

# ISSA Proceedings 1998 - Criteria For Winning And Losing A Political Debate



## *1. Introduction*

I am concerned about the quality of the public political debate. I am concerned about reducing it to a game, where opposing political parties play their roles, obey the game's rules and confirm the genre.

In this paper the aim is to answer the following questions:

What are the relevant criteria for the analysis of winning and losing a political debate? What are the theoretical and methodological implications of applying a normative argumentation theory (pragma-dialectics) and a descriptive interaction theory (conversation analysis) to the same data?

To give an answer to these questions I have first tried to investigate the general and specific character of the modern political debate and from these I have drawn the relevant evaluation criteria. To justify why these are relevant, I have decided to look at the debate genre in a broad diachronic perspective. By doing this I believe that a set of genre constituting features can be revealed besides a set of more context-sensitive ones. In other words I try to describe the genre in terms of constant and relative/flexible elements. Thereafter, I will argue that a winning and losing enterprise forces the investigator to build a normative framework.

My claim throughout this paper is that there is a close relationship between genre development and the development of evaluation criteria. Consequently I will also claim that while genres change and develop over time, also evaluation criteria will have to change.

## *2. The development of the political debate genre*

Broadly speaking "genre" can be understood as either relative or stable, or as a combination (Ventola 1989). In this perspective I will understand the pragma-dialectical ideal context as a predefined, idealized and stable genre. However, I will argue that a context description has to consider both stable and variable features in order to provide relevant evaluation criteria.

My point is not to give an outline of the ancient roots of the political debate, but rather to point at the fact that electronic debates, and especially televised

debates, represent a shift in debate style from a more discussion-like format to a more quarrelsome one. This shift has implications for what kind of criteria that create the winner and the loser of a public political debate.

My claim is that the debate tradition experiences an important shift with “The Great Debates” between Nixon and Kennedy in the 1960 campaign. At this time the political debate genre as we know it today was in its infancy. Five specific elements of debate can be isolated as it has developed in the American tradition, a debate is:

1. a confrontation,
2. in equal and adequate time,
3. of matched contestants,
4. on a stated proposition,
5. to gain an audience decision (Auer 1962).

My point of departure for the analysis of winning and losing is the genre “political debate”, more precisely “election debate interview by radio”. By asking what is *quality* in this context, I have established a set of evaluation criteria to decide the winner and the loser. While analysing interactional political argumentation my general claim is that both a theory of argumentation and a theory of interaction is required (Sandvik 1997). This claim can be supported by pointing at important features of interactional argumentation like the repetition of arguments, the manipulation of topics, interruptions and competition for the floor, which all are relevant information in the analysis of quality. In order to select a winner and a loser of political debate, this two-sided character of the communicative activity must be considered.

Ideally the debate is an arena for the open discussion of ideas and opinions about the course the nation should take, and apparently the ideal pragma-dialectical context “critical discussion” is a possible candidate. However, the modern electronic debate is far from this ideal, a fact that needs no further elaboration. The political debate aims at persuade a third party, it is conducted in a public sphere, and it is competitive in character (Sandvik 1998). From these descriptions of the debate I have drawn the following four criteria to establish the winner: non-fallacious moves, speech amount, interruptions and topic manipulation. Hence the winner is selected from both argumentative and interactional criteria, and here we are at the normative and descriptive character of this genre description. For the sake of the debate genre, I will suggest that the stable elements of the

genre are related to the quality of the arguments and can be described in terms of a normative theory, while flexible elements yield the interactional process and can be described in terms of a descriptive theory. Debates always entail argumentation, and argument assessment is central to any approach to argumentation. Debating is a verbal activity, and dependent upon contextual arrangement, like degree of formality, the interviewer's role and intention, number of participants and physical organization, it is more or less interactional. Anyhow, a theory of spoken interaction is required.

The argumentative winner is established on the basis of non-fallacious moves, and consequently a normative theory of fallacies is required (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, 1992). The interactional winner is established from *how* the debaters interact and compete, and insight from Conversation Analysis creates the theoretical basis (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974). However, Conversation Analysis, or a more eclectic theory of interaction are descriptive in character, but at the moment this original descriptive theory is exploited to select a winner and a loser, the whole enterprise of establishing a winner is turned into a normative project.

