

Corpora and argumentation: a case study

Chiara Degano
Università degli Studi di Milano

1. Introduction

This paper explores the possibility of integrating quantitative analysis with argumentation theory in the broader frame of discourse analysis. While qualitative and quantitative approaches to the study of discourse have been profitably integrated with regard to the levels of lexico-grammar and syntax (cf. among others, Stubbs 1996, Partington *et al.* 2004, Garzone/Santulli 2004, Baker 2006), more rarely has this been the case for higher levels of analysis such as the argumentative structure (Degano 2007, Mazzi 2007, Mochales/Ieven 2009). Argumentative analysis is generally carried out through close reading, which allows for the reconstruction of the general structure, the identification of schemes, and the subsequent evaluation of argumentation in single communicative events. Such an approach, however does not account for the “incremental effect of discourse” (Baker 2006: 13), i.e. the constitution of recurring patterns that build up cumulatively, often without being noticed, and which can only be observed through the analysis of larger samples of discourse. The application of corpus linguistics tools to argumentative discourse could obviate this limit.

In light of such considerations, this paper sets out to identify ways in which the tools of corpus linguistics can be put to use for the study of argumentation. In order to do so, it will analyse the three televised prime ministerial debates that preceded the 2010 general elections in the UK. The choice of the sample is justified on the one hand by the eminently argumentative nature of this type of communicative event and on the other hand by its being of a manageable size. As they were an absolute first for the UK, the three debates amount to the totality of available materials, thus making the corpus maximally representative, and at the same time small enough to make it suitable for qualitative as well as quantitative investigation. Furthermore, the three debates were part of a unified argumentative effort, in which it is reasonable to suppose that coherent strategies of persuasion were adopted by each candidate in the attempt of conveying a well defined, recognisable message.

A preliminary manual analysis of the debates’ scripts, which relied on the model of strategic manoeuvring (van Eemeren / Houtlosser 2006, van Eemeren 2010), elaborated within the frame of the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation (van Eemeren / Grootendorst 1992, 2004), has tentatively highlighted patterns of persuasion for each candidate. The study will now proceed to identify possible linguistic indicators of such argumentative preferences with respect to one aspect in particular of strategic manoeuvring: topical selection. The identification of viable indicators would allow to confirm quantitatively the existence of distinguished patterns of argumentation for each candidate, while proving that corpora could profitably be used also for the analysis of argumentation.

2. Background

2.1 Electoral debates

TV presidential debates are by now a well established genre of political discourse, having made their appearance back in 1960, during the Nixon-Kennedy race to presidency. Since then they have drawn scholarly attention, mainly in the field of political communication and primarily with a focus on U.S. Presidential debates (e.g. Bishop et al. 1980; Jamieson/Birdsell 1988; Hellweg et al. 1992; Hinck 1993; Carlin/McKinney 1994; Friedenbergl 1994; Benoit/Wells 1996; Benoit 2003, 2007; Schroeder 2000, 2008; Kraus 2000; Minow/LaMay 2008)

A model that has proved particularly influential in research on political campaign communication, including TV presidential debates, is Functional Theory (cf. among others Benoit/Wells 1996, Benoit 2007). Resting on the assumption that candidates need to appear preferable to others in order to win votes, this theory identifies three functions through which candidates can construct their preferability: acclaiming their positive aspects; attacking the opponents and defending from criticism levelled by the opponents. Each of the three functions is articulated along a twofold dimension: policy, concerning past deeds, future plans and general goals, and character, encompassing personal qualities, leadership ability and ideals.

As is easily understandable, a major concern of studies on TV election debates is whether they manage to influence voters (Schrott/Lanoue 1992, Jørgensen et al 1998, Benoit/Hansen/Verser 2003), an issue that can be subsumed under the more general scope of empirical studies of the effects of persuasive discourse. These can be divided into two approaches: the experimental one, isolating one variable at a time so as to reduce disturbing influences, which can be traced back to the works of the Yale Group (Hovland et al. 1953), and the other, privileging the analysis of authentic political communication (cf. for example Jamieson/Birdsell 1988). As Johnson (2005) points out past research shows that debates succeed in influencing voters. Even though their role is mainly one of reinforcement for those parts of the electorate who have already made up their mind, debates can shift votes helping undecided voters to reach a decision (Mayer/Carlin 1994: 135). Effects of presidential debates have been studied both from the perspective of policy issues, finding that viewers do learn about issues and programmes through debates (Benoit et al. 2003), and along the character dimension, confirming that voters' knowledge and perceptions of candidates' ethos are directly influenced by debates (Pfau 2002).

While functions and topics have received wide scholarly attention so far, limited research has specifically addressed the use of language in electoral campaign, as testified by Benoit's call for analysis of the textual features of campaigning (2000), with a view to complementing the topic- and function-based explanations of the effectiveness of campaign discourse, which taken alone are hardly conclusive (Benoit 2003). A contribution in this sense comes from the analysis of the entire (or a significant) set of

presidential debates initiated by functional researchers (cf. Benoit, 2004 for a study that includes data from all of the US general election presidential debates, and Johnson 2005 for a study focusing specifically on the style – masculine vs feminine – used by candidates in presidential debates). As Johnson herself remarks (2005) a focus on language rather than on content alone would also have the beneficial effect of moving past the artificial “policy/persona” dichotomy, reconciling the two aspects in the unified effort aimed at the construction of candidates’ image.

