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AD HOC CONCEPTS AND ARGUMENTATION IN POLITICAL DEBATES

ANABELLA-GLORIA NICULESCU-GORPIN

Lexical items have been regarded as conveying a basic, literal meaning, captured in most cases by lexicographic definitions. Nevertheless, when communicating, speakers select (unconsciously) only those 'literal' features relevant for that particular context, loosening or narrowing the basic, literal concept encoded. On the other hand, in processing utterances to recover the speaker's meaning and to understand particular constructions, hearers may not retrieve the same encyclopaedic features as the ones put forward by speakers, but different though similar ones. Such instantaneous formed concepts have been known in the literature as *ad hoc* concepts (Barsalou 1983, 1987; Carston 2002).

Following the relevance-theoretic account of this phenomenon (Carston 2002; Wilson & Carston 2006; Wilson & Carston 2007; Sperber & Wilson 2006), this article attempts to discuss several aspects of meaning in connection to *ad hoc* concept formation, argumentation and persuasion. Using as corpus the 2004 American Presidential Debates, the analysis considers the way in which the candidates employed recurrently several lexical structures to argue for their own campaign and to dismantle the one of the opponent. The analysis focuses on several constructions that are representative for the entire corpus. It also proposes several possible lines of interpretation that could have been followed by the audience in processing the candidates' message.

The analysis shows that such means are instances of loosening or narrowing leading to *ad hoc* concept formation, revealing ways in which the candidates used repetition to strengthen their arguments in their attempt to persuade the voters.

1. Introduction

Politicians want to persuade, that is they try to change their hearers' beliefs and knowledge, and sometimes their behaviour, too. Candidates to presidency attempt to persuade their audience, making them believe that they represent the perfect solution for the problems of the country and its citizens; they use language to achieve their final goal, that is getting elected.

Linguistic elements, such as sentence structure (coordination and subordination, passive or active voice), choice of lexical items, use of metaphors, framing, rhetorical elements have been described as contributing to achieving persuasion to a greater or lesser extent. The present article is part of a larger project concerned with the analysis of the 2004 Amer-

ican Presidential debates. The focus here will be on *ad hoc* concept formation, its link to the relevance of the message and on the relationship existing between argumentation and persuasion in political debates.

The main points of the theoretical framework will be described in the sections preceding the actual analysis.

2. *Relevance theory and ad hoc concepts*

To arrive at the relevance-theoretic interpretation of *ad hoc* concepts, a brief overview of the main tenets put forward by the theory is presented here.

According to relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995, 1987) having cognitive effects is a necessary condition for relevance; the greater the cognitive effects, the greater the relevance.

People have intuitions about relevance: they can distinguish, without being aware that they can, between irrelevant and relevant information, or between more or less relevant information. These intuitions are in close connection with the context, that is a particular item of information is more relevant in one context than in others.

A stimulus is said to be worth the hearers' attention when the information transmitted can be linked with background information possessed. Moreover, any utterance / input creates predictable expectations of relevance. Relevance is connected with some form of cost-benefit analysis. To be relevant, the processed information has to yield positive cognitive effects, i.e. "a worthwhile difference to the individual's representation of the world – a true conclusion, for example" (Wilson & Sperber 2004: 3¹). Positive cognitive effects are of three types: contextual implications, strengthening of a contextual assumption or contradiction, and elimination of a contextual assumption. Contextual implications are the most important and are defined as "[...] a conclusion deducible from the input and the context together, but from neither input nor context alone" (Wilson & Sperber 2004: 3-4). Cognitive effects are achieved by mental processes, which involve a certain effort. Since processing effort is a negative factor, relevance is lower when the processing effort is greater than expected.

For a political debate to be relevant to an audience, the information it contains must combine with the context in which it is delivered, and to yield positive cognitive effects. Political debates are considered ostensive stimuli because by producing them, politicians draw their audience's attention to a particular stimulus. Considering the above highlighted relevance-theoretical claims, it is assumed that the audience expected that the information contained in these speeches would have yielded positive cognitive effects at a low processing effort.

¹ Most articles are cited from the authors' websites so they are Word documents; page numbers may refer to the document as downloaded from the website.

