

**“THE PUPPET”, “THE CHICKEN” AND “THE CLOWN”:  
A DISCOURSE-BASED APPROACH TO SARCASTIC METAPHORS  
IN PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES**

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***Abstract** Considering the faircloughian premise that political discourse is always a form of action, this paper presents an analysis of three sarcastic metaphors, framed by various ironic formulae, used by candidates against each other in the American presidential debates of 2016 and 2020. In the analysis, I look at these ‘actions’ through the prism of several particularities of sarcasm and the conditions of its occurrence in the context of the presidential debate as a discursive genre. The presidential debate is a genre of discourse-in-interaction. More precisely, it is a highly adversarial type of interaction, in which participants are mainly concerned with disqualifying the opponent while making a politically favourable impact on the audience. Nevertheless, the ‘serious’ nature of presidential debates imposes discursive limitations on the participants, who cannot deliver their verbal attacks and insults straightforwardly against the opponent. Therefore, they need to resort to rhetorical tricks, as workable weapons in the battles of words these events are without exception turned into. Verbal attacks will occur in the guise of humour-related figures such as irony and sarcasm, popular in the genre for their effectiveness in softening the aggressive and offensive nature of the disparaging expressions, exempting the attacker of any fault, also enabling them to make an impression of wittiness in front of the audience. The three examples chosen for analysis, “the puppet”, “the chicken” and “the clown”, which I catalogued as sarcastic hyperbolic metaphors, are all references to the opponent and are somehow analogous in structure, all ‘acting’ to disqualify the target through ridiculing. Still, the mechanisms through which disqualification through derision is enacted are different and reveal less obvious nuances of the overall intended meaning conveyed, considering that the whole talk show happens - and only makes sense - in the presence of a mass audience. The analysis is carried out in the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, as proposed by van Leeuwen in *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for CDA*, also considering the principles of political discourse analysis.*

***Keywords:** presidential discourse, critical discourse analysis, sarcasm, sarcastic metaphors, agency*

## **1. Introduction**

Verbal exchanges in which words literally denote one idea but imply an analogy are of such frequent use in political discourse, most likely so in presidential debates, that this could almost be considered the norm. The practice of saying one thing and intending to mean something else has been used with ever-increasing refinement ever since ancient Rhetoric and is today more blatant than ever. It is a matter of effectiveness in communication, given that “most of our normal conceptual system

is metaphorically structured, that is, most concepts are partially understood in terms of other concepts”<sup>1</sup>.

There are a number of factors leading to this discursive convention, among which the rigours and limitations imposed by ethos and the high stakes played for by politicians, which tend to condition them as speakers into retaining from literally expressing their actual thoughts and feelings and remodelling words to match the ‘serious’ nature of the speech events candidates are usually part of.

Besides being characterised by normativity, largely consisting of argumentation about what ought to be done, political discourse also has a highly combative nature, largely conveying messages of offense and disqualification about the opponent. This is a delicate aspect to communicate, as verbal attacks need to be delivered in socially accepted and audience-friendly ways. No straightforward insults will be uttered in events such as presidential debates, as they would be detrimental to the image of the speaker. These coups will be launched skilfully through various rhetorical figures, of which the ones related to humour are mostly popular, because they benefit the speaker in rewarding ways, exempting them of any label offensiveness and also granting them an image of wittiness in front of the audience. Thus, when dealing with any type of political discourse, particularly presidential debates, the quest for meaning becomes an engaging and resourceful journey.

The corpus is composed of four extracts from the American presidential debates of 2016 between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump and 2020 between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The extracts were selected for containing one sarcastic metaphor, used within the representation of the same discursive practices enacted by the participants.

For the examination of these samples of speech, the analysis approaches some theoretical aspects related to the discursive genre of presidential debates and sarcasm, as a figure of negative humour, and uses several tools of Critical Discourse Analysis, which are further discussed in the following sections.

## **2. Theory and method**

This section presents some brief considerations on the main theoretical notions that this analysis works with, detailing some particularities of the *presidential debate* as a genre of political discourse in interaction and also looking at *sarcasm* and its functions within the genre. The analysis is carried out in accordance with the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), also considering the principles of Political Discourse Analysis (PDA), as presented by Isabela Fairclough and Norman

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<sup>1</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 59.

Fairclough<sup>2</sup>, and is based on the model developed by Theo van Leeuwen in his 2008 *Discourse and Practice: New tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*, i.e. the representation of agency.