2.2 Argumentation theory

For what concerns argumentation, the analytic frame of reference is provided by pragma-dialectical model (van Eemeren/Grotendorst 1992, 2004), and more specifically its extended version, which includes the notion of strategic manoeuvring (van Eemeren/Houtlosser 2002, 2006; van Eemeren 2010). If the pragma-dialectical theory has always aimed at bridging the gap between logic (dialectic) and rhetoric, it is with the formalization of the model of strategic manoeuvring that the rhetorical dimension is fully integrated in the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation. It refers to the “efforts arguers make in argumentative discourse to reconcile aiming for rhetorical effectiveness with maintaining dialectical standards (Houtlosser 2006: 383), and includes three complementary aspects: the selection of arguments from the available topical potential, adaptation to the audience, and presentational/stylistic choices. Although in practice these three aspects do not occur in isolation, for the sake of analysis they are better dealt with separately. As the present paper focuses on the first aspect, i.e. the selection of topics, the next section deals with it more specifically.

2.2.1 The selection of topics in argumentation. Topical selection has always been considered a fundamental step of argumentation, as it is on the choice of effective topics that much of an argument’s strength depends. The origins of the concept of topic goes back to classical rhetoric, where the notion of *topoi* or *loci* was extensively dealt with by philosophers, among which Aristotle, without reaching, though, a unified definition of it. A major difference exists in the understanding of *topoi*, between those who conceive them as “ready-made arguments” (as was the case the case for Cicero), which contain instructions on how to reach a conclusion from a certain set of premises, and those who consider them warrants providing backing to a logical inference that leads from premises to conclusions (Walton et al 2008: 275). In this latter sense, *topoi* are often implicit, and roughly correspond to the *if-then* proposition in modern treatments of argument schemes (see van Eemeren 2010: 102 and ff. for an exposition of these aspects).

The relation between *topos* or *loci* and modern argument schemes is another object of debate. According to some (e.g. Rubinelli 2009) Aristotle’s *topoi* are argumentative schemes, while others question that an absolute correspondence exists between the two concepts. Van Eemeren (2010: 103), for example, seems more inclined to consider them as different entities, on the ground that “the Aristotelian topics are much more abstract [than modern argumentative schemes] and do not always seem to characterize a specific relationship between an argument and a standpoint”. Others suspend judgement, as is the case for Walton et al (2008: 276), who in their thorough study of argument schemes invite specialists of Greek philosophy and rhetoric to investigate the exact relation

between modern argumentative schemes and historical *topoi*, limiting on their part to acknowledge that the *topoi* are the ‘forerunners’ of schemes.

From the pragma-dialectical perspective, topical potential does not refer to a pre-formulated set of options from which ready made topics can be chosen, but is rather conceived in terms of ‘dialectical profiles’. These are defined as “a sequential pattern of the moves the participants in a critical discussion are entitled to make – and in a way have to make – to realize a particular dialectical aim at a particular stage or sub-stage of the resolution process” (van Eemeren, Houtlosser, Snoeck Henkemans, 2007). In this respect the pragma-dialectical approach differs from other accounts of topics, in that topical potential is not limited to the argumentative stage proper, but extends to other stages as well. For example in the confrontation stage topical selection consists in making the most effective choice in terms of potential issues for discussion, opting for those that create the most favourable conditions for the resolution of a difference of opinion to one’s advantage.

However, for the purpose of this paper – which in fact draws on the pragma-dialectical approach – the concern for topical potential is limited to the argumentative stage, as the focus is on the lines of defense followed by each candidate to support the standpoint inherent in this specific activity type, i.e. ‘vote for me’. No consideration is given to topical selection in terms of choice of issues (confrontation stage), choice of procedural and material starting points (opening stage) and choice of conclusions (concluding stage).

From antiquity different categorizations of schemes have been proposed (see Walton et al 2008: 276 and ff. for classifications of schemes in classical rhetoric, the Middle Ages, Renaissance, up to modern theories). In modern times the interest for topics was rekindled by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958/1969), who divided argumentative schemes in two broad categories: arguments based on processes of association – encompassing the subcategories of quasi-logical arguments, and arguments based on the structures of the real – and arguments based on processes of dissociation. Walton et al. (2008) offer a compendium of all the topics attested in literature, adding a few original ones, which includes the three macro-categories of inductive, deductive and defeasible arguments. According to the pragma-dialectical theory, in the argumentation stage the arguer can choose among three ‘generic argument schemes’ (van Eemeren 2010: 94), based respectively on causal, symptomatic or analogy relations, from which all other subtypes of arguments descend.

3. Analysis

From the pragma-dialectical perspective, TV debates can be seen as a complex form of critical discussion,¹ irrespectively of the form they take on the surface (they are

¹ The term refers to a four stage model, intended as a heuristic tool for the analysis of argumentation, more than as a normative or descriptive construct. It includes a confrontation stage, in which a difference of opinion arises, an opening stage in which the parties agree to solve the difference of opinion making appeal to each other’s reasonableness and distribute the roles of protagonist and antagonist (as well as establishing the starting points for argumentation), the argumentation stage proper, in which arguments

fragmented into many topics, introduced by the questions asked by members of the audience), in which candidates try to solve a difference of opinion on who should become prime minister. Applying the pragma-dialectical categories this can be described as a single difference of opinion in which each candidate in turn plays/takes the role of the protagonist defending the implicit or explicit standpoint “I’m the best suited candidate”. The role of the antagonist is taken by the other two candidates in turn, who openly challenge the standpoint during the debate in front of the audience (determining a mixed difference of opinion) but also, of course, TV viewers, who do not have a chance to take part in the discussion, but in private can certainly raise doubts on the protagonist’s view (thus generating a non-mixed difference of opinion) or take on an opposing standpoint (giving rise to several mixed differences of opinion).