Public debate has developed over time, and the question is whether the criteria for good and bad argumentation and good and bad conduct can be viewed as stable or flexible due to contextual changes. If a normative and even ""epistemic account of argumentation is linked to stability, this can create the stable element of the genre, while flexible elements can be drawn from its changes. My project is to search for 1) something stable from which good and bad argumentation is evaluated, and this "stability" can be epistemologically based, and 2) to search for context-sensitive and thereby flexible elements which vary over time, and this "flexibility" is interactionally based.

### *3. Winning and losing a debate*

Winning a debate and winning any other organized competitive activity share some important common characteristics. Dependent upon the game you are playing, some specific winning-qualities are implied and drawn from premises inherent in the game. But winning a game is not always equivalent to a positive conception of quality. "Quality" is generally a positive term, and a debate, a film and a student text may be described in lines of "quality", but a winner of a verbal or a literal duel may not necessarily possess positive qualities, but both of them display "qualities" which enable them to kill the opponent. So, "winning" must be described in relation to a specific activity, and may involve negative behaviour

and characteristics. Winning a modern political debate, then, rests upon a set of winning-qualities or winning criteria which have their basis in a normative fundament and may be perceived as negative. As mentioned above non-fallacious moves, speech amount, interruptions and topic manipulation establish the winner. These will now be further commented.

*Non-fallacious moves:* The pragma-dialectical argumentation theory is fundamented in a theory of rationality and regards fallacies as violations of one of the ten rules for a critical discussion (van Eemeren 1986, 1987:202, van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984:18). This point of departure has one important implication: unlike other approaches to fallacies, it can provide a set of norms that applies to all the recognized fallacies, and it does not give each individual fallacy a specific theoretical framework, as is the case in particular logical approaches[i]. Nor does it regard only the formal fallacies as interesting and worth treatment within a theory of fallacies[ii], but also regards informal fallacies as equally important, since they occur in natural language use. By regarding fallacies as violations of the discussion rules, pragma-dialectics links the fallacious moves to the speech acts that, in every stage of the critical discussion, contribute to the resolution of a dispute. Therefore the pragma-dialectical concept of fallacies is not related to one norm, as a logical approach is with validity/invalidity as the only norm, but relates to ten norms, the ten rules of a critical discussion. This implies that there are different criteria involved for deciding whether a move is fallacious or not.[iii]

As underlined above the modern electronic debate represents a shift in the public debate style. The new debate format opens for quick and entertaining exchange of moves, and the interviewer and administrator of the floor introduces confrontational topics and cuts the debaters off in order to heat the debate atmosphere. My point is that the debaters are framed to act according to this standard, and this creates the basis for the interactional criteria, which I now will continue to justify.

*Speech amount:* It is a frequently held opinion that there is a close relationship between dominance and control over the floor: To be dominant in a dialogue is to control a major part of the territory which is to be shared by the parties, i.e. the interactional space, the discourse ratified and jointly attended to by the actors (what is normally called the 'floor'). (Adelswärd et al. 1987: 314)

Speech amount in a situation of competition is a means which can tell us something about who is the most dominant politician. In other settings where the turns, topics and amount of time is pre-allocated, this is not a relevant area of

investigations. But it would be wrong automatically to assume that the party with the highest amount of speech is dominant or that she has won the debate, although the winner is partly defined in terms of getting and holding the floor. There is no automatic correlation between speech amount and dominance. Some people can be highly dominant without uttering more than a few pivotal remarks. With this in mind, my point of departure is nevertheless that the party with the highest amount of speech – in this particular situation of an election radio debate interview – will be regarded as dominant and successful in getting the floor and holding it.

Speech amount is a purely quantitative value and can be measured in different ways. Amount of time is one way, but not reliable, since the speaker's speed will influence how much talk produced. I have therefore chosen to count the words produced, something which is in line with most of the research done within spoken language[iv]. Thereafter a comparison between the two politicians is undertaken, on the basis that the situational context is symmetric.

