

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Nonverbal Communication As Argumentation



Do politicians argue with their bodies? Argumentation deals with attitudes and opinions proposed through claim and ground. It thus appears impossible for a person's nonverbal communication to make arguments. Neither body nor voice - it seems - can create the verbal two-part structure of an argument. However, if such nonverbal communication can work as a stimulus evoking a receiver's cognitively generated argument, then also non-verbal communication may function as rhetorical argumentation.

In this article we explore the nonverbal argumentative communication of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in the 2008 televised primary debates for the Democratic Party. Our aim is neither to describe the communication styles of the two contenders, nor to make generalizations about the nonverbal communication they employ in the debates. Instead we primarily use the analysed instances to exemplify that nonverbal communication can have argumentative functions, and to illustrate how such communication works. More specifically, we examine how nonverbal communication performs argumentative functions in acclaiming and defending the debater's own ethos and in attacking the opponent's ethos.

## *1. Our Theoretical and Methodological Starting Points*

In our view, argumentation can occur in a host of different forms of expression, including speech, pictures and nonverbal behaviour. With Wayne Brockreide, we believe that arguments are found "not in statements, but in people" (Brockreide 1992). Further, we subscribe to a contextual and cognitive view of argumentation (Hampe 1980, 1992, Kjeldsen 2007), where the message - for instance the nonverbal behaviour - performs as "a stimulus for the receiver's (cognitively generated) argument" (Hampe 1992, p. 93; cf. Gronbeck 1995). We consider argumentation as communicative action, which is performed, evoked, and must be understood, in a rhetorical context of opposition (Kjeldsen 2007, 2011).

Of course, there is no denying that the semiotic mode of verbal communication

allows for more precise and elaborate forms of argumentation than pictures or nonverbal communication. However, we will try to show that this does not prevent nonverbal communication from performing certain types of argumentative acts.

Nonverbal communication concerns facial expressions, hand gestures, movements, postures and the use of voice. When rhetorically performed in public speaking we refer to these nonverbal means as *actio*. *Actio* differs from nonverbal communication in general in that *actio* is performed in a rhetorical situation with the intention to be persuasive.

In order to capture the argumentative workings and functions of the nonverbal communication, we apply a rhetorical, interpretative analysis of four examples from the debates in the 2008 democratic primaries. We have chosen to focus on the interactions between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, because they generally exhibit two dissimilar debating styles, and because their rhetorical exchanges provided a rich source of illustrative material for the exemplification of nonverbal argumentation.

Our interpretation and analysis of the empirical data is grounded in a rhetorical and hermeneutic view (cf. Richards 1956, Foss 1991, Palmer 1977, Ödman, 2005). The interpretive process takes place not only between the part and the whole, but also between object and context and between preconception and understanding of the phenomenon. In this way the interpretations are confirmed by congruence within the material and through comparison with other relevant research.

In order to interpret *actio* it is important to gain an understanding of the context within which it is performed because the recipients in a rhetorical situation normally interpret a speaker's *actio* in accordance with the constraints within the situation. Constraints are one of three aspects which Lloyd F. Bitzer used in the 1960s to define a rhetorical situation. Bitzer's constraints, which are somewhat similar to Bourdieu's concept of *doxa*, refer among other things to the preconceptions and expectations that are present in any given situation (Bitzer 1968, Bourdieu 1990). For instance, one can assume that the preconceptions and expectations regarding *actio* during a private conversation are different to those in a public debate among politicians. Hence, what is considered credible and valuable *actio* can differ in various rhetorical situations. For instance, the expressive *actio* of the orators on the rostrum in ancient Greece and Rome would

not be equally persuasive in the television debates of today. In this way, *actio* is a historically, socially, and culturally situated activity.

Our perspective differs from nonverbal communication research where it is not uncommon to carry out quantitative studies, not least within voice research (Scherer 2010, Martin 2010). We also depart from the kind of contemporary rhetorical research about *actio* which has as its main aim to find correlations between certain expressions performed by a speaker and the effects this creates among the audience (Mehrabian 1972, Burgoon *et al.* 1990, to some extent also Jørgensen *et al.* 1994, 1998).