As for the structure of argumentation, each theme raised by the questions of the audience (crime, immigration, taxes...) makes up a line of defence, which ideally must be taken together with other themes to be conclusive, since a candidate should result convincing on all or the majority of the issues, in a sort of coordinative argumentation. For each issue, generally, there is one or more level of supporting arguments, which can be reconstructed as instantiations of subordinative argumentation.

Qualitative analysis of some significant moments of the debates has highlighted some possible recurrent patterns characterising each candidate’s strategic manoeuvring. Particularly significant in this respect are the opening remarks made by each candidate at the beginning of each debate (and even more so in the first debate), as here they have a chance to freely select their topics (as opposed to answering questions of members of the audience). This gives candidates the opportunity of conveying a distinctive message, which will function as a unifying thread throughout the many answers provided by each candidate in the course of the subsequent debate.

3.1 Gordon Brown

Starting from Brown, this is his exordium in the first debate:

- (1) These are no ordinary times, and this is no ordinary election. We've just been going through the biggest global financial crisis in our lives, and we're moving from recession to recovery, and I believe we're moving on a road to prosperity for all. Now, every promise you hear from each of us this evening depends on one thing: a strong economy. And this is the defining year. *Get the decisions right now, and we can have Secure jobs, we can have standards of living rising, and we can have everybody better off. Get the decisions wrong now, and we could have a double-dip recession.* And because we believe in fairness, as we cut the deficit, over these next few years, we will protect your police, your National Health Service, and we will protect your schools. I know what this job involves; I look forward to putting my plan to you this evening.

More than one strategy can be identified here, but emphasis seems to fall mainly on the parallel structure highlighted in italics (“Get the decisions right now, and we can have ... Get the decisions wrong now, and we could have...”). Here Brown relies on the pragmatic argument, a subtype of the causal argument scheme, whereby it is stated that

and counterarguments are put forth by the parties, and the concluding stage. Strategic manoeuvring occurs at all the four stages.

a certain act is desirable because it leads to a given consequence and that consequence is desirable, as represented in the following scheme:

Act X is desirable
 Because: Act X leads to consequence Y
 and: Consequence Y is desirable

In its negative version, also exploited by Brown, the pragmatic argument makes the case against something (in this case voting for someone else) on the ground of the undesirable consequences it might have. In Brown's incipit the negative pragmatic argument is associated to what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tytwa define the locus of the irreparable, (if action is not taken immediately, the momentum will be lost), which according to Zarefsky (2009) is generally put to use in political argumentation to try and prompt the uncommitted to action.

Brown's strategy seems to be perfectly in line with his status as incumbent, which, according to the literature, puts him in the position of guarding against the call for change made by the challenger, by raising fears of what might happen if change is adopted, while at the same time emphasizing his competency and the status he enjoys from his office.

To verify whether the prominence given to causal relation, suggested by qualitative analysis, corresponds to a preference for such a form of reasoning throughout the debate quantitative analysis will be put to use. In order to verify the hypothesis quantitatively possible indicators of causal arguments must preliminarily be identified. Drawing on Van Eemeren et al 2007, all the following categories of words can be potential clues to the use of causal arguments: function words expressing causal relations, verbs of process (producing a result), reference to an event as the cause/result of something else, reference to future events (resulting from present actions) and the mention of positive/negative consequences. The overall wordlist of the first debate has then been scanned for words falling under these categories, whose frequency is reported below:

- function words expressing causal relations: so (0.49%) , as (0.46%), because (0.23)
- verbs of process (producing a result): make (0.32%), put (0.16%), cut (0.15%), change (0.14%), give (0.14%), help (0.11%), stop (0.10%), doing (0.09%), making (0.08%), support (0.08%)
- Reference to an event as the cause/result of something else: recovery (0.07%), action (0.05%)
- Reference to future events (resulting from present actions): will (0.38%), Going (0.29%), future (0.14%)
- Positive/negative consequences: would (0.39%), risk (0.09%) Economy (0.2%) Jobs (0.15%)

These data refer to the totality of such words' occurrences in the whole corpus, while their breakdown for each candidate is reported in the table below:

	Brown	Cameron	Clegg
so	0,52	0,44	0,54
as	0,56	0,45	0,39
because	0,33	0,47	0,41
would	0,33	0,47	0,41
will	0,61	0,29	0,10
make	0,28	0,47	0,24
going	0,20	0,34	0,23
economy	0,33	0,21	0,06
put	0,17	0,21	0,11
cut	0,28	0,18	0,03
jobs	0,31	0,12	0,05
change	0,1	0,2	0,15
give	0,21	0,1	0,13
future	0,26	0,07	0,08
help	0,08	0,16	0,13
stop	0,06	0,2	0,06
risk	0,22	0,04	0,03
doing	0,15	0,07	0,05
making	0,08	0,12	0,06
recovery	0,15	0,05	< 0,01
support	0,08	0,08	0,03
action	0,10	0,04	-
TOTAL	5,41	4,78	3,29

Table 1- Possible indicators of causal argument types

The raw percentages reported in table 1 show that in Clegg's turns these words occur with significantly lower frequency than in his opponents' (3,29 % vs Brown 5,41% and Cameron 4,78%), while Brown's and Cameron's frequencies are not so dissimilar, with slightly higher frequency in Brown's turns. However, data as such are not sufficient to prove that Brown makes recourse to causal arguments more than the others, as occurrences should be checked manually to make sure that these indicators actually correspond to as many examples of causal arguments.