According to the above-mentioned framework proposed by Fairclough & Fairclough, political discourse is always a form of or a reason for action. It is characterized by normativity, largely consisting of argumentation about what ought to be done. It is designed to serve rhetorical goals which, in the expression of Fairclough & Fairclough, are germane to the main-focus on positive self-representation and negative other-representation, the principal ‘action’ candidates to presidency are preoccupied with.

Theoretically, presidential debates are a genre of discourse-in-interaction<sup>3</sup>, basically a media genre, with a strict format and clear-cut participation framework composed of the two candidates, the moderator and a mass audience as ratified participants<sup>4</sup>. A particularity of this discursive genre, as of any type of talk-in-interaction, is the ‘two-sidedness’ of discourse, which means that everything that happens discursively generates an instant echo and is a result of co-construction. This produces a rich palette of potential meanings that can arise in the interaction of discourses. Nevertheless, it must be considered that the candidates’ talks are contextually constrained by the specific norms of the interaction<sup>5</sup>. This means that direct attacks and insults against the opponent are not an option as they would produce a detrimental ethos of aggressiveness and offensiveness of the speaker. So, in order to accomplish their combative goals, speakers disguise their insults under sophisticated rhetoric. Verbal attacks will occur in the guise of humour-related figures such as irony and sarcasm, most popular in the genre for their effectiveness in softening the aggressive and offensive nature of the disparaging expressions, exempting the attacker of any assault, serving what Erving Goffman refers to as maintenance of face, also enabling them to make an impression of wittiness in front of the audience.

When investigating aspects of language related to sarcasm, a first challenge is that a definition of the concept is not as easy to outline as one would expect. The enormous amount of theory out there seems to either put sarcasm and irony into the same basket, either oppose the two, or blend them into one-another, in what becomes a tangle of theories. For the purposes of my thesis, I chose to follow a theoretical direction that clearly distinguishes between irony and sarcasm.

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<sup>2</sup> Norman Fairclough and Isabela Fairclough, *Political Discourse Analysis. A method for advanced students*, London & New York: Routledge, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, *Le discours en interaction*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Erving Goffman, On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction, in B. G. Blount (Ed.), *Language, Culture, and Society* (pp. 224–50). Cambridge, MA: Winthrop.

<sup>5</sup> van Dijk, T. A. (2017). Critical Discourse Studies: A Sociocognitive Approach, in Wodak, R. & Meyer, M. (Eds) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Ltd, p. 87.

Sarcasm is a category of what scholars call negative humour<sup>6</sup> and along with irony, it is the most popular figure used in presidential debates for the general aim of disqualifying the target through derision. Unlike irony, sarcasm presents no semantic opposition between the literal meaning and the intended meaning, so speakers literally mean what they say when speaking sarcastically<sup>7</sup>. Sarcasm is generally defined by “a bitter, caustic effect”<sup>8</sup>. Experiments revealed that sarcasm is remembered better than literal uses of the same expression or nonsarcastic equivalents, most particularly when echoing societal norms, such as is the case in the present analysis. Sarcasm adds a further “insulting or denouncing effect”<sup>9</sup> and counts on the collaboration of the audience to “play along”, in an engaged type of play, in which the audience is invited to take on the role of an accomplice, as nothing ever goes free in this discursive genre. What sarcasm does, finally, is what Charaudeau describes as “hyperbolisation du négatif exprimée par le dit”<sup>10</sup>, namely a ‘hyperbolisation of the negative through what is said’ (translation my own). According to the same author, sarcasm talks of what shouldn’t be said and thus makes the addressee uncomfortable.

In the light of the above-mentioned distinction between irony and sarcasm, as main figures of negative humour in the genre of the presidential debate – namely the fact that in irony there is contradiction between what is said (positive) and what is meant (negative), while in sarcasm what is meant and what is said are both negative, with an exaggeration of the intended through the literal meaning –, and because both figures operate discursively in the same direction, it is necessary to mention that in the present analysis discussions on sarcasm also include discussions on irony.