As pointed in the Introduction, there may be (and often is) a gap between the concept encoded by a word and the actual concept put forward by speakers. According to relevance theory (Wilson 2003; Carston 2002; Sperber & Wilson 2006; Wilson & Carston 2006; Wilson & Carston 2007), what bridges this gap is the construction of an *ad hoc* concept. *Ad hoc* concepts are constructed pragmatically by both speakers and hearers either when performing an utterance or when trying to comprehend a message. There is no need for speakers and hearers to end up with the same *ad hoc* concept for successful communication to occur. *Ad hoc* concepts are not linguistically given and are not necessarily stored in the lexicon; as just mentioned, they are constructed pragmatically, on-line and this is due to specific expectations of relevance determined in particular contexts. Thus, an *ad hoc concept* “[i]s accessed in a particular context by a spontaneous process of pragmatic inference, as distinct from a concept which is accessed by the process of lexical decoding, and so it’s context invariant” (Carston 2002: 322-323).

It seems that more often than one might expect, the 2004 candidates to the US presidency used ‘non-literally’ the linguistically encoded meaning of a concept either because language did not provide them with any word/structure that would best suit their purpose, or because this would have been the most effective way in which they could communicate their plans (readers are referred to Section 4).

Within the realm of relevance theory, the theory of *ad hoc* concepts has been developing in relation with its proponents’ attempt to provide a unifying theory of lexical pragmatics, that is a theory which attempts to show that “narrowing, loosening and metaphorical extension are simply different outcomes of a single interpretive process which creates an *ad hoc* concept, or occasion-specific sense, based on interaction among encoded concepts, contextual information and pragmatic expectations or principles” (Wilson & Carston 2007: 1).

Such an approach and its implications are important for the analysis of the 2004 US presidential debates because they may offer an explanation on how the audience might have arrived at the relevant interpretation of the candidates’ messages. More specifically, the audience employed the same inferential mechanisms in deriving both the meaning of ‘literal’ and ‘figurative’ expressions because, a unified account of lexical pragmatics rejects “the traditional distinction between literal and figurative meaning and claims that approximation, hyperbole and metaphor are not distinct natural kinds, requiring different interpretive mechanisms, but involve exactly the same interpretive processes as are used for ordinary, literal utterances” (Wilson & Carston 2007: 3).

The 2004 American presidential debates provide examples that illustrate the definition given by relevance theory to *ad hoc* concepts which can also inform the analysis of my corpus (for an extensive discussion see Carston 2002; Wilson 2003; Wilson & Carston 2006; Wilson & Carston 2007, etc.). Following the relevance theory approach, concepts are presented with capital letters and *ad hoc* concepts with an asterisk.

3. *Persuasion and argumentation*

When it comes to the 2004 US presidential debates, *ad hoc* concepts can be studied in relation to the way in which candidates bring arguments in favour of their own programmes or against their opponent in their attempt to persuade the audience.

Persuasion has been studied from different points of view, and within different disciplines, such as rhetoric, linguistics, sociology or psychology, making it a great candidate for an interdisciplinary approach.

I have neither the space nor the intention to go into a long analysis of the different approaches to persuasion, therefore only those aspects important for my analysis are emphasised. Persuasion is considered to take place when opinions and values are changed; this may happen during an electoral campaign. How candidates use discourse to achieve persuasion is still a matter of discussion in the linguistic, sociological and psychological fields. Persuasion cannot and should not be analyzed from one single perspective; any pertinent study should consider not only the linguistic elements that could contribute to the persuasiveness of the message, but also the socio-cultural and economic context in which the debates took place.

Here, persuasion is defined as an attempt to change hearers' beliefs and knowledge in order to change their behaviour (Zimbardo & Leippe 1991). According to this theory, successful persuasion requires four steps: a message may persuade if hearers are exposed to it, pay attention to it, understand it and accept it (Zimbardo & Leippe 1991: 129). Two more steps are needed for persuasion to be fully achieved through change of behaviour: retention of the new attitude and its translation into the expected behaviour (Zimbardo & Leippe 1991: 129, 136, 137).

In the case of the 2004 American presidential debates, US citizens watching or listening to the debates were exposed to the message. Some of them may have paid attention to it; some may have also understood it, and some may have even accepted it.

Establishing the percentage of the audience which was persuaded during these debates would have involved actual questioning of people, but this was neither possible nor the purpose of my article which is to see how *ad hoc* concepts formation, argumentation and persuasion may be linked.

My approach to rhetoric follows the interpretation given by Michael Billig (1996) who claims that rhetoric has mainly to do with argumentation. Protagorean rhetoric was concerned with argumentation that had at its core the idea that there are always two sides of one issue (Billig 1996: 3). This is also what candidates to presidency are doing: each contender tries to bring arguments in favour of his particular electoral programme and to dismantle the one of his opponent. Of interest are both the form (i.e. the lexical structures used) and the content (the meaning of such lexical structures) of their messages, since in processing the message, the audience would look for that information that will yield more positive cognitive effects at a low processing effort.