*Interruptions:* As mentioned above the communicative activity “election radio debate interview” represents a highly competitive speech situation. In political debates there are reasons for doubting that the interactants willingly leave the floor and select the co-debater as the next speaker unless they have made a strategic move, to which response they look forward to. In interactional political argumentation self selection and speaker continuation is more likely to be the turn allocational principle at work. In political debates and debate interviews where the chairman or the interviewer plays a withdrawn role, simultaneous speech is very common and in most cases represents attempts at taking the floor from the other party.

In a competitive, conflictual and disagreement-oriented context like the election radio debate interview, the parties compete for the floor and try to *take* it from the other party. In my opinion, this fundamental characteristic qualifies for regarding interruptions as an adequate reflexive means to further one's own political message, and consequently successful interruptions are a plausible indicator of “winning-behaviour”. If successful interruptions display interactional strength and “winning potential”, it is necessary to make a distinction between successful and unsuccessful interruptions, on the basis of speaker shift or not (James and Clarke 1993:245)[v]. In this work I will separate unsuccessful attempts at taking over the floor (by some investigators called ‘simultaneous speech’) from interruptions – which are successful moves, and relate them to

“winning and losing”.

The view on speech organization, overlapping speech and interruptions has met strong criticism from contemporary investigators of conversation (Edelsky 1981, Beattie 1989, Tannen 1983, McLaughlin 1985, Coates 1986, Goldberg 1990, Talbot 1992, and James and Clarke 1993, among others). The criticism concerns a perspective on conversation as smoothly organized with one speaker talking at a time and with syntactically and objectively defined transition places for turn allocation, and the fact that overlapping speech, and interruptions, are seen as disturbances and clearly disruptive in nature. Opposed to this, recent investigations have shown the multifunctional nature of interruptions, or simultaneous talk, pointing out that they can fulfill highly positive socioemotional functions unrelated to dominance. A more nuanced understanding of interruptions with a more consistent methodology is called for and has already been initiated. Common for this new trend is the perspective that conversation is mutually negotiated, and that broad contextual information has to be included in the interpretation of simultaneous talk, often with an analysis of the actual speech event as the starting point. As Tannen says: [...] in order to understand this pattern, it is necessary to ask what the speakers are *doing* when they talk over other speakers (1996:232).

So then, what is clear is that the analyst cannot automatically start from the simultaneous speech marked in the transcript, and thereafter be satisfied with distinguishing interruptions from overlaps on the basis of syntactic criteria alone[vi]. Rather he has to regard both functional and sequential criteria to decide whether an instance of overlapping speech can be said to represent interruptions. Consequently, every instance of simultaneous talk is regarded both in its local discursive context and from the broader context, including type of speech event and the speakers' aim. Thereafter two types of winning and losing the floor are described: winning and losing by interruptions, and winning and losing as the result of talk starting at the same point. Interruptions in this context are related to competition and dominance, and are violative and power-oriented in character, and occur during the talk of the other speaker(s), and therefore all kinds of simultaneous speech representing backchanneling signals are excluded, including those representing involvement and rapport, often found in female conversational style (Tannen 1983)[vii]. The sequential criteria then, are related to *where* in the local context the overlapping speech occurs, at a possible transition point or not. This creates the basis for successful interruptions, so-

called “winning-interruptions” and unsuccessful interruptions, so-called “losing-interruptions”, which are not interruptions at all – only attempts not leading to speaker shift. Winning and losing the next turn, as a result of simultaneous talk starting at the same point, can be seen if the foregoing turn is terminated and the speech has thus reached a transition point, and the speakers start at the same point with the result that one of them takes over the floor, and is thus regarded as the winner because the others stop talking. My data reveal several instances where the speakers (also including the interviewer) start at the same point, and compete for the floor for some time, resulting in a winner and one or two losers. And we should bear in mind that only interruptions representing competition for the floor are registered.

*Topic manipulation:* In interactional competitive discourse topic manipulation plays a crucial role. Generally speaking, controlling the topic, either by introducing, shifting, reintroducing, or setting the perspective of the current topic, is an activity neatly interrelated to the status, power and interactional skills of the interactants involved. In debate interviews the interviewer has the institutionalized right to introduce new topics and to change old ones. Still, the politicians are clever at introducing their “own” topics. In the election debate interview object to this study, the politicians are more or less equal in status and strength, so they fight to control the floor – and the topic development – on equal terms. An analysis of topic and topic change provide the analyst with information in his investigation of floor management. The politician who is best at manipulating the topic development, will be considered the winner, since this skill is seen as an important part of election media competence. In addition, it has implications on another dimension of this competence, namely speech amount, which is the effect of having got your topic on the agenda.