While a manual analysis of the totality of the indicators would clearly go beyond the scope of this study, just one of them will be singled out for in depth analysis, for the sake of exemplification, namely the causal connector 'because'. The word can be used to express different relations of causality (Schiffrin 1987): a fact-based relation of causality holds between events or states (e.g. John is home because he is sick); a knowledge-based relation is at play when some pieces of information are used as a warrant for an inference (e.g. John is home, because the lights are burning), and an action-based relation exists when the speaker presents a motive for an action being performed through talk (John is home? Because the lights are burning). Causal relations of the second and the third type can be considered metadiscursive, establishing a relation between two statements, one of which provides the epistemic ground for the other. Only the first type, i.e. fact based relation, will then be considered prototypical of the causal argument, for the purpose of this analysis. The following examples from the debate will further clarify this point:

- (2) Net inward migration will continue to fall under our policies. 40.000 less students, I suspect, this year, **because** of our tightening of visa controls.
- (3) How do we encourage people who are on benefits to move into work? [...] our proposal to lift the income tax threshold to £10.000 is the best incentive to work. **Because** if you keep more of your money when you start working, particularly on low-paid and part-time work, then of course you have an incentive to get off benefits.
- (4) Now, be honest with the public, **because** you can't airbrush your policies, even though you can airbrush your posters.

In (2) Brown presents the reduction in immigration rates as a direct consequence of the measures introduced by his government, thus establishing a fact-based causal relations between two events. In (3) Clegg motivates his proposal of lifting the income tax threshold as an incentive to push people on benefit into work on the ground that this measure would allow people with low paid jobs (the others are not likely to depend on benefits) to pay less tax, and if people can take more of the money they earn, they are more likely to be willing to work. In (4) the proposition 'because you can't airbrush your policies ...' supports Clegg's exhortation to be honest with the public (addressed to Cameron), on the ground that if he hides the unpopular effects of certain measures during the campaign and thereby manages to be elected, people would find out that such policies are not what they were made believe. In both cases, then, the proposition introduced by 'because' expresses the rationale behind the proposition that precedes it. Limiting the scope to the fact-based occurrences of because, Brown is the one who recurs most frequently to it, as shown in the table below:²

	Brown	Cameron	Clegg
Fact-based 'because'	12/44	3/37	4/28

Table 2 - Causal arguments: fact-based 'because'

There follow some more examples of fact-based 'because' used by Brown.

- (5) Illegal immigrants are deterred **because** we've got ID cards for foreign nationals now, so an employer cannot say...
- (6) You cannot afford to take money out of the economy now **because** you will put jobs at risk, businesses at risk ...
- (7) The only way we've kept our economy moving forward is not because there's been private investment or bank lending, it's **because** the government has had to step in to make sure there is sufficient growth.
- (8) Why are we in Afghanistan? We're in Afghanistan **because** there is a terror threat and a chain of terror that comes from the Afghan-Pakistan border
- (9) Look, we've had to change our tactics all the time **because** of what the Taliban has been doing.

Brown's recourse to causal arguments, which as confirmed quantitatively is above the average of his opponents, characterizes his discourse as factual and centred on logical reasoning. The same trait pertains also to his use of symptomatic arguments. These are schemes in which "a standpoint is defended by citing a certain sign, symptom or

² The number of fact-based 'because' occurrences is given against the totality of 'because' occurrences in each candidate's turn.

distinguishing mark of what is claimed in the standpoint” (van Eemeren et al 2002: 97). In the specific case of political debates a person’s acts and values are seen as a manifestation of his personality.

Occurrences of symptomatic arguments have been retrieved using Wordsmith Tool’s concordancer, taking first person pronouns (in the forms ‘I’, ‘I’ve’, ‘we’ and ‘we’ve’), as possible indicators. Following manual analysis of the output, occurrences have been grouped in two different categories: fact-based reasoning, in which past records are put forth as manifestations of the leader’s capability (here labelled ‘past record’), and values and beliefs. Data related to these categories are reported in the following table:

	Brown	Cameron	Clegg
Past record	30	6	18
Values and beliefs	26	7	6

Table 3 – Symptomatic arguments

The concordance lines pasted below represent a selection of the occurrences of both categories into which symptomatic arguments have been grouped. Starting from past record, Brown, in line with what emerged from the analysis of causal arguments, insists on the actions taken as prime minister to tackle social problems (lines 1 and 2) and to counter the economic crisis (see lines: 3, 4, 5, 8), emphasising also his international role (lines 7 and 9).

Brown

1 Union can come to Britain now. I also said that jobs had to be adver
 2 trol and manage immigration. And I when I became Prime Minister, I did
 3 David, I had to nationalise Northern Rock,
 4 had to restructure their banks. I had to persuade them they had to wor
 6 hink we've got to resolve this. I have had to take the economy through
 7 o do things for the government. I invited people who are businessmen a
 8 problem and get on with the job. I need to work with these other countr
 9 n bad. When the banks collapsed, I took immediate action to stop crisis
 10 terrible, terrible mistake. Now, I worked with the European leaders the

Cameron and Clegg, on their part, tend to stress their qualities as leaders of opposition parties. Cameron presents himself as a reasonable leader of the opposition, who has supported Labour’s reforms when he has deemed them creditable (1 and 3), and is also capable of constructive criticism towards his own party (line 2, with regard to the environment). In this way he also manages to conveying the message that he shuns away from contrapositions on a sheer ideological ground, a strategy possibly meant to appeal to voters beyond the circle of staunch conservative supporters.

Cameron

1 gh that's important in politics. I helped Tony Blair get his Education
 2 when I said to my party we had to get real
 3 and work together where we can. I've always though that's important in
 4 bout the bravery of our forces. I've been to Afghanistan four

Clegg seems to adopt a different strategy, placing emphasis on measures he proposed, but were not given credit by others (see lines 1, 2, 3 and 6, 7), thus blaming the two major parties for current shortcomings. In this way, he seems to be making an attempt at

transforming the unflattering reality of having never made it to conquering the trust of the majority of the voters into a point of strength, namely a sort of impermeability to criticism.

