

discuss, what to leave out), adaptation to the audience (e.g. how to create empathy), presentational devices.

In the extract above, effective strategic maneuvering is primarily evident in the way Băsescu chooses to address the topic of communism and thus to create a confrontation that he will turn to his advantage. In pragma-dialectical terms, the interaction between the two participants involves four stages. At the *confrontation* stage, Băsescu voices his view (standpoint) that "we both have a big problem" and launches an invitation to his opponent to "discuss it openly". At the *opening* stage, both participants seem to agree that there are more problems than one, yet both allow the discussion to focus on the problem that Băsescu has decided to raise. Băsescu then proceeds by defining the problem (and the confrontation) in terms of a "curse" on the Romanian people (subsequently as a "big drama"), namely that the Romanians should have to choose between two former communists, that no alternative candidate has appeared. Once stated, the confrontation is redefined three times, and each confrontation is accompanied by its own *argumentation* stage. Every time, Băsescu acts as antagonist of his own previously stated standpoint and as protagonist of a new distinct standpoint. He eventually formulates the confrontation as one over *mentalities*: the "problem" (or "drama") is that we have the same communist mentalities even 15 years after 1989. As for who this "we" designates, Băsescu manages to imply each time that he himself is not at issue: the problem is Năstase's only. On the whole, therefore, Băsescu assumes a double protagonist-antagonist role, repeatedly launches a standpoint, then challenges it and redefines it, and eventually proposes a different standpoint, which he supports with various types of evidence. In the reconstruction below, implicit (unexpressed) premises are placed between parentheses. Italicised sentences indicate participant roles.

1. We both have a big problem: we have both been communists. *(Băsescu as protagonist of a standpoint)*

2. (The problem is *not* that we have been communists in the same sense of the word). *(Băsescu as antagonist of his own standpoint)*

3. (The problems is that you, Năstase, were a communist properly speaking, I was just a party member.) *(Băsescu as protagonist of a new standpoint, redefining the confrontation)*

3.1. (I was not a communist properly speaking.)

3.1.1. I did not live off political work.

3.1.1.1. I was serving my country.

3.1.1'. (A communist lives off political work.)

3.1.2. I have not made a mockery of the Romanian people.

3.1.2.1. I have examined myself in the mirror.

3.1.2'. (Being a communist amounts to making a mockery of the people.)

3.1.3. I have not failed to show respect for the people.

3.1.3.1. I have examined myself in the mirror.

3.1.3'. (Being a communist amounts to having no respect for the people.)

3.2. (You were a communist properly speaking.)

3.2.1. (You lived off political work.)

3.2.1.1. You supported Ceauşescu.

4. The problem is *not* that I have been or that we have both been communist party members. *(Băsescu as antagonist of his own previous standpoint)*

4.1. It is not shameful to have been a communist party member in a communist state.

4.1.1. This I what the state was like at the time.

5. The problem is that we have the same communist mentalities 15 years after the fall of communism. *(Băsescu as protagonist of a distinct standpoint, again redefining the confrontation.)*

5.1. (You have a problem of mentality.)

5.1.1. You are not capable of understanding that institutions have to function without interference.

5.1.1.1. There is proof for this in your everyday behaviour.

5.1.1'. (Interfering with institutions is a symptom of a communist mentality).

5.2. (I do not have a problem of mentality.)

5.2.1. (I allow institutions to function without interference.)

Băsescu's strategic maneuvering is particularly effective here because it draws on a distinction which an important segment of the electorate most certainly liked to see being made, i.e. between being a party member nominally (which a lot of people have been) and having communist attitudes and behaviour that are incompatible with democracy. He thus cleverly opts out of a Manichean opposition between "us" and "them" as "anti-communists" vs. "ex-communists" and draws the dividing line elsewhere, i.e. between the majority of the population (in which he includes himself) and the ex-communist oligarchy.