Our study differs in two ways from such studies, and other common nonverbal types of research (e.g. Kendon 2004, Streeck 1993). Firstly, using a multimodal approach we examine how different human modalities – such as gestures, facial expression, and nuances in voice – interact and work simultaneously. Secondly, we are not only interested in *what* a speaker does (for instance nodding her head), but also – and in particular – *how* she is doing it (nodding eagerly or hesitantly).

The importance of the first approach, the multimodal approach, is confirmed in previous research on *actio*, which found that the recipients of a message in a rhetorical situation create their perception of the speaker through a holistic perspective. In other words: An audience evaluates an orator or speaker based on how they perceive the different modalities of *actio* interact simultaneously (Gelang 2008, about multimodality see also; Mondada and Lindström 2009). For instance, when an audience was asked to explain why they felt the speaker was committed, they usually commented on several different modalities such as eye contact, gestures, postures, voice management, and how these interacted. For example, feeble or a lack of gestures could be offset by a pleasant voice, and poor eye contact could be compensated for by vibrant and energetic gestures when the recipients described a speaker's committed *actio* (Gelang 2008).

In the same way, we believe that knowledge about rhetoric and argumentation in television debates cannot be acquired by looking at the different modalities of nonverbal communication separately, examining them one by one. The communicative – and argumentative – action is created in the way these modalities interact and function together. This even includes the words accompanying the bodily actions. So, even though our main focus in this article is

the multimodality of nonverbal communication, our interpretations are also based on the words that follow.

The second approach, examining *how* a gesture is performed, we refer to as studying *actio qualities*. The actio qualities are the aspects of actio that create the nuances, and make actio appear with variation (Gelang 2008). The *way* a gesture is performed is at least as important for its rhetorical impact and argumentative dimensions as the gesture chosen. What we call actio qualities is in many ways similar to the concepts *paralinguistics* and *paracommunication*. Paralinguistics (Argyle 1988) describes different qualities in relation to the voice, for example variations of tone, while paracommunication describes qualities in relation to bodily communication, for example how energetically a gesture is carried out (Schefflen 1973, Birdwhistell 1970). Similar aspects are also noted within artistic research, for instance in relation to a dancer's movements or an actor's on-stage actions (Laban 1974, Sjöström 2007).

Although these qualities are often mentioned in research on nonverbal communication they are seldom the main topic. Some studies from the early 1970s have given attention to these qualitative aspects of actio, especially regarding the voice. Mehrabian (1972), for instance, showed that a credible and/or convincing speaker conveys a sense of power, energy, activity, and vitality. More recent research has employed concepts such as openness, firmness, precision, relaxation, and energy to describe a successful speaker (Jørgensen *et al.* 1994, Babad *et al.* 2004).

In judging the *how* of actio, we distinguish between the three actio qualities energy, dynamism and tempo/rhythm (Gelang 2008). Some research points to energy as a particularly important factor in nonverbal communication (Mehrabian 1972, McCroskey 2001, Babad *et al.* 2004). One study of 37 television debates concludes that the speakers who were considered to be winning the debates were characterized by modulated voice, energetic articulation, intense gaze, energetic posture, eager gesticulations and firm, directive gestures in comparison with their opponents and in relation to the rhetorical situation (Jørgensen *et al.* 1994, 1998).

*Energy* concerns flow, intensity and focus. Flow refers to the energy, constant or variable, that exists in the succession of expressions that the speaker produces in a public appearance. Intensity refers to the degree of energy in a particular

modality or in the multimodal expression. Focus refers to the way in which energy is concentrated on the most meaningful modalities. The second actio quality is *dynamism*, which concerns variations. Dynamism is a quality that is related to the variations in actio. The dynamic variations usually occur with the help of other qualities such as energy, rhythm and/or the magnitude of the expressions. The third actio quality, *tempo and rhythm*, concerns flow, speed and timing. Tempo refers to the basic rate that pervades the entire performance, while rhythm refers to the variations of pace that can occur by means of changes in one or more modalities. Timing concerns the right actio at the right time.

Naturally the actio qualities occur most often in parallel, and it can be about energy and dynamism at the same time. So, in our analysis we have focused on actio as a multimodal activity and the actio qualities as defined above. We believe that it is the degree, strength, and intensity of the actio qualities, working simultaneously and jointly with the number and modes used, that are of importance in the rhetorical situation.