Clegg

1 dismayed by this. This is something I actually put forward in the House of
 2 oved to be corrupt. It's something I advocated in the past, it's something
 3 wrote this week precisely what I have been saying all along,
 4 t for Britain in Brussels. what I learned when I was there was this:
 5 ian government and others. what I noticed there was that the Chinese
 6 y and work together. That's why I proposed several weeks ago, that
 7 ted in the past, it's something I put forward in westminster, both
 8 David Cameron and Gordon Brown, I have been in there, have sought chang
 9 's have the fundamental debate. I worked in my previous life before

Another distinctive strategy used by Clegg consists in presenting himself as a person who learns from experiences (lines 4, 5 and 8, 9), with regard to the positions he has had in European institutions, as trade negotiator for UK and the European Union and previously as an assistant of the person sent by Margaret Thatcher to ‘bat for Britain in Europe’. In this way, he firstly constructs himself as a leader with hands-on knowledge of the European Union and the mechanisms governing it, and secondly by presenting his judgements as deriving directly from experience, he presents them as self-evident, rather than grounded in a political vision which is necessarily partial and selective.

While in symptomatic arguments of the first category a politician’s actions are made to speak for his/her capability, in the second category, it is simply what the candidates say to believe in that should be taken as a warrant of their aptitude to the office they are racing for. As is typical in electoral discourse part of the values upheld by the three party leaders are of a very general nature, aiming to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. Examples of these are the importance of education (Brown, line 6, Cameron 1 and 5, Clegg 3³), moral outrage over the expenses scandals (Brown, lines 1, 5, 8; Cameron 2, 4, 6), and patriotic values, like Clegg’s pride in British values (line 1), and Cameron’s love for the Country (line 3).

Brown

1 ible scandal and something that I am ashamed of on behalf of all.
 2 ordinary, hard-working families. I believe in fairness, but one thin
 3 but we're trying to do it. Now, I believe in work, too, because I'
 4 I feel passionate about opportunity for
 5 that is in the public interest. I have never been so angry as when I
 6 rades and standards are concerned, I myself believe in the highest of
 7 ". It just does not make sense. I'm sorry that Boris Johnson, the Mayor
 8 I was shocked and I was sickened by wh

³Cameron’s and Clegg’s reference to education becomes evident only considering the larger context in which lines 5 and 3 respectively occur: “As someone who has got two children, one of whom started at a state school in London, and hopefully another child to come, I'm passionate about getting as much money into the school as possible, rather than wasting it in Whitehall” (Cameron); and “I see myself as a father that what happens to a young child in a reception class, years one, two and three, is so important in developing their self-confidence, their social skills, their willingness to learn. Get it right at that early age, and we can really help people later in life. That's what I believe in” (Clegg).

Cameron

1 what I'd say in terms of what I care about most in education with
 2 for MPs to abuse the system. I know how angry I was when I heard
 3 for a very simple reason, that I love this country, and I think we c
 4 ought great shame on parliament. I'm extremely sorry for everything tha
 5 hopefully another child to come, I'm passionate about getting as much m
 6 edibly proud of my country. But I'm so ashamed that we've had this out-

Clegg

1 I am so proud of the values that ha
 2 to work. Our plan would do that. I believe in work. I think work is
 3 eople later in life. That's what I believe in.
 4 referendum next year. I'm absolutely dismayed by this. This
 5 don't do enough. I'm acutely aware I don't do enough, I'

At the same time, in Brown's lines one can see an attempt to strike a chord with the particular audience of labourites, selecting values that are dear to them: in lines 2 and 3 he affirms his belief in fairness and work (the latter being mentioned also by Clegg in line 2) and his being passionate about opportunity [for all] (line 4) all of which are keywords of the New Labour's discourse.

For the sake of clarity of analysis the two macro-categories of arguments – causal and symptomatic – have been considered separately, but it is often the case that they are used jointly. In these cases, the standpoint supported throughout the debates ('vote for me') tends to be defended by a symptomatic scheme (e.g. *Because I know what it takes to foster economic recovery. And having such a know-how is symptomatic of being the best candidate*), while the causal scheme is used to back the claim made by the candidate ('as an effect of the measure taken under my leadership, we've started moving from recession to recovery').

3.2 David Cameron

Brown was the candidate who used arguments most consistently, relying massively on clearly recognizable and repeated schemes. However, also for the other two candidates it is possible to identify some characterizing rhetorical patterns. Starting, as was the case for Brown, from the remarks opening the first debate, this is Cameron's exordium:

- (10) *I think it's great* we're having these debates, and *I hope* they go some way to restore some of the faith and some of the trust into our politics [...] The expenses saga brought great shame on parliament. *I'm extremely sorry* for everything that happened. Your politicians, frankly all of us, let you down. Now, there is a big choice at this election: we can go on as we are, or we can say no, Britain can do much better; we can deal with our debts, we can get our economy growing and avoid this jobs tax, and we can build a bigger society. But we can only do this if we recognise *we need join together, we need to come together, we need to recognise we're all in this together*. Now, not everything Labour has done in the last 13 years has been wrong - they've done some good things and I would keep those, but we need change, and it's that change I want to help to lead.