Deborah Tannen stresses that topic control and development is a joint product; therefore the analyst always has to ask what else could have happened (1987:8). This analytical procedure is meant to prevent the impression that the discourse, as it shows itself from the transcripts, should be interpreted as fixed and one-way-governed, and not negotiated in co-operation. Controlling the topic is closely interwoven with controlling the interaction. It is important to be aware of the fact that the introduction of a topic has to be seen in relation to the attention given to it. The one who raises the topic is not automatically in possession of power; the fact that the topic has to be responded to in one way or another, reflects its co-operative character. In this perspective the attention-giver can also be seen to

display power, i.e. by asking several questions concerning the topic, by merely commenting upon it and thus giving attention to its importance – or by ignoring it totally.

The crucial questions are: What is a *topic*? How can it be identified and limited? We can all intuitively tell what a conversation is about, and that the conversation sequentially can be separated into different topics, and in this activity we draw upon both referential, sequential, contextual and formal insight. Still, the definition of topic represents an immense difficulty. This can be explained by the fact that topic is a context-unit, not a formal one. In order to gain the status as a topic, it is dependent upon an interpreting individual and a context. As Bublitz has underlined, topic is not an inherent quality or unit of the discourse, and consequently it cannot be given an objective and formalized definition, rather topic has to be interpreted, comprehended and ascribed to the discourse (Bublitz 1988:18, 26). Topic is negotiated, and so is the meaning. Therefore, the fact that topic is part of a social situation to which the interactionalists contribute, has to be realized and thereby become part of the analysis.

The pragma-dialectical approach gives no satisfactory account of topic. Although van Eemeren and Grootendorst talk about “the propositional content” in their publications, they do not define the concept of ‘topic’ or ‘content’. Still, there is evidence in their literature for choosing a propositional approach to topic, instead of a sequential one, which is the tradition in Conversation Analysis and ethnomethodology.

Topics develop and change throughout a conversation, and may shift both abruptly and gradually. Topic change are ideally brought about by the interviewer, so his turns should involve topical shifts. This is a conventional feature of the interview, – and a general characteristics of human behaviour:

Activity framed in a particular way – especially collectively organized social activity – is often marked off from the ongoing flow of surrounding events by a special set of boundary markers or brackets of conventionalized kind (Goffman 1974: 251).

But as Button and Casey have pointed out “topics flow from one to another, and this means that a distinct beginning of a topic may not be readily apparent” (1985: 3). Nevertheless, I will make an attempt to define where a topic starts and where it ends, and the procedure applied is both formal, referential and sequential. The questions asked as the interaction proceeds are: What are they talking about now? *How* did they come to talk about it here? What are the



political reasons for *why* they are talking about it, and *why* are they talking about it *here*?

I will suggest a concept of topic that satisfies my immediate need to

1. decide the topics at stake in the debate and classifying them,
2. decide whether one of the politicians shifts the current topic or the perspective on the current topic, and
3. decide who is in charge of election media competence by being skilled in topic manipulation.

My point of departure is a concept of topic which focusses on topic shifts and topic boundaries (Maynard 1980, Brown and Yule 1983:95, Crow 1983:137, 155, Button and Casey 1984, 1985, 1988, McLaughlin 1984:57-59, Adelswärd 1988:44, 53-60, Fredin 1993: 117-127, Jefferson 1993 and Marttala 1995). The reason for this is mainly that a concept of topic that rests upon shifts is easier to operationalise than finding a plain definition and thereafter a suitable analytical unit. This assertion can be empirically supported by Planalp and Tracy's experiment showing that interactants can segment a conversation into topical shifts (1980).

Three criteria are applied in the analysis of topical shifts: formal markers, referential markers, and sequential markers. *Formal markers* are metastatements and appeals to the interviewer. *Referential markers* are drawn from the discursive coherence and cohesion. Finally, *sequential markers* are taken from the conversational activities performed by the interactants.

