Мовознавство

Presidential Debate (on the material of the 2020 Election Campaign in the USA)

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The paper in question is devoted to the study of political debates which are held during the presidential election campaign, based on the first debate between the Republican nominee D. Trump and the Democratic nominee J. Biden in the USA.

The above mentioned phenomenon is studied from the standpoint of communicative linguistics. During political communication the debate in its classical meaning tends to such a form of controversy as polemics, in which the main efforts of the debaters are focused on the asserting their views on the issue under discussion rather than seeking consensus. Presidential debate has the features of the conflict discourse.

The debaters compete for the electorate sympathy, with the main goal being to win power. The communicants' intention to defeat the opponent and to get the votes determines the optimal way to implement it. The candidates exploit two principal communicative strategies, namely to create and maintain a positive self-image, as well as to discredit the opponent. To realize the first strategy the following tactics are used: positive presenting of the situation, self-praising, promising, and denying the allegation. The tactics of blackening of the competitor, accusing the opponent, insulting and threatening the other debater are effective to implement the second strategy.

The analysis of the US presidential debate dated September 29, 2020 has revealed that the choice of tactics primarily depends on the following parameters: 1) the topic under discussion, 2) the official status of the debater (it is crucial whether the participant of the event is the incumbent or not), 3) the political past of the candidate.

During the debate under consideration both nominees were vulnerable to criticism, as D. Trump was the incumbent president and J. Biden had a long track record, including his serving as the vice-president under B. Obama (2009–2017). The attempts of both parties to evade direct questions of the moderator and to destabilize the opponent's emotional state with the help of verbal aggression were observed.

Key words: political communication, debate, political debate, presidential debate, conflict discourse, communicative strategy, communicative tactic

Political debate is a type of political communication that has emerged as a result of a long period of transformation of the art to participate in the discussion. In the life of a democratic society the role of the political debates, including presidential one, is difficult to overestimate as the choice of the head of the state, depending on the form of the governing in the country and, consequently, the authority of this figure, can to some extent (in the definite cases indirectly) influence the general political course as well as the realization of the rights and liberties of the citizens. The stated confirms **the relevance of the research topic** connected with this complex and ambivalent object.

For many centuries the phenomenon of debate was the object of classical rhetoric which considers it to be the sort of the public dispute [1, p. 41], characterizing it as eristic (the adjective comes from the Greek word *eristikos,* meaning "fond of wrangling" [11]). It should be noted that for the debaters the argument itself and the eloquence are more important than the approaching the truth. As you see, in contrast to the dialogue, the debate is not collaborative but combative as its goal is to search the faults in the opponent's position and to criticize their arguments defending your own view.

In the English terms dictionary the word "debate" is defined as "a formal discussion in a public meeting or legislature, in which opposing arguments are presented" [9]. The definition in question highlights the

official status of the discussion and the opposition of the expressed opinions.

In turn, a political debate is qualified as the exchange of opinions on a burning political issue between participants of the event" [5, p. 170]. There are different types of political debates (parliamentary, interparty as well as presidential). The latter is held during the election campaign and is aimed at forming the image of a presidential candidate.

It is declared that presidential debates "provide a unique opportunity to hear directly from the candidates at the same time" [12]. The signals sent through their answers to the questions concern the following five items: 1) an overall theme to which the candidate returns to during the event (the so called hook or soundbite for the voter); 2) the type of leadership practised by the presidential candidate; 3) the nominee's traits which define their presidency; 4) the values and hopes shared with the audience; 5) unintended messages (poorly chosen words and nonverbal behaviour) [12].

The objective of our research is to study the above mentioned phenomenon from the standpoint of communicative linguistics and to determine the peculiar features of the 2020 presidential debate in the United States of America.

The communicative goal of this type of activities is to draw the sympathy of the electorate. The participants of the debate do not communicate with the voters directly but the audience is the main target of their speeches. In the study to determine what is more crucial: the appearance or the substance during the election campaign, C. Boussalis and T. Coan state that the politicians "have strong incentives to use their communication to positively impress and persuade voters" [8].

In most cases the presidential debate stands out for being bitter strife. During political communication the debate in its classical meaning tends to such a form of controversy as polemics (from the Greek *polemikos* which means "warlike" or "hostile" [15]), in which the main efforts of the debaters are focused on the asserting their views on the issue under discussion rather than finding common ground that unites different points of view [4, p. 364].

Contrasting the conflict discourse and the discourse of coordination, the compilers of "Polity`chna Abetka" ("Political Alphabet") attribute the debate to the discourse of the first of these types [3, p. 88], which breaks the cooperative principle as the debaters ignore the rules of effective conversational communication known as P. Grice's maxims [14].

S. Formanova compares the conflict with the sports competition as well as with the court trial when the chairman begins and ends the discussion, allows the debaters to take the floor by turn, observes the rules, "extinguishes the fire" if the participants are truculent [6, p. 141].