Strategic maneuvering is also effective in positioning Băsescu as not being all that different from or better than other Romanians, while still being a "communist with a difference". Such self-critical emphases are likely to increase the dialectical acceptability of the argument. They are cleverly balanced by a rhetoric which subtly flatters the electorate and invests it with the power to grant Băsescu a sort of symbolic clemency. Băsescu chooses here a position of moral inferiority: it is a "curse on the Romanian people", he claims, that they should have to choose him; still, as far as bad choices go, Băsescu constructs himself as the lesser evil, by comparison with Năstase. He is therefore at once constructing a victim role for the electorate, giving the electorate the moral high ground, and portraying himself as someone who understands the situation and is full of compassion ("on my honour, I was sorry for it"). All of these are powerful forms of *ad populum* appeal, part of the stock-in-trade of populist leaders everywhere.

Năstase is more restrained, polite ("if you will allow me…") and uses indirectness more. Surprisingly, he allows Băsescu to get away with various forms of obstructing critical discussion, among which the most glaring is the way in which he ends up denying his own original standpoint and its associated starting point. From: "we *both* have a problem", i.e. "we have *both* been communists", he is allowed to conclude that *Năstase* has a problem, that Năstase is a communist, in the sense of having a communist mentality, while he himself is not. In so doing, he is arguably violating *Rule 6*: he is denying a premise representing an accepted starting point. However, his repeated acknowledgement that he *is* a communist (albeit, as it turns out, in a different sense), allows this violation to go more or less unnoticed. He is also allowed to get away with blatantly weak or irrelevant arguments in support of the claim that he himself is not a communist properly speaking, e.g. because "I have looked at myself in the mirror". Such argumentative support can be discussed in relation to pragma-dialectical *Rule 2*, as a violation of the obligation-to-defend rule by presenting a standpoint as beyond doubt or self-evident (evidence from introspection is here allegedly self-evident and beyond doubt).

Băsescu's argumentative success in this debate is due primarily to his choice of the "two communists" topic, and his effective way of handling it. Not only does he repeatedly redefine the confrontation in his favour, but he also chooses a starting point that will serve his own interests best, while at the same time appearing to be operating with a starting point that is accepted both by himself and his interlocutor. More exactly, while appearing to advance the statement "we have both been communists" as a mutual concession or as an intersubjectively accepted starting point, he is in fact unobtrusively introducing a distinction between two different understandings of what a "communist" is and he actually ends up *denying* that himself and Năstase have been "communists" *in the same sense*. Năstase seems to be caught off-guard, deceived into a false sense of safety by Băsescu's formulation of the starting point and of the confrontation and misses some good opportunities to react. Throughout the argumentation stage, Năstase's restraint, his use of irony and implicit meaning, rather than bold, direct assertions, only damage his own rhetorical objectives, and testify to a poor judgment of his opponent, of what would have worked effectively with the audience, while also revealing his altogether different personal style.

Invoking the Romanian people in a victim role is a good illustration of Băsescu's typical *ad populum* appeals, which invoke an emotional solidarity with the Romanians, an "us" vs. "them" opposition between Băsescu and the people, on the one hand, and the entire political system on the other, and legitimize Băsescu as presidential candidate on the strength of premises having to do with his emotional and providential relation vis-à-vis the people-as-victim. References to the people and their sensitivities ("I have not made a mockery of the Romanian people") may be dubious both as emotional, rhetorical ploys (violations of *Rule 4*) and as fallacious arguments, to the extent that implicit premises that refer to certain attitudes displayed towards "the people" are taken as conclusive and sufficient "signs" that a certain presidential candidate is the right choice (violations of *Rule 7*). In arguments such as these, strategic maneuvering gets derailed, strictly speaking, although, as I will argue below, the fact that it does is not necessarily obvious, or if obvious, not necessarily unacceptable, to the participants involved.

