Presidential Debate as an Agonal Genre in Modern Political Discourse

Darya Y. Mezhenina[1], Irina N. Kabanova[2]

[1, 2] Nizhny Novgorod State Linguistics University, Nizhny Novgorod, Russia

[1] mezhenina.darya@yandex.ru

[2] kabanova@lunn.ru

Abstract: The article is devoted to the study of Presidential debate as an agonal genre of modern political discourse. Modern political debate is a special form of interaction of political subjects, in which the tendency of agonality is clearly revealed. Under the influence of agonality, various communication strategies and tactics are formed in political discourse. In this article the analysis of the election debate between D. Trump and J. Biden is given, the specifics of communicative behavior of the participants in particular.

Keywords: political debate, political discourse, agonality, competition, communication strategy, communication tactic.

Предвыборные дебаты как агональный жанр современного политического дискурса

Дарья Юрьевна Меженина[1], Ирина Николаевна Кабанова[2]

[1, 2] Нижегородский Государственный Лингвистический Университет им. Н.А. Добролюбова, Нижний Новгород, Россия

[1] mezhenina.darya@yandex.ru

[2] kabanova@lunn.ru

Аннотация. Статья посвящена исследованию политических дебатов как отдельного агонального жанра современного политического дискурса.

Современные политические дебаты – это особая форма взаимодействия субъектов политики, в которой отчетливо обнаруживается тенденция агональности. Под воздействием агональности в политическом дискурсе формируются различные стратегии и тактики. В данной статье представлен анализ предвыборных дебатов Трампа и Байдена 2020 года, а именно специфики коммуникативного поведения участников.

Ключевые слова: политические дебаты, политический дискурс, агональность, коммуникативная стратегия, коммуникативная тактика.

Despite the fact that a huge number of works are devoted to the study of agonality as a cultural phenomenon, linguistics lacks its consistent and clear definition. Most often, agonality is implicitly understood as a synonym for competitiveness, confrontation, fight, conflict.

For the first time, the concept of agonality was formulated by J. Burckhardt, who used it to denote universal competition, as a most profound and essential feature of Greek culture [2, p. 6].

This cultural phenomenon permeates almost every section of human activity. In business communication agonality is interpreted as a conflict, hostility during conversations or talks. Agonality plays a crucial role within the framework of modern society and communication models; consequently it has required special attention of philosophy, sociology, political science, and linguistics.

In political linguistics, agonality is interpreted as one of the basic characteristics of political discourse associated with the intention of the struggle for power [1], since this concept is a cultural form of competition that has such goals as to show one's superiority over the opponent in intellectual and psychological terms, gain public respect and support, demonstrate one's qualities, compete for power and prestigious positions in society and eventually win. By participating in election debates, candidates stick to these goals. Besides, the debate gives political opponents a chance to show people that, despite their differences, they can treat each other with mutual respect, while they disagree on certain political issues.

Researchers equate this kind of discourse with conflict and aggression, and this, therefore, narrows the scope of use of this term in communication. After all, in a broad sense, agonality is understood as a way of communication in which there are necessarily parties who are opposed to each other and who, with the help of techniques or strategies, strive for preeminence over the opponent.

Modern political debate is a special form of interaction of political subjects, in which the tendency of agonality is clearly revealed. This kind of debate presupposes the presence of opposition and consequently speech interaction is organized around the conflict.

According to the results of the analysis of the debates between D. Trump and J. Biden, it can be concluded that the agonality of the election debate is supported by a system of communication strategies. Such agonal strategies as self-presentation, evasion, constructing the image of the opponent, discrediting the opponent implemented using manipulative tactics, techniques and verbal aggression, have become an integral feature of modern socio-political life. Each strategy and tactic is verbalized through certain language means and is characterized by peculiar linguistic stylistic techniques. Let us take a closer look at each of the strategies.

1) Strategy of self-presentation

Self-presentation is the speaker's verbal demonstration of their personal qualities, the so-called self-portraiture. This strategy is carried out with the help of self-praise, promise and demonstration of professional success: *"I'm running as a proud Democrat, but I'm going to become president for everyone, regardless of who voted for and who voted against. I don't see red and blue states. What I see is the United States of America. I will unite the country»* [5].

2) Strategy of constructing the image of the opponent

This strategy is carried out with the help of disclosure of the opponent, differentiation. There can be given any facts which make the opponent's actions look bad or illegal by presenting oneself in a positive way, comparing and making one's own image more positive and powerful. Biden said the following: *"Under this president, we become weaker, sicker, poor, more divided and more violent. When I was*

vice president, we inherited a recession. I was asked to fix it. I did. We left him a booming economy and he caused the recession" [4]. This strategy is used to show differences in the opponents' positions and views in order to push oneself away from the enemy's position, or to deny that the opponent may be involved in any positive activities.