The call for change, a typical move for challengers in electoral campaigns, can be considered an example of pragmatic argument, whereby the standpoint 'vote for me' is defended on the ground that this would produce desirable results, and conversely, the re-election of the incumbent candidate would perpetuate an undesirable state of things. However, from the rhetorical point of view, what seems to prevail here is a conciliatory, rather than an openly confrontational drive, as suggested by the three-part structure "we

need join together, we need to come together, we need to recognise we're all in this together." Manual analysis of the debates reveals that this assertion has the status of a soundbite,⁴ as the call to unity is a sort of leitmotiv for Cameron throughout the debates. Associated to this is the prevalence of the expressive function, manifest in the recurrence of mental processes (to be happy /to hope / to feel sorry), as well as the self reproaching speech act "Your politicians, frankly all of us, let you down", by means of which Cameron apologizes for the poor record of politicians as a class in the wake of the expenses scandals. In the same tone is the concession "not everything Labour has done in the last 13 years has been wrong", even though in this case behind the conciliatory facade the presupposition is that most of what Labour has done *was* wrong. All these aspects suggest that Cameron is pursuing a strategy based on interpersonal work, more than on logical reasoning with the aim of establishing himself as a sincere person, thus overcoming the wall of distrust that divides the people from politicians. His opening remarks are then characterized by an appeal to ethos, while the call to unity epitomised by the 'come together' soundbite, which leverages on a sense of national belonging and commonality, can be seen as an appeal to pathos.

While in terms of frequency there is no great variation among the three leaders, the collocation in which the word 'together' occurs confirm that the call to joining together in time of crisis is a distinctive trait of Cameron's rhetoric, particularly if compared to Brown's. In Cameron's turns, all the occurrences of 'together', with one exception in which it is referred to enhancing communication among sectors of the army (line 15), repeat the pattern outlined in the opening remarks, as shown below:

Cameron

N Concordance

9 different faiths, we bring faiths closer together with each other and we are
 10 where we really think we should come together much more effectively. That is, I
 11 the country's going to have to come together to deal with this really big
 12 need join together, we need to come together, we need to recognise we're all
 13 and real change comes when we come together and work together. That's the
 14 do this if we recognise we need join together, we need to come together, we
 15 and war, you've got to bring people together better than we do now.
 16 we can achieve anything if we pull together and build the big society we all
 17 actually we build a strong society together. I think that's really important to
 18 an understanding that we're all in this together and real change comes when
 19 we need to recognise we're all in this together. Now, not everything Labour has
 20 have responsibilities. We're all in this together, and that's how we will build the
 21 when we come together and work together. That's the sort of the change
 22 I think we should try and work together where we can. I've always

In Brown's turns 'together' occurs in a more diversified context, only once in the sense of a call to unity among political parties for the sake of the country (line 10 below), while more frequently it refers to a synergy among UK Institutions (lines 4, 5 ,6), a dialogue between different religions (lines 7, 9, 15) and international (lines 11, 12, 13, 14).

⁴ An expression that can be easily picked up by and repeated by the media and which easy to remember.

Brown

N Concordance

4 council for Britain and **that brings together** all the leading businessmen and
 5 for financial stability **which brings together** the Governor of the Bank of
 6 measures we've taken. **We've brought together** the police and the immigration
 7 in our world. The faiths **must come together** and recognise they have
 8 for that matter, David Cameron, **to join together** in the European Union with a
 9 all religions because **bringing religions together** is the key to making sure that
 10 I want the parties **to work together**. When I became Prime
 11 action with all of **us working together**. We are nuclear weapon states.
 12 but when Europe and **America works together**, we are so much stronger.
 13 of our banks, we've had call **the world together** in London to have a big summit
 14 and the right decisions to get **the world together** to deal with that recession.
 15 religious faiths to work **more closely** together.

Clegg's use of 'together' resembles more closely Cameron's rhetoric, with ten lines out of fifteen referring to the necessity of cooperation among parties as well as national unity (lines 1, 2, 5-7, 11-15). However, these do not represent the totality of occurrences, as the remaining lines refer to the European dimension – with Clegg making the case for staying in the EU (lines 8 and 9) and criticising Cameron for partnering with far-right parties in the European Union⁵ –, or address the voters directly, urging them to join the speaker (lines 3, 10) in the effort of bringing change.

Clegg

N Concordance

1 how long it'll take for us as **a country, together**, to deal with it.
 2 how bad this situation is **and how together** we're going to get out of it. I
 3 you from following **your instincts**. **Together**, next week, we can change
 4 for that matter, David Cameron, **to join together** in the European Union with a
 5 the vice-chancellors of all **the parties together**, with the governor of the Bank
 6 and Vice-Chancellors of all **the parties together**. I've suggested we call it the
 7 like us for once to **get politicians together**...
 8 the safety of children. We **are safer together**, we're weaker apart. Gordon
 9 above our weight when **we stand together** in Europe in a world, frankly,
 10 do things differently this **time, then together** we really will change Britain.
 11 than any other party, **actually work together?** There are some things,
 12 it's better if politicians try **and work together**. That's why I proposed several
 13 point scoring when we **can work together** on a solution that works for
 14 to get the politicians **actually working together** on this. I've suggested - I don't
 15 come up with a longer **term proposal** together. Elderly people should not

⁵ The whole context goes as follows “How on earth does it help anyone in Bristol or anyone else in the country for that matter, David Cameron, to join together in the European Union with a bunch of nutters, anti-Semites, people who deny climate change exists, homophobes?”