One of the reasons for the above-mentioned fact could be that, while steering the confrontation in his favour, Băsescu appeared at the same time to be driven by a sincere concern to clarify the matter under discussion, to examine it from all possible perspectives, and by an honest desire to get at the truth, however uncomfortable for himself that truth might be. He thus appeared willing to lay himself open to public scrutiny, without trying to hide anything about his past, and at the same time did not damage his credibility by making strong explicit statements about how different he was from Năstase. The balance between "rhetorical" and "dialectical" objectives thus seemed to be masterfully maintained, or, in other words, Băsescu apparently managed to uphold a commitment to a critical ideal of reasonableness, while at the same time successfully pursuing his persuasive aims. The fallacious moves that took place did not therefore succeed in damaging the overall impression that Băsescu was arguing reasonably in the context in which he found himself, by adjusting optimally to the situation and the audience, and upholding a commitment to reasonableness.[4]

Moreover, given the overarching political goal of ousting Năstase and the PSD from power by whatever means available, Băsescu's populist style and discourse were welcomed, by large segments of the electorate, but, most significantly, by the anti-communist, liberal-democratic intellectual elites, as well-adapted to the situation in

Romania. Paradoxically, *ad populum* fallacies and other examples of fallacious strategic maneuvering were often perceived by otherwise highly critical people as reasonable contributions to the electoral campaign and effective means of persuading and mobilizing the electorate.

Legitimation and strategic maneuvering in the "supporters" video-clips

In this section I will continue to look at differences in the strategies of legitimation used by and on behalf of the two presidential candidates in connection with a different type of electoral material, i.e. video-clips showing each candidate's "supporters", which were included in the final debate of December 8, 2004. I will focus on forms of argumentation used either by the candidates themselves or on their behalf by the producers of electoral material.

In marketing, in general, products can be advertised through "endorsement" by famous personalities. In electoral campaigns, the campaign staff and other supporters form a "symbolic entourage" meant to give credibility to a candidate. Argumentatively, this can correlate with appeals to *authority* (the symbolic authority of cultural personalities, politicians) and *ad populum* appeals (to popularity, or to the feelings, emotions, enthusiasms of the audience).

Marketing research is generally used to identify and anticipate the wants and needs of the public, and political marketing involves an identification of the wants and needs of voters (citizens). The "product" it develops is a manufactured image based on adapting the candidate's political platform, ideology, values, personal qualities, record of achievements, etc. to these alleged wants and needs. The political marketing undertaken in support of the two candidates seems to correlate here with a *problem-solution* argumentative *topos*, in which voting for one or another candidate is presented as a "solution" to people's "problems".

I am drawing here on a view of argumentation on normative matters which regards *ought*-claims ("we ought to vote for x") as being made on the basis of at least two types of premises, which define (a) the (allegedly) factual *circumstances* (i.e. the problems people have, as well as the candidate's qualities and areas of competence) (b)

a *normative* ideal in view of which the ought-claim is made (Kratzer 1991). Such arguments seem to have the following form: given people's problems, as well as the candidate's ability to satisfy them (circumstantial premises), given what people want, i.e. that problems should bee solved (normative premise), and given that, if people want their problems solved, they should vote for that candidate (warrant), it follows that it is necessary/ recommended that people vote for that candidate (claim). I am interested in differences between the two campaigns in terms of what problems were recognized and attributed to the public (in circumstantial premises) and what problems were obscured, of how the problems that were recognized were related to the images that were manufactured for the candidates and to the particular qualities and abilities that were emphasized, and in terms of what normative ideals (what aims, needs or wishes) were invoked on behalf of the people (in normative premises).

A striking difference between the two video-clips is that while Băsescu's supporters were public personalities, most of Năstase's were peasants. Năstase's campaign makers obviously acted on the fundamental premise that in a country with over 40% rural population, a presidential candidate can only win by effectively mobilizing the rural vote. Năstase is described in the video-clip as "competent" (he has "training", "culture", "moral rectitude", "experience", he is a "good politician" and a "good leader", etc.), he was also repeatedly associated with Romania's European "future". On this basis, his supporters legitimized the claim that people should vote for him. Many superlatives were used: he is "the best", he is "very, very good", "the only one" who can do various things. It was however the purely emotional arguments (often verging on the irrational) that were really noticeable in Năstase's "supporters" clip, e.g. in the intervention of a peasant woman shown holding Năstase's portrait to her chest and saying: "I don't want anybody but Mr. Năstase. I don't need a pension, I don't need anything, I only want to see him and talk to him… Adrian Năstase… my own soul", or of another peasant woman saying: "He has a beauty, he has a power bestowed on him by God to lead the people".