Methodologically, the analysis is based on the model of discourse as recontextualised social practice<sup>11</sup>, focused on making social practices more explicit, for the purpose CDA is generally concerned with, namely revealing buried ideology<sup>12</sup>. Explicitness is achieved through examining in which contexts are which

<sup>6</sup> Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humour*, Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994, p. 49.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Charaudeau, Des catégories pour l’humour. Précisions, rectifications, compléments, in Vivero M. D. (Ed.), *Humour et crises sociales. Regards croisés France-Espagne*, (pp. 9-43), L’Harmattan, Paris, 2011, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> R. W. Gibbs, On the Psycholinguistics of Sarcasm., in Gibbs, R. W. & Colston, H. L. (Eds.), (2007). *Irony in Language and Thought: A Cognitive Science Reader*, New York & London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> Andreas Musolff, Irony and sarcasm in follow-ups of metaphorical slogans, in Athanasiadou, A. & Colston, H. L. (Eds.), *Irony in Language Use and Communication*, London and New York: John Benjamins, 2017, p. 129.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Charaudeau, Des catégories pour l’humour. Précisions, rectifications, compléments, in Vivero M. D. (Ed.), *Humour et crises sociales. Regards croisés France-Espagne*, (pp. 9-43), L’Harmattan, Paris, 2011, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Theo van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for CDA*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> David Machin and Andrea Mayr, *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis. A multimodal introduction*, London: Sage, 2012, p. 1.

social actors represented as agents and which as patients, through various tools such as suppression or backgrounding vs foregrounding of agency, activation/passivation of agency through the grammatical role allocation for participants, explicitness/implicitness, individualisation vs assimilation and types of association, generalisation, categorisation, functionalization, indetermination etc, all designed to serve the discursive goals of the speakers.

Transcription conventions have been drawn from the theory presented by John W. Du Bois et al.<sup>13</sup> and are focused on reflecting the reticular functioning of sarcasm.

### 3. Data analysis

The corpus is composed of four extracts from the American presidential debates of 2016 between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump and 2020 between Donald Trump and Joe Biden (henceforth HC, DT, JB), transcribed from the video recordings publicly available on youtube.com (channels listed and links provided in end references). Each extract contains one sarcastic hyperbolic metaphor, as part of the larger representation framework of the same discursive action of disqualification through derision, as means of bringing focus on positive self-representation and negative other-representation. Metaphors are used “to ‘reframe’ reality and the inferences they make possible are used to direct arguments in ways that correspond to the rhetorical goals of arguers”<sup>14</sup>.

There are a few associations presented in the texts, lumping agents together into very clear and sharply drawn parties, which can be largely summarized into self vs others, with the corresponding followers. Words referring to agents have been bolded for highlighting the framing of the sarcastic hyperbolic metaphor in each extract.

#### (1) Clinton – Trump, 3<sup>rd</sup> debate [26:41 – 27:49]

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DT: so /just to finish on the [borders_]-
CW: [yes\]
    /she wants <MRC open borders MRC>
    people are going to <MRC pour into MRC> \our /country_
    /people are going to come in from /Syria_ [...]
    /thousands and /thousands of people (.)
    they have /no ^idea where they come from_ (.)
    /we are /going to stop <MRC radical Islamic terrorism MRC>
    \in this country_
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<sup>13</sup> John W. Du Bois, S. Schuetze-Coburn, S. Cumming, D. Paolino, Outline of Discourse Transcription, in Edwards, J. A. and Lampert, M. D. (Eds.). *Talking Data: Transcription and Coding in Discourse Research*, Hillsdale N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Norman Fairclough and Isabela Fairclough, *Political Discourse Analysis. A method for advanced students*, London & New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 187.

/she won't even /mention **the words**  
 and ^neither will **president/\Obama**  
 so (.) **I** just want to tell **you** (.)  
**she** /wants open borders (,) now **we** can talk about \Putin (.)  
 [...] and /**she's playing chicken** (,)  
 \look, [**Putin**]- (,)  
 CW: [w-- w-- wait- wait-]  
 DT: from ^everything **I** `see (.) has ^no respect for <MRC **this**  
**person** MRC>