## *2. Nonverbal Communication as Symptomatic Argumentation*

A wide range of studies suggest that nonverbal communication affects the audience in their liking or disliking of different debaters or leaders (Sullivan & Masters 1988, Atkinson 1988, Bucy 2000, 2003, Bucy & Bradley 2004, Jørgensen *et al.* 1998). One general finding in such research is that non-speaking debaters expressing nonverbal disbelief or disagreement when their opponent is talking, are perceived as deceptive, less likable and less credible, when compared to debaters not exhibiting such background behaviour (Seiter 2001, Seiter *et al.* 2009, Seiter *et al.* 2006). We suggest that such evaluation of speakers and debaters contains argumentative dimensions.

In order for any discourse to be argumentative it must address some sort of difference of opinion (cf. van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Snoeck Henkemans 2002, p. 3 ff., van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992). The television debate is a genre that can be described as an institutionalized difference of opinion. It is a constitutive trait in presidential debates – as well as other kinds of debates – that the candidates will argue for their own view and against the view of the opponent, while simultaneously trying to weaken the opponent's ethos and strengthening their own.

As functional theory proposes, political debaters may *acclaim* (praise, boast of,

tout) their character and policy. They may attack (criticize, condemn) their opponent's character or policy, and they may *defend* those accusations (Benoit & Wells 1996, Benoit, Pier & Blaney 1997, Benoit & Harthcock 1999, Benoit & Brazeal 2002).

The audience will interpret both the verbal and the nonverbal discourse of the candidates according to these generic conventions. Thus, nonverbal communication can be taken as signs for spoken or unspoken premises and propositions about the candidates' or the opponents' character or policy. This can be executed through singular acts (such as shaking the head) *and* through the amount of energy put into their nonverbal communication (such as shaking vigorously). When a candidate exhibits an active, energetic actio it may be taken as an argumentative act of *acclaiming*, *attacking* or *defending*. In all three instances, nonverbal communication is used as ground for propositions claiming the praiseworthy ethos of the candidate, the blameworthy ethos of the opponent, or the injustice of the attacks directed at the candidate. We refer to such active manifestations as *enacted actio*, because the candidate appears to enact an inner mental state, an emotion or opinion.

Enacted actio can function as a symptomatic argument scheme (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Snoeck Henkemans 2002, p. 96ff., Garssen 2001, p. 91ff). In an argument scheme based on a symptomatic relation "a standpoint is defended by citing in the argument a certain sign, symptom or distinguishing mark of what is claimed in the standpoint. On the grounds of this concomitance, the speaker claims the standpoint should be accepted" (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Snoeck Henkemans 2002, p. 97). The general symptomatic argument scheme may be expressed like this:

Y is true of X,  
*because* Z is true of X,  
*and* Z is symptomatic of Y.

Nonverbal communication can function as such symptomatic arguments. For instance:

Politician A is an involved and passionate person,  
*because* He exhibits energetic nonverbal communication,  
*and* Energetic nonverbal communication is a sign of an involved and passionate

person.

Performing the nonverbal argument that you are involved and passionate is important for establishing the character (*arete*) and goodwill (*eunoia*) of the speaker. By the same token, fluent speech may also function as an implied argument about the competence (*phronesis*) of the speaker. Needless to say, such assessments are always culture specific.

If an orator or a debater uses a nonverbal style of communication that is more expressive and unrestrained compared to what people normally experience in speeches or television debates, he risks appearing exaggerated and out of control (cf. Jørgensen *et al.* 1994, Streeck 2008). The now famous “Dean Scream” is an example of this: During the US 2004 primaries, Howard Dean (D) spoke at a rally in Iowa, finishing a section of the speech with a screaming “Yeah!!”, supported by huge swing of his arm. This outburst caused the speech - and hence Howard Dean - to be framed as loud, peculiar, and un-presidential. Senator Dean was widely ridiculed, and the “Yeah!” was widely distributed on the web (cf. Warnick 2007: 11)[**i**]. Such behaviour may be read by the audience as an argument suggesting that a candidate is not fit to be president. It is likely that fear of this kind of gaffe leads to a restrained *actio*.