Another distinctive rhetorical trait in Cameron's speech is the expression of regret for a better time in the past, as shown by the following concordances, extracted using the word 'back' as a node:

Cameron

N Concordance

- 1 control, and it does need to be brought **back** under control.
- 2 and headteacher, in particular, control **back** over their school. Discipline is the
- 3 system and put the Bank of England **back** in charge and change things is the
- 4 is that we put the Bank of England **back** in charge of regulating the banks,
- 5 needs to be a cap. I want us to get **back** to a situation where the net number
- 6 what it would really achieve is getting **back** to where we used to be, where we
- 7 these banks properly. We would put **back** to the Bank of England the power
- 8 Then simple changes which would put **back** in control. I want to see more

As shown by these concordance lines, the word 'back', in Cameron's turns, is always associated with the idea of restoring control over something (immigration, lines 1 and 5; schools, line 2) or analogously to put someone back in control of something, namely the Bank of England with regard to banks (3, 4, 7), and the people (8) with regard to politics.⁶ Interestingly enough, the word 'back' is a trigger of presupposition, and more specifically an iterative trigger (Levinson 1983), whereby a certain status of things in the past is presented as part of the speaker and audience's shared knowledge. In this way Cameron creates the illusion that there was an indisputably better time, unanimously recognized as such, and that it is sufficient to go back to the old ways to solve current problems. Cameron's call for change, then takes the shape of a return to the past, reference being here to a time preceding the 13 years of Labour government, or simply to an ideal earlier moment in the history of the country.

The distinctive role of the *topos* of the past in Cameron's discourse becomes even more evident in comparison with the use of the same word by the other two candidates: in Clegg's discourse the word 'back' is never mentioned, while in Brown's turns it only recurs three times, two of which contain warnings against the risk of returning to a previous state of things which is not desirable at all.⁷

⁶ Cf. the broader context in which the word back occurs: "There is just anger about the expenses fiasco. People say, "I pay my taxes to have decent politics and yet the money's been spent on all these appalling things." [...]. So strict limits on what can be spent, total transparency so you, the voters, can see every penny. [...] Then simple changes which would put back in control. I want to see more people involved in choosing candidates for the parties, holding open primaries [...]."

⁷ With regard to line 1, this is made clear by the immediate context of the word 'back', while in the case of line 3 the broader context has to be taken into account: "There's a lot to this job, and as you saw yesterday, I don't get all of it right, but I do know how to run the economy in good times and in bad. When the banks collapsed, I took immediate action to stop crisis becoming calamity and to stop a recession becoming a depression. As a result of that, Britain is now on the road to recovery. But as we meet tonight, economies in Europe are in peril, and there is a risk of dragging us into recession. So I'm determined that nothing will happen in Britain that will put us back in that position"

Brown

N Concordance

- 1 a Britain-only solution and let's not go back to the days when we were fighting
- 2 been got rid of. We are bringing that back. Biometric visas mean that we can
- 3 will happen in Britain that will put us back in that position, and I want to set

3.3 Nick Clegg

Finally, distinctive rhetorical traits of Clegg's speech will be taken in consideration. Also the Liberal Democrat leader urges people to choose a new course for the UK, thus using a pragmatic scheme, as his colleagues. But while Cameron's presentational choices revealed a conciliatory approach in his opening remarks, Clegg adopts an opposite strategy. From the very beginning, he makes recourse to what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958/1969) classify as loci from dissociation, i.e. techniques meant to separate elements that are regarded as forming a whole or at least a unified group.⁸ The discourse of separation is introduced already in the first debate's opening statement, where he exploits the opposition real/ideal to express a negative evaluation of the *status quo*:

- (11) *I believe the way things are is not the way things have to be. You're going to be told tonight by these two that the only choice you can make is between two old parties who've been running things for years. I'm here to persuade you that there is an alternative. I think we have a fantastic opportunity to do things differently for once. If we do things differently, we can create the fair society, the fair country we all want: a fair tax system, better schools, an economy no longer held hostage by greedy bankers, decent, open politics. Those are the changes I believe in. I really wouldn't be standing here tonight if I didn't think they were all possible. So don't let anyone tell you that the only choice is old politics. We can do something new; we can do something different this time. That's what I'm about; that's what the Liberal Democrats offer.*

The separation discourse continues with a dissociation, in which the notion of 'political parties' is semi-explicitly (van Rees 2005) divided into 'old parties', which had been running the country for years, to which a negative value is attached, and 'new parties' who had never run the country, i.e. the Liberal Democrats, and therefore cannot be blamed for current problems. The difference between old politics and his new proposals is emphasised also by repetition of the soundbite 'do things differently / do something different', which is also refrained in the other debates. The theme of difference between Clegg and his two adversaries is further stretched, becoming openly confrontational with the words "You're going to be told by these two that the only choice you can make is between two old parties". Here the audience is represented as the object of manipulation by the leaders of the 'old parties', while Clegg's mission is presented as openly argumentative ("I'm here to persuade you that"), therefore legitimate. All these strategies are aimed at enhancing the character of the speaker, thus characterizing Clegg's manoeuvring as based on ethical appeals.

⁸ In Perelman and Olbrechts Tyteca's classification (1969), dissociations proper are part of a larger group of arguments based on 'breaking connecting links', which rest on techniques of separation which have the purpose of dissociating, separating, disuniting elements which are regarded as forming a whole or at least a unified group within some system of thought (Perelman/Olbrechts-Tyteca p. 190).