During the presidential debate the communicative activities are subordinated to the general goal to win the support of the electorate. This goal is achieved by using some strategies. This term in general means "a teleological course of action undertaken to achieve a particular goal in an optimal way" [13, p. 282].

If we speak about the communicative strategy the notion of intention should be applied. In particular, T. Pasternak defines the communicative strategy as the realization of the speaker's intention to achieve the goal [2, p. 215]. The two main strategies can be traced in this type of debate: 1) to create and maintain a positive self-image, 2) to discredit the opponent.

To realize the general strategy different tactics are employed. The communicative tactic is considered a specific way to implement the planned strategy. K. Artym stresses that the appropriate tactics should be chosen as they "are not universal and effective in all situations" [7, p. 242].

The material of our research is the transcript of the US presidential debate dated September 29, 2020 [10]. The debate was held between the Republican nominee Donald Trump and his Democrat challenger Joe Biden. The topics for the discussion were chosen by the moderator – the Fox News journalist Chris Wallace. The main topics discussed were as follows: 1) the appointment of a Justice of the Supreme Court (the health care was actively discussed during this segment), 2) Covid-19 pandemic, 3) the economy, 4) the race issues (the question of law and order was raised in this segment), 5) the protests and violence in the cities, 6) the prospects of the country in case of voting for the definite candidate (the thorny problem of climate change was brought in the discussion).

The peculiar feature of the debate in question is that its participants were trying to evade the direct questions of the moderator and to shift the flow of the discussion to the theme which debating was uncomfortable for the opponent because of the sensitiveness in this point.

The analysis of the debaters' lines has shown that the commonly used tactics to implement the first strategy (to create and maintain a positive self-image) are as follows: positive presenting of the situation, self-praising, promising, and denying the allegation. The second strategy (to discredit the opponent) is mainly realized by the tactics of blackening of the competitor, accusing the opponent, insulting and threatening the other debater.

When analyzing the topics separately you can determine which tactics and with what intention each of the debaters turned to on September 29, 2020.

The first question was put to the incumbent president who used this as a good opportunity to speak about the victory of the Republicans and their right to choose the nominee to the Supreme Court. The tactic of positive presentation of the situation to realize the general strategy to create and maintain a positive self-image is fulfilled by the exploitation of the adjectives with positive connotation such as *"fantastic", "outstanding",* the comparison *"as good as anybody",*

the superlative degree of the adjective *"greatest"*. The verb *"to win"* is used several times in D. Trump's speech to support his self-image as a part of the whole positive context.

The opposite tactic – the tactic of blackening the opponent by depreciating the nominee's party – was readily added to the first one. For example: *"… the Democrats, they wouldn't even think about not doing it"* [10].

At the 6 minute of the debate J. Biden started his attack using the tactic of blaming: *"… what's at stake here is the President's made it clear, he wants to get rid of the Affordable Care Act … which will strip 20 million people from having health insurance now, if it goes into court"* [10]. The difficult Covid-19 situation was eagerly introduced into the discussion: *"… the 200,000 people that have died on his watch, how many of those have survived? Well, there's seven million people that contracted COVID"* [10]. The fact of using quantitative data should not be ignored. It can be explained by the intention to add some weight to the arguments which results in the increased level of trust in the speaker's words.

Remembering that the best tactic to defend oneself is to accuse the other, the Republican nominee used the same tactic of blaming: *"you've had 308,000 military people dying because you couldn't provide them proper healthcare in the military. So don't tell me about this"* [10].

The above mentioned tactic was repeated in the following lines: *"And if you were here, it wouldn't be 200, it would be two million people because you were very late on the draw. You didn't want me to ban China, which was heavily infected. You didn't want me to ban Europe"* [10].

The debater is to choose those theses which do not contradict the party agenda. It is made obvious in the following statement: *"The platform of the Democratic Party is what I, in fact, approved of"* [10].

The discussion concerning Obamacare was not constructive: D. Trump as its opponent was criticizing this system and its main aspect – the individual mandate – by using the attributes *"the worst"* and *"the most unpopular"*. On this background the nominee was praising his healthcare plan: *"I'm cutting the drug prices… which no president has courage to do"* [10]. The lessening of the medical sector financing was grounded by accusing the predecessors including J. Biden: *"You could have done it during your 47 year period in government, but you didn't do it"* [10].

Both nominees were firm denying the allegations of the opponent. J. Biden's lines are the very illustration of this: *"That's simply not true"* [10] or *"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"* [10].

In the struggle for the voters the opponents spare no means. For example, the tactic of insulting was applied when D. Trump made a rude remark about the opponent's school progress: *"You graduated last in your class not first in your class"* [10]. It was quite a difficult task for the moderator to stabilize the situation and resume the productive course of the debate. The first segment of the debate was finished by an absolutely chaotic exchange of remarks.