Arguments based heavily on *ad populum* and emotional appeal were used to construct the image of a paternalist and almost messianic leader, loved and worshipped by a pre-modern, parochial and infantilized population in exchange for care and protection. Năstase's appeal in the "rural" sequences of the video-clip was primarily of

a charismatic type, his presence seemed to create a state of grace in which all needs other than emotional ones were suspended. The legitimizing argument in support of Năstase had the following form: given (1) people's problems, (2) Năstase's qualities and (3) people's normative ideals (their wants, needs, aims), it follows that Năstase is the best option. Interestingly, while premises referring to Năstase's personal qualities were numerous, premises referring to current problems such as poverty or corruption were practically absent. People's main problem seemed to be the *absence* of a competent leader, of a man capable of fulfilling their emotional needs, their needs for protection and symbolic representation. Judging from what they said, people did not seem to be worried much about poverty and daily survival, or about the present. Factual premises involving economic problems were absent, and presumably not because of lack of "market research" or failure in tuning the candidate's message to real needs (although this is also possible), but in order to give prominence to assumed problems, needs and wants which matched Năstase's real strengths (e.g. in foreign policy). Premises specifying normative ideals were also mainly implicit. The only explicit normative ideal was the grand political vision in incumbent President Ion Iliescu's final endorsement – "… a Romania that is more prosperous and more respected, a Romania that is equal amongst the European nations". However, neither the diagnosed "problems", nor this particular normative vision seemed particularly plausible reconstructions of the Romanian people's justifications in voting for Năstase at the time of the 2004 election.

Băsescu's campaign, by contrast, was mainly oriented towards the urban population and especially towards relatively young, educated voters, hence the humorous, playful tone of the campaign and the wide use of intertextuality and parody. Băsescu's supporters in the video-clip were not anonymous peasants, they were either well-known public personalities or faces that people would have recognized from the leaflets that were used in the campaign. Instead of argumentation *ad populum* based on the authority of an anonymous collective body of people, there was rather an argument from the authority of specific *individuals*. Or, to be more exact, an argument from authority involving well-known personalities was combined with a modified version of an *argumentum ad populum*, based on a claim to representativeness of a set of ordinary people. Among the most interesting elements of strategic maneuvering was the

absence of superlatives: Băsescu was not "the best", but a *decent* candidate, therefore a fallible human being, an ordinary man. Humour was used extensively, for instance in ex-dissident poet Mircea Dinescu's intervention, in the use of two metonymies: the Black Sea (an allusion to Băsescu's career as a sea-captain) vs. *Cartierul Primăverii* (the residential area of the communist *nomenklatura,* which Năstase was directly associated with): "If you have confidence in me, vote like me, for Traian Băsescu, because it would be the first time in the history of Romania when the Black Sea might defeat *Cartierul Primăverii*".

Băsescu's supporters seemed to value primarily his moral qualities: his honesty, fairness, trustworthiness, the fact that he cared for others, his integrity, his moral strength, his sense of responsibility, his sense of humour. The legitimizing argument for Băsescu seemed to be of the following type: given what the circumstances are (implicit references to injustice, corruption, inefficiency of institutions) and given that Băsescu can solve these problems (as the testimonies to his qualities indicate), also given the normative ideal of a "decent" country where "we can all breathe" and live, where things get done and justice is done (this is what people allegedly want), Băsescu is the best option. There was a clear difference between the two normative ideals proposed by the two candidates: a grandiose and abstract future vision for Romania under the leadership of a charismatic and paternalist superlative leader, on the one hand, and the more down-to-earth, pragmatic vision of a merely "decent" country, where politicians are honest and carry out their electoral promises, on the other. In Băsescu's clip there were no references to the distant future, nor to Europe, but only to current domestic problems. There was no mention of God either, and the heavy-handed appeal to emotion in Năstase's clip is replaced by a subtle appeal to humour and to a feeling of in-group solidarity with members of Romania's intellectual elite. Băsescu's electoral message in this particular video-clip seemed on the whole to be conceived for a modern, not pre-modern society, aimed at and legitimized by individual and responsible citizens, not by a generic anonymous electorate.