This extract draws on the representation of the social issue of immigration and several other actions meant to delegitimize it, echoing the radically opposed views of the candidates upon the “open borders” policy, from which Clinton had just attempted to commute attention towards espionage against Americans and the Russian president. The social actors involved in these practices – corresponding to the groups supporting one or the other of the candidates – are, on the one hand, “she” – with 3 occurrences, “people”, “thousands”, “they”, then a second and different “they”, “terrorism” – still an agent although passivized through nominalisation, “president Obama” and “person”, and on the other hand “our”, “we”, “I”, “Putin”. The first 5 utterances compose one proposition, namely “her open borders mean terrorists inside our country”. Linguistically, we have exclusive activation of agency with “she wants”, “people are going to pour / to come in”, “they have no idea”, “they come” which all point to what van Leeuwen calls “the deviant action” which presents a threat to the orderly unfolding of things, in an attempt to reveal the contradictions which underlie these practices, contradictions such as a devastating effect of what the opponent presents as a solution. Then, next, the second proposition, about stopping terrorism, activates the “we” and backgrounds agency through the nominalization of “terrorism”, placing a clear mark of importance on “we” and “stop”, backgrounding the threat itself. Then, the third proposition, about the lack of courage of “she” – directly associated with “president Obama” (in contrast with the courage of “we” in the previous proposition) culminates with an activation of agency in “**she’s playing chicken**”, retrieving the connotative meaning of “scared, timid, cowardly”, features contrasting the normative discourse of bravery, morality and verticality that underpins the presidential ethos. This is a direct ad hominem attack wrapped up in a sarcastic metaphor, to suit the conditions of social acceptability and appropriateness, given the discursive limitations imposed by the genre. Furthermore, we have the “person” reference to HC, made through what van Leeuwen calls “highly generalised categorisation”<sup>15</sup>. The generic reference is another way to achieve some disqualifying effect, this time through an effect of distancing the audience from

<sup>15</sup> Theo van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for CDA*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 42.

the referent. So the attack is delivered in a softened, audience friendly formula through sarcasm, as form of derision containing bitterness, intended to disqualify the opponent in front of the audience and to place the speaker in a position of superiority, as actions within the political discourse.

As it often happens in political discourse, figurative language used by one speaker is followed up and countered by the addressee through comments that range from irony and sarcasm.

(2) *Clinton – Trump, 3<sup>rd</sup> debate [27:42 – 29:19]*

DT: \look (.) [**Putin**]- (,)  
 CW: [w- w- wait- wait-]  
 DT: from ^everything **I** see\_ (.) has /no respect (.) for <MRC  
**this person** MRC>  
 HC: /well (,) that's because **he**'d rather have a ^puppet/  
 as /president [of the /United States]\  
 DT: [/no puppet\_ (!) /no puppet\_]  
 HC: and (.) it's [pretty clear-]  
 DT: [/you're the ^puppet\_]  
 HC: it's pretty clear (,) [you /won't admit]-  
 DT: [no, /you're the ^puppet\_]  
 HC: -that **the /Russians** have engaged in /cyber-attacks (,) against the /United States of America/ (.) that **you/** <MRC encouraged **espionage** ^against **our people** MRC>\ [...]  
 /I find that just /absolutely (.) fascinating\

Continuing the discussion from where she left off before Trump interrupted her so that they could “finish on the borders”, this extract is the representation of a single proposition through a series of utterances, namely that “Trump is submitted to the Russians”, which, as an effect, facilitates ‘their attacks’ against Americans. The social actors enacting this action of carrying out threat against the nation, in a joint effort, are “he” – referring to the Russian president – and “puppet”, re-enacted shortly with “the Russians” and “you” and associated with “espionage”, as an agent passivized through nominalisation, through the same mechanism in (1) with “terrorism”.

There is one reference to HC as “this person” which, through what Theo van Leeuwen calls indetermination anonymises her as a social actor, treating her as irrelevant. The sarcastic reference to DT as an individual occurs through ‘puppet’, a lexical choice made to represent his previous speech acts. There is direct activation of agency with “he’d have”, making an explicit association between “he” and “puppet” through possession. The connotative meaning of “puppet” points at “one whose actions are controlled by an outside force or influence” (merriam-webster.com) and is used to indicate dissociation of the actor (‘puppet’) from interests of the social agent of “our people” (of course, highlighting affiliation and sameness of the speaker – HC – with “our” nation,





because they did [a good job]\  
 DT: [s-- some people] just [don't do] a good  
 job (?)/  
 JB: [/well, here's  
 the-] [crosstalk]  
 (!)here's the deal\  
 CW: (!)go ahead ^you get the- [crosstalk] (!)wait a minute  
 (.)^You get the 'final word\Mr.-  
 JB: well (,) it's 'hard to get^any word in\ with **this clown**\  
**/excuse me\ (,) this person**\