According to D. Trump, if Biden becomes president, it will be a very sad day for America: *"I have to say the following. The country will be united by economic success, but this will not happen under Biden. He wants to raise taxes for everyone, and it will kill everyone"* [5]. The above given passage lacks the objective statement of facts, it presents only D. Trump's opinion, and it may be biased. Consequently, the politician implicitly inspires his negative attitude towards his opponent using pseudo-argumentation.

3) Strategy of discrediting the opponent

a) Tactic of accusation

During the final debate, J. Biden repeatedly criticized and accused D. Trump for not having a plan to combat the coronavirus pandemic and admitted that he should be responsible for deaths in the United States: *"A lot of people died and a lot more are going to die unless he gets a lot smarter, a lot quicker."* [4]. D. Trump answered in return: *"If we would've listened to you, the country would have been left wide open, millions of people would have died, not 200,000"* [4]. The above mentioned excerpt demonstrates a wide use of mutual accusations, evidence being the last thing employed in a debate as an agonal genre.

J. Biden also used the tactic of impersonal accusation: *"Anyone who is responsible for not controlling anything, anyone who is responsible for so many deaths, should not remain president of the United States"* [5]. Here the tactic of impersonal accusation is employed because the politician focused attention without naming the subject of the action, D. Trump, and using the pronoun *"anyone"*.

b) Tactic of humiliation

The humiliation of the opponent is accompanied by an explication of the emotional component instead of bringing evidence. E.g. *"The fact is that everything*

he's saying so far is simply a lie. I'm not here to call out his lies. Everybody knows he's a liar" [4].

During the debate D. Trump often interrupted J. Biden, using the tactic of insult in convergence with self-presentation: *"There's nothing smart about you. In 47 months, I've done more than you've done in 47 years, Joe. We've done things that you never even thought of doing."* [4]; *"Did you use the word "smart"? There's nothing smart about you, Joe. 47 years you've done nothing"* [4].

J. Biden did not lag behind and, using negatively coloured vocabulary, called his opponent *"clown", "racist", "puppy", "liar"* and, when Trump interrupted him, rudely asked him, using *"man"* as a form of address typical of informal communication: *"Will you shut up, man?"* [4].

The purpose of the negative strategies and tactics is to eliminate and provoke situations of misunderstanding, as well as to be able to provoke a conflict, an undesirable negative reaction to the statements of the opponent, in order to present the candidate in a bad light.

To sum up, the presidential election debate is an agonal genre of modern political discourse. Agonality is manifested in such constitutive features of the debate discourse as participants, two opposing parties in each election campaign, goals, values, strategies, such as self-presentation, discrediting the opponent, making the opponent an enemy with the help of emotional persuasion of the electors. Analysis of the factual material suggests that the use of the above mentioned strategies is also a manifestation of the competitive struggle between rival candidates. The implementation of strategies and tactics reveals the prominent features of the agonal genre of modern political discourse.

References

1. Василькова Н.Н. Реализация агональных стратегий в публичных спорах политического дискурса // Медиаскоп. 2018. Вып. 1. [Электронный ресурс]. — URL: http://www.mediascope.ru/2413 (дата обращения: 11.02.2022).

2. Ершов В.А. Агональное как предмет социально-философского исследования. Автореф. дис. канд. филос. наук. М., 2007. 163 с.

3. Шейгал Е.И. Семиотика политического дискурса. М: Гнозис, 2004. 431 с.

4. Donald Trump & Joe Biden 1st Presidential Debate Transcript 2020 [Электронный ресурс]. — URL: https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-joe-biden-1st-presidential-debate-transcript-2020 (дата обращения: 11.02.2022).

5. Donald Trump & Joe Biden Final Presidential Debate Transcript 2020 [Электронный ресурс]. — URL: https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-joe-biden-final-presidential-debate-transcript-2020 (дата обращения: 11.02.2022).

Информация об авторах

Дарья Юрьевна Меженина - студентка Нижегородского государственного лингвистического университета им. Н. А. Добролюбова (г. Нижний Новгород, Россия) E-mail: mezhenina.darya@yandex.ru,   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0749-1864

Кабанова Ирина Николаевна - кандидат филологических наук, доцент кафедры английской филологи Нижегородского государственного лингвистического университета им. Н.А. Добролюбова. (Н. Новгород, Россия). E-mail: kabanova@lunn.ru, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9628-2740