Topics in politics can be divided into preferred and dispreferred on the basis of contextual information. Background knowledge from the current political situation together with general knowledge about party political differences provide the analyst with contextual information sufficient to divide the topics into preferred and dispreferred[viii]. No topics are labelled neutral, since political parties are expected to take a position to nearly any topic, and topics of no immediate electoral interest are hardly introduced in an election debate. The speakers have a strong desire to debate *preferred topics*, since they enable politicians to create positive pictures of themselves, and consequently these topics are evaded by the antagonist. The speaker tries to avoid *dispreferred topics* whilst the antagonist tries to introduce them. The protagonist succeeds if he is able to bring about preferred topics, but he fails – or the antagonist has succeeded – if a dispreferred topic is introduced. In my opinion, these

mechanisms are inherent in political argumentation and create the basis for claiming that topics “belong” to someone, because of the politicians’ knowledge about the opponent’s weak points and their opportunities to parade their own qualities. As mentioned before, an analysis of topic and topic-manipulation creates the basis for deciding the winner and the loser, in other words the one who has *succeeded* in getting her topic debated by introducing topics which display either preference for themselves or dispreference for the other party.

To sum up, the analysis of winning and losing in the topic analysis draws upon a predefined distinction of preferred and dispreferred topics. Preferred and dispreferred topics are listed against a background of contextual information, more precisely the analyst’s knowledge of the current political situation. Preferred and dispreferred topics are also arrived at by studying the ongoing interaction; how the politicians eagerly seem to introduce or avoid a topic or a perspective.

#### *4. Conclusion*

In this paper I have claimed that non-fallacious arguments, speech amount, interruptions and topic manipulation are relevant criteria for establishing the winner of a political debate. These four criteria have their basis in a normative theory of argumentation and a descriptive theory of spoken language. In spite of conflicting theoretical orientation, I have argued that the selection of a winner and a loser of a political debate, intrinsically is a normative project.

Political debate has also been investigated from a genre theoretical perspective, and I will suggest a description of genre which involves both stable and flexible elements. The stable elements of the debate is first and foremost grounded in a normative and rational, and perhaps even epistemic account of argumentation. The flexible elements are due to shifting circumstances in the way argumentation is processed, and consequently a descriptive approach is best suited to account for the interactional changes in the debate genre.

#### NOTES

**i.** Woods and Walton, with their background in both formal and informal logic, have impressively set out to give all the fallacies their own logical treatment, without excluding the so-called informal fallacies, and without forgetting that fallacies occur in a natural dialogue situation. See Woods and Walton (1982a), (1989), Walton (1987b), (1989a), (1992a, b, c) and Woods and Hudak (1991). The drawbacks of such an approach are mainly of practical and applicable kind,

according to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992:103).

**ii.** See Copi and Cohen (1990:103).

**iii.** See Biro and Siegel (1992:90) for a detailed criticism of the pragma-dialectical concept of normativity. They argue that rationality is the norm argumentation has to be measured against and also the norm fallacies has to be seen against. According to them discussion rules are not relevant.

**iv.** Adelswärd (1988: 117) points out that speech amount, or to say that people speak a lot, can mean different things: that the utterances/the turns are long, that the proportion of the total interactional space is large, and that the talk is pragmatically insignificant in relation to what is relevant.

**v.** In the competitive context of an election radio debate interview subject to analysis, there is no link between successful interruptions and dominance, a relation much investigated and cited in the literature, see James and Clarke for further references (1993:246).

**vi.** Following James and Clarke (1993:237) I will use the term 'interruption' also without simultaneous speech actually occurring, for example immediately after the completion of the uttering of a word while still being in midturn.

**vii.** From the analyses I will also exclude the type of simultaneous utterance commonly referred to as back channel responses (Yngve 1970) consisting of one-word utterances like 'yes', 'aha', 'mm'. Further, the term 'mistiming error' is disregarded on the background that it rests upon a smooth and well-defined speaker organization, perhaps not existing in very many contexts.

**viii.** In the study of competitive political argumentation I consider 'face-work' to be of minor relevance. Therefore aspects of 'face' are not considered while defining preferred and dispreferred topics (Goffman 1967).

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