More generally, various forms of strategic maneuvering were evident in the choice of campaign themes (as "topical choices") for all sorts of electoral material: each candidate addressed those topics that were most advantageous to him, each

deployed a variety of rhetorical presentation devices, of which for instance humour (in Băsescu's campaign) turned out to be extremely effective, each sought particular ways of adapting to what were perceived to be the electorate's needs and concerns. The main slogan of Năstase's campaign, for instance, was *Faptele sunt politica mea* ("Actions are my politics"), accompanied by a constant reiteration of political and economic achievements. However, as I have said, excessive emphasis on foreign policy achievements and issues of symbolic representation gave the strange impression that *these*, not the economic situation, were the major issues of concern for the population. To the extent that a whole range of real problems were obscured and a whole range of potential differences of opinion were not brought into the open, the overall strategy was open to the charge of fallaciousness, seen as obstruction of reasonable discussion or derailment from critical conduct.

On the whole, while Năstase emerged as a paternalist leader in terms of social stability and consensus, Băsescu was constructed as a providential leader and saviour of his nation in times of crisis. By drawing excessively on a paternalist type of populism and disregarding corruption and poverty issues, Năstase's campaign achieved a relatively poor adaptation to audience demand. Băsescu's radical, authoritarian message, on the other hand, showed considerable sensitivity to the concerns of the electorate, not least of all by claiming that there were radical and quick solutions for them. Better adaptation to audience expectations, better use of presentational devices (notably, the use of humour, of the colloquial register, etc.) and more relevant topical choices (i.e., corruption, not foreign policy), as elements of successful strategic maneuvering, all contributed to the success of the "Băsescu brand" and to its electoral success in the campaign. The context of perceived acute crisis in Romania also played a crucial part. It was in part due to contextual factors that a variety of argumentative moves that might have otherwise been perceived as questionable tended to go unnoticed or to be perceived as reasonable, as being well-adjusted to the demands of the Romanian context.

Differences between argumentation strategies in the "supporters" video-clips can also be taken to indicate different assessments of the "political culture" (Almond and Verba 1963/1996) of the Romanian population by political advisors and campaign staff. Năstase's electoral message seemed to be predominantly intended for an

electorate that shared a "parochial" type of political culture. The "subject" type was addressed in terms of a promise to continue the gradual measures aimed at relieving poverty, by Năstase, and by a pledge, by Băsescu, to "crush" the corrupt political system that was responsible for poverty. Băsescu's campaign showed better adaptation to a wider variety of segments of the electorate and types of political culture. This included a "participant" type of political culture, i.e. a segment of the electorate who did not necessarily share a strong commitment to liberal-democratic values but who in the end voted for Băsescu on the strength of his radicalism and authoritarianism, as well as a radicalized liberal-democratic segment, who voted for Băsescu either out of conviction or for primarily pragmatic reasons, hoping for radical change in the spirit of liberal democracy. This latter type of voters, in principle critical of and not easily swayed by populistic appeals, suspended their critical stance and supported Băsescu's campaign as one which served a perceived "reasonable" and "constructive" purpose in the context it was meant address: a situation of crisis, a predominantly parochial and dependent electorate with inertial political options. This would explain why Băsescu was also massively supported by the intellectuals, who did not seem to mind Băsescu's frequent "derailments" from critical conduct, but chose to back him unconditionally given the overall political goals he embodied.