In extracts (3) and (4) we have two occurrences of the sarcastic metaphor of the clown, with “this clown” uttered by JB to refer to his opponent, DT. Discursively, we are dealing with the same action of disqualifying the opponent while trying to make a politically favourable impact on the audience, this time performed through what Erving Goffman calls “by-play”. By-play is a subordinate form of talk between two ratified participants who for a moment depart from the dominant state of talk and no longer focus on the main purpose of the interaction. In (3), Biden switches interlocutor and addresses the audience in an attempt to ridicule and invalidate the rude behaviour of his opponent who kept on interrupting him even when the organisational rules granted him the floor with ‘Folks, Folks, do you have any idea what this clown is doing?’. Then, in (4), he addresses the moderator to blame not being able to answer his questions on the fact that ‘it’s hard to get any word in with this clown’, which he then neutralizes with the ‘person’ reference, through the same mechanism of highly generalised categorisation<sup>16</sup> which we have seen in (1), in an attempt to fit his lexical choices into the normative discourse of politeness and emotional self-control which, too, underpins presidential ethos.

When the target is not the interlocutor, as is the case with both “clown” references, there is an effect of connivance emerging, an appeal to the interlocutor to take the role of an accomplice in the disqualification of the opponent. This effect is especially clear in the first example, where he addresses the audience with a double utterance of “folks”, which is intrinsically affiliative through its denotation of “persons of one’s own family”. “Clown” in itself attaches a label of “rude, ill-bred person or fool” to the referent, an ad hominem attack enacted through the mechanisms of a sarcastic metaphor.

#### 4. Conclusion

From the discourse-based analysis of the three mentioned sarcastic hyperbolic metaphors encountered in the four debate extracts listed in the Data analysis section, a primary conclusion that can be drawn is that sarcastic metaphors (and

<sup>16</sup> Theo van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for CDA*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 42.

it is definitely the case with the sarcastic *hyperbolic* metaphors in question here) are used by speakers in a sustained effort of disqualifying the opponent while elevating the self in front of the audience.

Pragmatically, as this analysis reveals, sarcasm is used for its quality of activating an implicit contrast between the one who formulates the sarcastic formula and the target, through positive self-representation and negative other-representation. Sarcasm serves to argue against the scenario attributed to the target, in an pretence of demystification, through a somehow softened formula, through laughter (although it is a bitter sort of laughter, rather situated in the range of derision and ridiculing and intended to be perceived as explicit criticism). There is a considerable effect of mitigation of the face-threatening aspect of rudeness, which characterises sarcasm as a form of strategic “implicational impoliteness”<sup>17</sup>. When joined with the figure(s) of metaphor (completed by hyperbole), the sarcastic comments are intended as put-downs or insults aimed at disqualifying the opponent’s competence<sup>18</sup>. All of these functions of sarcasm seem to be active, effective and easily identifiable in the corpus analysed in this article.

In the first example, the sarcastic metaphor “she’s *playing chicken*”, is enacted through activation of agency for the purpose of achieving the effect of derision through its connotative meaning of [+cowardice] or even [+falsity (of cowardice)]. Then, the second sarcastic metaphor, “he’d rather *have a puppet* as president” is worked out through functionalisation and retrieved the connotative meaning of [+controlled by external force], also used to make association explicit through the possessive “to have”. “This *clown*” in a double occurrence, first used to address the audience and second to address the moderator, both referring to DT through instances of by-play, loads the target with the connotative labels of [+fool] and [+rude]. Moreover, “chicken”, as an object within the practice of “playing”, used to address HC, becomes a hyperbole for cowardice, “puppet”, a hyperbole for “manipulable / manipulated” and “this clown” a hyperbole for “rude and ridiculous”.

As a form of action within political discourse, in the genre of the presidential debate, as this analysis has shown, sarcasm and metaphor (as well as hyperbole) largely operate discursively in the same direction, namely the disqualification of the opponent in front of the audience, also granting the effect of the maintenance of face, essential in political discourse in general, even more so for candidates to presidency.

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Culpeper, *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence*, published online by Cambridge University Press, 2011 (no page).

<sup>18</sup> Andreas Musolff, Irony and sarcasm in follow-ups of metaphorical slogans, in Athanasiadou, A. & Colston, H. L. (Eds.), *Irony in Language Use and Communication*, London and New York: John Benjamins, 2017, p. 138.

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**Data:** Youtube.com

The Third Presidential Debate: Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (Full Debate) | NBC News - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smkyorC5qwc&t=1870s>

Fox News: Trump-Biden presidential debate moderated by Chris Wallace | FULL - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofkPfm3tFxo&t=2864s>