The term *argument* may be misleading in itself, since it may mean a quarrel, a discursive battle, or “reasoned discourse”, especially in dialogue (Billig 1996: 27-28). The two-sidedness of argumentation implies the existence of dialogue, since no real argumentation can take place if there is no voice to counter-react.

The opposition between Plato’s and Protagoras’ philosophy is of help here: Plato claimed that people’s different opinions have nothing to do with actual knowledge. He considered that the unchangeable truth, the World of Ideas lies above contradictions of shifting oppositions and sense-perceptions. Hence, oppositions exist between truth and opinion, appearance and essence. To discover the ultimate truth means to put an end to all argumentation; thus, the Platonic view becomes the one of indisputable truth.

On the contrary, Protagoras and sophists argue that there is nothing but the different opinions people have, hence denying the validity of objective truth; there is no underlying reality besides argumentation, and since any issue is two-sided, then both sides are true. Thus, there is a constant possibility that any speech is opposed by a counter-speech. For example, in arguing that his solutions were valid, Kerry had to consider that a possible true counter-speech was also available – that of his opponent, and the other way around.

According to Perelman (1979), the basic features of the context of argumentation are justification and criticism, rhetorically related to each other: “Every justification presupposes the existence or eventuality of an unfavourable evaluation of what we justify” (Perelman 1979: 138) and “a question of justification ordinarily arises only in a situation that has given rise to criticism” (Perelman 1979: 33). The context of argumentation must be social, because criticism is meaningless “unless some accepted norm, end or value has been infringed upon or violated” (Perelman 1979: 33). Actions and decisions are criticized in relation to accepted rules and values, not in abstract. The same is also true for justification. Hence, it was necessary for candidates to justify and legitimate their campaigns and programmes in order to persuade their voters and to get elected.

By their own nature, political debates presuppose argumentation. In the case of these political debates (as in the case of all modern political debates), a dialogue is established along two dimensions: on the one hand, the dialogue between the candidates and the audience, and on the other hand, the dialogue taking place between the candidates. Argumentation was involved in the second case: each candidate had to provide justification for his electoral programme and to criticise his opponent. This dialogic dimension is well represented in my corpus: each candidate’s answer is opposed by a counter-speech, the opponent’s rebuttal. On the other hand, the dialogue existing between the candidates and the audience gave the latter the possibility to react only through one means: their votes.

Since persuasion is sometimes difficult if not impossible to achieve, the purpose of argumentation is not always to persuade the other party. Moreover, the candidates did not want to persuade each other, but the audience. To do this, they used the basic features of argumentation to justify their own programmes and to criticise their opponent. Nevertheless, because immediate persuasion is often unattainable, the candidates were also in search for the last word, that is to provide an unanswerable criticism, or to fail to offer justification

on the part of the opponent. By having the last word, a candidate may have higher chances to persuade more voters and thus to get elected.

The 2004 US candidates made use of argumentation: they bring arguments in support of their actions and statements, arguments that are related to legal situations (UN resolutions, the American Constitution, etc.), to past situations (Saddam's former actions, former military interventions that were a success), to traditions (oaths taken, the Bible, etc.), or even to future situations (the possibility of a future attack using weapons of mass destruction). By bringing arguments, their programmes may become legitimate. Trying to legitimise their programme, the candidates' answers are examples of justification of their own position and of criticism of their opponent. Thus, argumentation as a rhetorical device may increase persuasion.

4. *The analysis*

In bringing arguments in favour of their own programmes and attempting to combat their opponent, the 2004 US candidates had to keep in mind that their messages had to be relevant to their audience, i.e. to yield greater positive cognitive effects at a low processing effort. If the candidates wanted (part of) the audience to process their answers (step 3 in the definition of persuasion) then their message had to be relevant: if the processing effort had been greater than the positive cognitive effects achieved, the audience would not have processed the candidates' answers at all. Given that recency of use and frequency of use are factors that may decrease the processing effort due to high activation of particular structures in the mind of the audience, the candidates used several (lexical, syntactic, etc.) constructions recurrently. In his attempt to justify his own electoral programme and to criticise his opponent, each candidate used his own achievements and the opponent's failures as premises of enthymemes², sometimes leaving a lot of information presupposed. As the examples (1)-(5) show, the concepts encoded by the candidates' words were either loosened or narrowed.

The short analysis below discusses several structures that were present recurrently in the candidates' answers, structures the candidates might have used to make their messages relevant for their audience, i.e. to keep the processing effort low while increasing the positive cognitive effects.