Conclusion

My analysis has suggested that one candidate in the Romanian presidential election, Traian Băsescu, was able to gain a small but decisive electoral advantage from a campaign which appropriated and implemented strategies for political marketing in a more sophisticated and effective way than the campaign of his main opponent, as well as using a strategy for political branding. I have partly related the success of the "Băsescu brand" to more effective strategic maneuvering in argumentation: the choices that were made in terms of what issues to address, how to address them, how to best adapt to audience demand (all drawing on certain varieties of populism), but also the way in which a commitment to reasonableness and to the norms of critical discussion was effectively maintained, all contributed to strengthening and expressing the brand

and the values Băsescu claimed to stand for. It is partly thanks to effective strategic maneuvering that Băsescu emerged as credibly and coherently embodying these values. I have also related Basescu's electoral success to factors having to do with the Romanian political and economic context at the time of the elections, a situation of perceived crisis, and to features of the political culture of the electorate. Finally, I have suggested that argumentative moves which, in other circumstances or for other audiences, might have been considered at least questionable, if not downright fallacious, were not necessarily perceived as such by significant sections of the electorate, or, if they were, the fact was not necessarily relevant in terms of voting behaviour. Basescu's populist style, the populist legitimation strategies deployed on his behalf were, rather, considered to be reasonable and effective adaptations to the context, to the Romanian electorate and to the overall political goals that he embodied.

References

Almond, Gabriel & Verba, Sidney. 1996/1963. *Cultura Civică. Atitudini politice şi democraţie în cinci naţiuni*. Budapest: CEU Press/ Bucureşti: Editura Du Style.

Bowell, Tracy & Kemp, Gary 2002. *Critical Thinking: A Concise Guide*. London and New York: Routledge.

Eemeren, Frans. H. van & Houtlosser, Pete.r 2002. "Strategic maneuvering: Maintaining a delicate balance." In *Dialectic and Rhetoric. The Warp and Woof of Argumentation Analysis*, Frans. H. van Eemeren and Peter Houtlosser (eds), 131-159, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Eemeren, Frans H. van & Grootendorst, Rob. 1992. *Argumentation, Communication and Fallacies*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Eemeren, Frans H. van & Grootendorst, Rob. 2004. *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation. The pragma-dialectical approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fairclough, Norman. 1989. *Language and Power*. London: Longman.

Fairclough, Norman. 1992. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fairclough, Norman. 2000. *New Labour, New Language*. London: Routledge.

Fairclough, Norman. 2003. *Analysing Discourse. Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge.

Fairclough, Norman. 2006. *Language and Globalization*. London: Routledge.

Goodnight, Thomas. 1982. "The personal, technical, and public spheres of argument: A speculative inquiry into the art of public sphere deliberation." *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 18: 214-227.

Ieţcu, Isabela. 2004. *Dialogicality and Ethical Perspective in Romanian Intellectual Discourse after 1989: A Study of H.-R. Patapievici*. Ph.D. thesis, Lancaster University.

Ieţcu, Isabela. 2006a. *Dialogue, Argumentation and Ethical Perspective in the Essays of H.-R. Patapievici*. Bucureşti: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti.

Ieţcu, Isabela. 2006b. *Discourse Analysis and Argumentation Theory: Analytical Framework and Applications.* Bucureşti: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti.

Ieţcu, Isabela. 2006c. "Argumentation, dialogue and conflicting moral economies in post-1989 Romania. An argument against the trade union movement." *Discourse and Society* 17(5): 627-650.

Ieţcu-Fairclough, Isabela. 2007. "Populism and the Romanian Orange Revolution: a discourse-analytical perspective on the presidential election of December 2004." *Studies in Language and Capitalism* 2(1): 31-74.

Ieţcu-Fairclough, Isabela. 2007. "Status groups of a free market of ideas? An analysis of a Romanian intellectual polemic in pragma-dialectical and critical discourse-analytical terms." *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Argumentation*, 659-666, Amsterdam: Sic Sat.

Ionescu, Ghiţă and Gellner, Ernest 1969. *Populism. Its Meaning and Characteristics*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson.

Ioniţă, Sorin. 1998. "În numele poporului. Scurtă analiză a populismului, ieri şi azi." In *Doctrine politice. Concepte universale şi realităţi româneşti*, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, (ed), 197-212. Iaşi: Polirom.