In order to verify that the strategy adopted in the opening remarks is representative of Clegg's discourse throughout the debate, a quantitative comparison has been made of the use of the determiners 'both' and 'neither' and the preposition 'unlike' by each candidate. The choice fell on determiners with a dual meaning, as no meaningful results emerged from corpus investigation of the standard indicators of dissociation (cf. van Rees 2005). On the other hand, as suggested by qualitative analysis, Clegg's attack often addressed both his adversaries at once, considering them two sides of the same old-politics coin. Similarly, the preposition 'unlike' could be a indicators of Clegg's attempts to mark the difference between himself and his adversaries. The concordance outputs for the node words both / neither / unlike are reported below, sorted by candidate:

Clegg

N Concordance

- 1 close to the city. The blunt truth is that **both** Conservative and Labour
- 2 of tough talking about immigration from **both** Conservative and Labour
- 3 which has been run chaotically by **both** Conservative and Labour
- 4 for a long time. All I would say to **both** David Cameron and Gordon Brown
- 5 election, whoever wins that election, **both** David Cameron and Gordon Brown
- 6 I have to say to **both** David Cameron and Gordon Brown,
- 7 For a fraction of the money that I think **both** David Cameron and Gordon Brown
- 8 pounds. I don't think it's right to do what **both** David Cameron and Gordon Brown
- 9 I put forward in Westminster, **both** David Cameron and Gordon Brown's
- 10 going wrong for so long. We have had **both** major parties running governments
- 11 fact that there are a number of MPs in **both** the old parties, who flipped their
- 12 a huge amount of talk about it from **both** the old parties about doing that, lets
- 13 of course they should be deported. But **neither** David Cameron or Gordon Brown
- 14 you have no plan to deal with it, **neither** do you... Or you
- 15 I read your manifestos this week. In **neither** of them are you coming clean
- 16 similar, in the United States. And yet **neither** of the old parties want to even
- 17 off from politics. Something which **neither** of the other two old parties want
- 18 d the levels of abuse in expenses. **Neither** of you want to clean up the
- 19 Of course we can change Europe. I, **unlike** David Cameron and Gordon

As revealed by the immediate context of the node words displayed in the concordance lines, in all the occurrences the quantifiers refer to Clegg's adversaries, forming the patterns BOTH_CONSERVATIVE_AND_LABOUR, BOTH_THE_MAJOR/THE_OLD_PARTIES, NEITHER_OF_THE_OLD_PARTIES, with third-person reference, or the second person direct address NEITHER_OF_YOU, or its variants. Also 'unlike', which recurs just once, follows a similar pattern.

Gordon Brown's turns present similar uses of 'both' and 'neither', but with a much lower frequency, as shown in the concordance output below, while in Cameron's discourse this pattern is virtually absent, with just one case.

Brown

N Concordance

- 1 with Nick on child tax credits. They're both going to cut child tax credits for the
 2 to enter into private grief here, because both of them have got this wrong, I'm
 3 Nick is anti-American, and both of them are out of touch with reality.
 4 would lose child tax credits under both of your proposals.
 5 put at at risk actually by the policies of both parties here this evening. So your
 6 that child tax credits would be cut by both parties if they came into a coalition.
 7 hasn't thought through his policy and neither is Nick if he's going to argue
 8 of abuse in expenses. Gordon Brown. Neither of you want to clean up the

Also the words 'difference/different/differently' have been used as indicators of Clegg's rhetoric for quantitative investigation, and their frequency across candidates confirms the distinctive character of separation discourse for the leader of the Liberal Democrats, with 38 occurrences in his turns, 18 in Cameron's and 10 in Brown's.

4. Conclusions

The present paper aimed at exploring the possibilities of integrating corpus analysis techniques in the study of argumentation, and in order to do so the first cycle of TV electoral debates has been used as a case study. The analysis carried out has allowed to identify distinctive argumentative styles for each leader, starting from observations made in a preliminary qualitative step, on small quantities of the debates transcriptions, which have then been verified quantitatively on the whole corpus.

From the point of view of the specific case under investigation, it emerged that Gordon Brown, the incumbent candidate, relied massively on causal and symptomatic arguments, with emphasis being placed on facts, (i.e. his achievements in the previous term), in line with findings of functional theories of electoral discourse. Of the three candidates Brown seems to be the one who relied more consistently on identifiable and repeated argumentative schemes, thus characterizing his speech as based on logical appeals. Cameron, coherently with his role of opposition leader, emphasised the need for change, which in general terms can be categorized as a broad instantiation of pragmatic argument, but the most distinguishing traits of his discourse, identified with the assistance of quantitative analysis, emerged at the rhetorical more than at logical level. His repeated calls to unity – national unity and unity among the main parties – in the face of the serious global economic crisis afflicting the country, leveraging on a feeling of common belonging, associated with the expression of a better time in the past, which Cameron's programme set out to restore, testify to the existence of a significant component of appeals to pathos in the Conservative leader. Also Clegg's discourse, finally, emphasised the need for change, but unlike Cameron's, it revolved around marking the difference between the leader of the Liberal Democrats and his adversaries, exploiting arguments based on breaking connecting links (in spite of rhetorical appeals to unity among parties). Clegg's choice of arguments based on division was functional to presenting himself as the only real alternative to old politics, thus making recourse prevalently to ethical appeals.

More in general, from a methodological point of view, this study demonstrates that it is possible to envisage a role for corpus linguistics in the study of argumentation. Of course there are limits to what can be automatically retrieved in a corpus, due to the fact that often reasoning unfolds implicitly or anyway without explicit indicators which can be associated to a particular step in the critical discussion, or to any specific scheme. However, corpus investigation can still prove valuable, if associated with qualitative analysis, so that the latter can compensate for what slips through the net of automatized interrogation routines. Qualitative analysis plays also a fundamental role in the preliminary identification of possible indicators of the aspects under investigation. While some of them can be considered standard, being attested in the literature on indicators of argumentation – and this is mostly the case of function words – others are context specific, and can only be spotted taking into account the peculiarities and conventions of the activity type at issue.

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