The first example belongs to John Kerry, and it occurs (as such or with a slightly different form) nine times in the debates analysed:

- (1) I have a plan to have a summit with all of the allies, something this president has not yet achieved, not yet been able to do *to bring people to the table*.
(John Kerry; italics mine, A.G.N.G.)

² Enthymemes, which are made up of a conclusion and its justification, are the basic unit of a rhetorical argument; they resemble syllogisms, but they lack one premise, thus always leaving some information presupposed. As opposed to syllogisms whose deductions are certainties, enthymemes deal with probabilities. The justification of the claim might also be criticised and, in its turn, it will need an enthymemic support and so on, *ad infinitum*. Thus, rhetorical arguments presuppose open-endedness (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*).

Following relevance theory, a possible inferential analysis of the conventional metaphor *bring people to the table* would look as follows:

(2) BRING PEOPLE TO THE TABLE

with the propositional form:

JOHN WANTS AT T₁ TO BRING PEOPLE TO THE TABLE

The encyclopaedic assumptions it may activate are:

- people come to the table in order to eat;
- when people sit together around a table they may talk, disagree or reach a conclusion;
- sitting together at a table involves friendship;
- the table is seen as a place which automatically puts people together;

BRING* [PEOPLE TO THE TABLE]*

- creating alliances, making the allies talk;

The audience is likely to create this *ad hoc* concept having available or recently activated contextual information such as Kerry is a politician and he is talking about America's allies, trying to emphasise the necessity of strong alliances in the war on terror. In trying to interpret Kerry's utterance, this *ad hoc* concept will satisfy (part of) the audience's expectations of relevance.

The second example is represented by the expression *the new wars of the 21st century* used by Bush in the second debate:

(3) the war of the 21st century

The structure in (3) is not a metaphor, but it represents a narrowing of the literal meaning of WAR. It may be analysed along the following lines. All people have some knowledge about wars: armed forces colliding for different reasons. Yet, in this particular context, the construction activates information related to the Iraq War, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and other such events. Assuming that the candidates are structuring their utterances according to their own abilities and preferences, trying to be as relevant as they can³, the audience will construct the *ad hoc* concept (21st CENTURY WAR) * whose encyclopaedic entry could contain information such as *wars involving terrorist attacks such as those of 9/11, wars involving weapons of mass destruction*, etc. This example displays another interesting and rare feature: narrowing does not take place here at the verb level.

G.W. Bush and John Kerry tend to use the same constructions when they talk about a particular subject. Their recurrence will determine particular *ad hoc* concepts to be highly activated in the audience's minds, lessening the processing effort needed to comprehend the message.

³ According to the second clause of the Presumption of optimal relevance: "An ostensive stimulus is optimally relevant to an audience if: (a) It is relevant enough to be worth the audience's processing effort; (b) It is the most relevant one compatible with communicator's abilities and preferences." (Wilson & Sperber 2004: 7).

In bringing arguments in favour of his programme, and trying to show how determined he is to make America safer, Kerry uses the structure under (4) every time he has the opportunity (6 times in the corpus analysed).

(4) I will hunt down and kill the terrorists. (John Kerry)

This construction exhibits a major metaphor characteristic: the speaker does not want to communicate the literal meaning of the predicate. Example (4) falls in the class of cases where the property could be true of the entity referred to in some particular cases (Carston 2002: 352). There is no doubt that J. Kerry could hunt down and kill the terrorists. However, what he is trying to emphasise is his plan to support the fight against terrorism. The loosening of the concept HUNT* is also determined by the direct object *terrorists*, since usually people would think that the element of hunting would be an animal, not a human being. Again, by recurrently using particular constructions, the candidate would have made his answers relevant to (part) of the audience.

The last example focuses on one occurrence of the verb *to go*, trying to show how speakers tend to 'select' unconsciously only those features that are relevant for the current purpose of communication, leading to *ad hoc* concept formation.

(5) They're going from tyranny to elections. (G.W. Bush)

It is neither the place nor the space to go into a long analysis of *go*, trying to establish its basic/literal meaning; therefore, *go* it is considered to imply movement from one place to another. Following the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, which according to relevance theory (Wilson 2004; Wilson and Sperber 2004, etc.) implies three steps⁴, part of the audience could process the example as in (6):

(6) **Contextual Assumptions**

- people usually tend to go from a point in space A to another B, say from London to Manchester;
- going from one place to another implies a change
- the Iraqi people were under a tyranny;
- they are about to have elections;
- the Iraqi people are moving from one political regime to another;

Contextual implication:

- Bush is the president who helped the Iraqi people go through the change;

Implicated Conclusion:

Bush's decisions are good.