Moderate physical movement can in some circumstances be taken as a premise for the claim that a person is suitable as president; because it signals that the speaker is in control, where other people would be steered by their emotions. We refer to this kind of moderate movement, exhibiting a limited degree of expressiveness, as *restrained actio*. Like the enacted *actio*, restrained *actio* may work argumentatively on the basis of a symptomatic argument scheme.

Because a debater in a presidential debate rhetorically must appear to be in control, as well as both involved and passionate, she must display both enacted and restrained *actio*, and try to balance these.

### *3. Actio Analyses of the Debates*

We will now present a rhetorical *actio* analysis of four film clips from three different debates. The clips show Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton in their contest for the 2008 American Democratic presidential nomination. All of the film clips can be found on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), references to the links can be found in our endnotes.

We have performed an interpretative, multimodal close reading (cf. Leff 1980) of the clips, directed by our understanding of nonverbal multimodality, the *actio* qualities, and the television debate as a rhetorical situation. More specifically we have studied how the nonverbal communication of the participants may evoke argument schemes in acclaiming and defending a debaters' own ethos and in attacking the opponents' ethos.

Let us first give an example of how the debaters *acclaim* their ethos through nonverbal communication. In a sequence from a debate in Ohio on 26 February 2008[**ii**], one can see how Hillary Clinton is acclaiming her ethos through her nonverbal communication. Clinton is answering a question about her view on public health care. She comments briefly on this and goes on to explain what she would like to do if she is elected president.

Clinton has an open face with raised eyebrows and a moderate smile, leaning slightly forward while constantly keeping eye contact with the audience. Her use of voice is steady, clear and determined. She is speaking and making gestures with an energy that sets a rapid tempo to her performance and supports her ethos. The qualities in *actio*, energy and tempo, together with a multimodal activity, face, posture, gesture and voice in simultaneous use, create a dynamic *actio* that indicates resoluteness and determination. Clinton hereby performs an enacted *actio* that works as a symptomatic sign - a premise - supporting the claim that she is a committed and passionate person.

Compared to Clinton's energetic, enacted *actio*, Obama's nonverbal communication is often more restrained. He does not express as much energy and emotion in his gestures and facial expression, thus safeguarding him against "Howard Dean-like Yeah-gaffes". At the same time, such calm and self-controlled *actio* risks presenting the candidate as reserved and aloof.

However, Obama often exhibits energy and trustworthiness through his deep, pleasant, and commanding voice. His speech has variation in melody and an almost perfect sense of tempo, with excellent timing expressed by pauses and well-placed emphasis.

In a debate in Texas on 21 February 2008[**iii**], Obama is explaining how he will handle the economy. He performs less facial expression, more restrained gestures, and less body movement than that which can be seen in the Clinton example above. Obama expresses most of his nonverbal energy through the dynamic and varied use of his voice and a few distinct gestures performed with



his left hand.

Compared to Clinton, Obama here exhibits less bodily energy and thus appears a little less committed and passionate. Nevertheless, this kind of restrained impression management may be taken as a symptomatic sign of a person in control, and consequently of a person fit to be president. This is not to say that restrained or enacted actio will predict a person's ability to become a president; there are many skills that are necessary to become a political leader of a country, with debating being just one of them.

A debater can also use nonverbal communication both to *attack* the opponent's ethos and *defend* her own, as the following examples will illustrate. In debates, the nonverbal defending and attacking will often be performed simultaneously. We can see this in a debate in South Carolina on 21 January 2008[iv]. In this sequence of the debate Hillary Clinton is defending her claim that Obama has not been clear about his view on the war in Iraq, while at the same time attacking Obama's ethos.

Compared to the previous Clinton example, the tempo of her movements and speaking here is much slower, and she takes longer and more frequent pauses. In the first example, her eagerness indicated commitment and passion. In this example, she still exhibits energy, through firm, directive gestures and focused eye contact, but the more restrained, focused and insisting actio is a nonverbal signal telling the audience that Clinton takes the criticism very seriously. Here, Clinton's actio both helps communicate her argument in a clear way, and functions as a symptomatic premise for the claim that she is a sincere and conscientious candidate who is taking the issue very seriously.

During Clinton's presentation, Obama is seen lifting his finger, signalling that he would like to comment on Clinton's allegations that he "agreed with President Bush", thereby implying that she is wrong. By means of this hand gesture, Obama is attacking Clinton's ethos, signalling that she is proposing some issue that he must be allowed to address.