Jacobs, Scott. 2002. "Messages, functional contexts, and categories of fallacy: Some dialectical and rhetorical considerations." In *Dialectic and Rhetoric. The Warp and Woof of Argumentation Analysis*, Frans H. van Eemeren and Peter Houtlosser (eds.), 119-130. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Jagers, Jan & Walgrave, Stefaan. 2007. "Populism as political communication style. An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium." *European Journal of Political Research,* 46 (3): 319-345, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Kratzer, Angelika. 1991. "Modality." In *Semantics: An International Handbook of Contemporary Research*, Arnim Von Stechow and Dieter Wunderlich (eds), 639-650. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Mudde, Cas. 2004. "The populist zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition* 39 (4): 541-563. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina. 2002 *Politica după communism*. Bucureşti: Humanitas.

Newman, Bruce. 1999. *The Mass Marketing of Politics: Democracy in an Age of Manufactured Images*. London: Sage.

Reisigl, Martin. 2007. "The dynamics of right-wing populist argumentation in Austria." *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Argumentation*, 1127:1134. Amsterdam: Sic Sat.

Richardson, John E. 2007. *Analysing Newspapers. An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wiles, Peter. 1969. "Populism. A syndrome, not a doctrine." In *Populism. Its Meaning and Characteristics*, Ghiţă Ionescu & Ernest Gellner, 166-179. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson.

Wodak, Ruth, Rudolph de Cillia, Martin Reisigl & Karin Liebhart. 1999. *The Discursive Construction of Austrian National Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Author's address

Isabela Ieţcu-Fairclough
Department of English
Faculty of Foreign Languages
University of Bucharest
Strada Pitar Moş 7-13

Bucureşti, Romania.

E-mail: isabela.ietcu@gmail.com

About the author

Isabela Ieţcu-Fairclough (Ph.D. University of Lancaster) is Associate Professor (Reader) in Applied Linguistics in the English Department of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Coordinator of the M.A programme in Discourse and Argumentation Studies at the University of Bucharest (Romania). Her research interests include the study of the political involvement of public intellectuals in the transition from communism to liberal democracy in East-Central Europe, media debates over European integration issues, and enhancing critical discourse analysis by integrating it with theories of argumentation (pragma-dialectics). She has published two books with the University of Bucharest Press (Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti) and various articles, including articles in *Discourse & Society* and *Studies in Language and Capitalism.*

[1] The earliest version of this paper was read at the *International Conference on Critical Discourse Analysis* organized by the University of Athens, May 20-21, 2005. Another version has appeared in the journal *Studies in Language and Capitalism* (Ieţcu-Fairclough 2007).

[2] A number of other CDA practitioners are using various versions of argumentation theory, e.g. Wodak et al (1999), Reisigl (forthcoming) or, most recently, Richardson (2007), who is specifically drawing on pragma-dialectics. For reasons of space, I will not include here a discussion of the analytical framework of either CDA or pragma-dialectics. For such a discussion see Ieţcu-Fairclough (2007) and Ieţcu (2006b, 2006c).

[3] The most significant public debate on branding in Romania has been about the country brand and the need to "re-brand" it. Several attempts so far, e.g. the 2004 campaign, "Romania. Simply Surprising",

and the more recent, 2007 campaign, "Romania. Fabulospirit", have been widely criticized and ridiculed by the Romanians themselves as failing to capture and express any recognizable sense of Romanian identity.

[4] I am drawing here on a functional, contextual view of fallacies (Jacobs 2002) that looks at *messages, in their context*, as fallacious or not. On this view, argumentative effectiveness (and presumably, acceptability) is tied to the satisfaction of "public interests" such as the "achievement of reasonable decision-making" in a given context. Rhetorical strategies that might conventionally be classified as fallacious can be thus perceived as pragmatically adequate, moreover as reasonable (non-fallacious), given the particular characteristics of the context and of the audience, and the goals pursued by the arguers. They may thus function as "constructive contributions" to the decision-making process, e.g. may clarify what is at issue in more effective ways than "non-fallacious" argumentation. (Jacobs 2002: 124-125).