The second announced subject was Covid-19. As the topic was very burning for the incumbent president the opponent readily employed the tactic of blaming that had already been used in connection with this point in the previous segment, starting with the statics: *"40,000 people a day are contracting Covid… between 750 and 100 people a day are dying"* [10]. J. Biden went on his attack bringing into play more serious incrimination: *"When he was presented with that number, he said, "It is what it is". The President has no plan. He knew all the way back in February how serious this crisis was. What did he do? He's on tape as acknowledging he knew it. He said he didn't tell us or give people a warning of it because he didn't want to panic the American people. You don't panic. He panicked"* [10].

To justifying himself D. Trump quoted the words of the Democrat governors as to his ability to cope with the pandemic characterizing his deeds as *"phenomenal"*.

Sensing Biden's superiority in the pandemic issue, D. Trump was glad to change the topic of the discussion. The third subject suggested by the moderator was the economy. The Republican nominee did his best to emphasize his achievements by exploiting the tactic of self-praising: *"We built the greatest economy in history"* [10]. But the question concerning taxes was put by the moderator. Thus J. Biden was given carte blanche to interrogate his opponent about the tax returns. D. Trump made excuses blaming the tax code established during the Obama government but the Democratic nominee was persistent in his accusation and pointed to the fact that the only person to blame was his opponent, not the laws. Simultaneously J. Biden used the tactic of promising: *"I'm going to eliminate the Trump tax cuts"* [10].

Some conclusions are beginning to emerge from our analysis. It is clear that during the debate the choice of tactics primarily depends on the following parameters: 1) the topic under discussion, 2) the official status of the debater (it is crucial whether the participant of the event is the incumbent or not), 3) the political past of the candidate (the more "sins" can be revealed the more questions are put to the nominee, as a result, the tougher their behavior and verbal repertoire is).

As to the general impression of the 2020 US presidential debate the issues chosen for the discussion were well selected, they were urgent for the audience and helped to reveal the candidate's traits and leadership capacity. The debaters were ready not only to paint a rosy picture of the situation but to blame and even to offend the opponent in order to dispirit him. The last tactic is very risky but, as we see, all the means

are used to win the struggle to achieve the ultimate goal – power.

D. Trump's being the incumbent president was a contributory factor to his opponent who, in turn, was vulnerable because of many imperfections during his holding office under B. Obama. Both candidates were trying to demoralize the opponent wearing him out by criticism and insults as verbal aggression causes negative emotions. The conflict communicative behavior aimed at constant fault-finding is the principle course of action during the presidential debate. Being dramatic and tempestuous makes this discussion the centre of national and international media events.

The explicit and implicit means to start and escalate verbal aggression during the debate is the object of potential future research.

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Президентські дебати (на матеріалі передвиборчої кампанії 2020 р. у США)

Статтю присвячено вивченню особливостей політичних дебатів, які проводять під час виборів президента країни, зокрема у США. Матеріалом дослідження слугували перші дебати, що відбувалися між представником Республіканської партії Д. Трампом та представником Демократичної партії Дж. Байденом.

Президентські дебати розглянуто з позицій комунікативної лінгвістики. Під час політичної комунікації дебати у їх класичному розумінні тяжіють до такої форми суперечки, як полеміка, коли зусилля учасників спрямовано на затвердження своєї точки зору на обговорюване питання, а не на пошук загальної згоди. Такі дебати зараховано до конфліктного дискурсу.

Учасники президентських дебатів змагаються між собою за прихильність електорату, головна мета при цьому – виборити владу. Загальна інтенція комунікантів – перемогти суперника і отримати голоси виборців – визначає оптимальний шлях її реалізації. Говоримо про дві основні комунікативні стратегії кандидатів: 1) створити і підтримати свій власний позитивний імідж, 2) дискредитувати опонента. Для реалізації першої стратегії використано тактику позитивного представлення ситуації, тактику самовихваляння, тактику обіцянки та тактику заперечення звинувачень на свою адресу. Тактика очорнення конкурента, тактика звинувачення опонента та тактика образи і погроз є ефективними для реалізації другої стратегії.

Встановлено, що вибір тактики під час дебатів залежить в першу чергу від таких параметрів: 1) тема, що обговорюється; 2) статус учасника дебатів (чи є він на момент дебатів діючою посадовою особою, чи – ні); 3) його політичне минуле (чи багато «гріхів» можливо знайти і винести на загал під час дискусії).

Обидва учасники розглянутих дебатів були вразливими, оскільки Д. Трамп на той момент був чинним президентом, а Дж. Байден мав довгий послужний список, зокрема виконував обов'язки віце-президента США за часів Б. Обами (2009–2017 рр.). Під час дебатів 29 вересня 2020 р. спостерігаємо намагання обох сторін ухилитися від прямих відповідей на запитання модератора та дестабілізувати емоційний стан опонента за допомогою вербальної агресії.

Ключові слова: політична комунікація, дебати, політичні дебати, президентські дебати, конфліктний дискурс, комунікативна стратегія, комунікативна тактика