⁴ "a. Follow a path of least processing effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretative hypothesis (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility. b. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied [or abandoned]." (Wilson & Sperber 2004: 9).

This is how such an example could have been processed by (part of) the audience. Such an implicated conclusion could have satisfied the expectations of relevance some voters might have had.

Suppose some voters already trusted Bush and were looking for confirmation of their already held attitudes: such an implicated conclusion (Bush's decisions are good) would have strengthened an already existing assumption. Since Bush frequently employs such constructions, they are highly activated in the minds of the audience (Bush used these constructions in the debates and in other speeches, and some voters could have attended to these stimuli). Thus, the processing effort is lowered, while the positive cognitive effects are increased. On the other hand, if other voters were against Bush, then such an implicated conclusion (Bush's decisions are good) would have led to the contradiction and elimination of a contextual assumption/an already held attitude (Bush does not take good decisions). Last, but not least, for undecided voters, the example may have triggered strong contextual implications such as the one under (6) which would have made them vote for Bush.

In bringing arguments against his opponent, Kerry uses constructions such as *He broke his word*, *He just declared it dead*, [it=Kyoto Protocol], *I believe that this president, regrettably, rushed us into a war, made decisions about foreign policy, pushed alliances away*, etc. Suppose part of the audience would have processed these utterances, since the processing effort needed would have been low due to their recurrence and because in processing them, they would have used the same mechanism used for comprehending other lexical items. For those who already considered that Bush had not achieved a great deal during his office, the message could have led to the strengthening of an already held assumption. On the other hand, for some undecided voters or for Bush's followers such recurrent structures would have led to different positive cognitive effects such as the contradiction and elimination of a contextual assumption/an already held attitude (Bush actions are good) or to contextual implications.

These examples show once more that in many cases it is very difficult to claim that only one single type of positive cognitive effect is observed; such cases are rare, and appear most of the times in artificial contexts created for the sole purpose of theoretical explanations.

5. Conclusions

Both candidates used recurrent constructions to bring arguments in favour of the way in which they would solve the main issues at stake (Iraq War, Home Land Security, Tax Cut, etc.) and to dismantle their candidate's programme. Since these structures display features of loosening or narrowing, they encode *ad hoc* concepts. Being recently and frequently used, they were highly activated in (part of) the audience's mind, decreasing the processing effort required and increasing the positive cognitive effects achieved. For those voters, the debates

were relevant. The 2004 elections' outcome together with the analysis suggests that both candidates used almost the same means in their attempt to persuade, i.e. to get voters to elect them.

The analysis suggested in Section 4 may explain how, following the second clause of the Presumption of optimal relevance, the candidates used particular lexical items that encoded only those features that would make their answers relevant to (part of) their audience. By narrowing or loosening the 'literal' meaning of several lexical items, new *ad hoc* concepts were built up that served the candidates' argumentative purposes. On the other hand, (part of) the audience might have interpreted the analysed debates as in 4, following a path of least processing effort. The theoretical framework of *ad hoc* concept formation as understood within relevance theory warrants that the audience will follow the path of least processing effort, because in attempting to bridge the gap between sentence meaning and speaker's meaning, the audience would retrieve only those features that satisfy the audience's expectations of relevance, and not the entire encyclopaedic information a concept may encode. There is no need for hearers to retrieve from their memory all features related to, say, the verb *go* in order for them to reach the intended meaning. Moreover, by repeating particular structures, the candidates were certain that the features they had in mind were highly active in the minds of their audience, thus being more accessible and easy to retrieve.

It has to be mentioned that the outcome of any elections depends on several other factors mainly related to the last two steps involved in persuasion: retention of the new attitude and its translation into the expected behaviour (Zimbardo & Leippe 1991: 129, 136, 137). Since attitudes people hold predict behaviour, when conditions (1) to (4) below are met, one may talk about attitudes-behaviour consistency:

[...] (1) the attitude is strong and clear; (2) the attitude is relevant to the behavio[u]r called for by the situation at hand; (3) the attitude and the behavio[u]r have strong links to the same additional component of the attitude system (either cognitions or affective responses), and (4) the attitude is important to the individual (Zimbardo & Leippe 1991: 192).

Investigating how these factors may influence the outcome of elections might bring new insights into the very complicated mechanism of persuasion. Nevertheless, such research has less to do with a linguistic analysis, and should consider a wide range of factors (socio-psychological, political, economic, etc.) specific to each electoral process. The present article has only tried to shed some light on the link between *ad hoc* concept formation and its use in presidential debates.

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