In the same debate in South Carolina on 21 January[v], Obama criticizes Clinton and her husband, stating that they incorrectly claim that Obama praises the Republicans, while they are actually the ones praising Reagan and the GOP. During his attack, Clinton stands motionless, looking at Obama with an expressionless face, avoiding any nonverbal admission. However, when Obama

involves her husband and accuses them of playing “political games”, she exclaims, “Now wait a minute, wow, wait a minute!” She lifts her hand, with the palm facing Obama as if to stop his unreasonable words. When he continues nonetheless, she takes a step towards him invading his ‘territory’ in order to better contain his attack. Clinton’s nonverbal reaction, we suggest, presents an implicit argument about Obama’s ethos, which can be rendered like this:

Obama’s behaviour is unreasonable,  
*because* I react strongly to his behaviour,  
*and* when behaviour is unreasonable, people react strongly.

This argument is created both verbally and nonverbally. The nonverbal enacting of the argument is done through a specific gesture (the stopping palm) and a specific movement (stepping forward) - the *what* of nonverbal communication. But it is also, perhaps particularly, enacted through the use of actio qualities - the *how* of nonverbal communication. The change of tempo in her performance creates a suddenness in the actio, the use of intense energy and focused gaze together with a varied consequently dynamic and forceful response creates Clinton’s nonverbal argument, and makes it believable.

Because the nonverbal acts must be understood in the rhetorical situation in which they are performed, there are no external, scientific units of measurement for determining the energy, dynamism and tempo that establishes the premise “I react strongly to his behaviour”. It is also not possible to determine singular gestures or movements as premises or arguments in themselves. The rhetorical action of the stopping palm, for instance, does not create an argument in itself. This gesture is ascribed argumentative meaning through its joint interaction with the words “wow, wait a minute”, the verbal assurance that she has not praised Ronald Reagan, and all the other accompanying nonverbal action.

To summarise, in order to fully understand the argumentative dimensions of political television debates, it is not enough to analyse transcriptions of the verbal communication. We also have to examine the multimodality of nonverbal communication, and we should not only look at *what* debaters do nonverbally, but in particular at *how* they do it with the help of actio qualities.

When doing so in the examples we have analysed here, two main nonverbal rhetorical argumentative strategies emerge: enacted actio and restrained actio. A restrained actio refers to active manifestations, while an enacted actio refers to

moderate movement, exhibiting a limited degree of expressiveness. These two strategies of basic nonverbal communication may take many forms, of course, but they can all be interpreted as premises in variations of a symptomatic argumentation scheme, signalling a political debater's ethos. As described above, such nonverbal communication can be used by debaters to acclaim and to defend their own ethos and/or to attack the ethos of the opponent.

In accordance with our multimodal and interpretative approach we have examined arguments that are evoked by rhetorical situation, words and nonverbal communication in joint collaboration. Our examples illustrate how nonverbal communication can evoke ethos argumentation that is relatively independent of the words spoken. The way a presidential debater conducts himself or herself through enacted or restrained actio, will affect the audience perception of the debater's general character, and thus offer an argument for or against the person's ability to be president. Of course, the more the bodily actions and the words uttered are in accordance and harmony with each other, the more clearly an argument will appear.

Our examples, perhaps especially the last one, also illustrate how nonverbal communication may support and co-create arguments concerning specific contested issues in the debate. In this case arguments that are also (partly) verbally expressed.

We have examined some argumentative dimensions of nonverbal communication in a specific genre and culture: the televised presidential primary debates in the US. We have argued that because of the immanent context of opposition in this rhetorical situation, nonverbal communication can have argumentative dimensions and communicate arguments both about ethos and about specific issues of controversy. In other similar contexts of opposition, we may expect to find similar possibilities of nonverbal argumentation.

#### NOTES

**[i]** Cf. Wikipedias article on Howard Dean  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard\\_Dean](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Dean)

**[ii]** See: "Huge mistake" 5.09-5.45:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JAJ-f4mtMc>

**[iii]** See: "Silly Season" 1.55-2.14:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vO1QjTRaEU>

**[iv]** See: "Tension Flare" 2.34-3.40

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD9F1t9GQzA>

[v] See: "Tension Flare" 5.25-5.38

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD9F1t9GQzA>

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