We believe the Iranian nation can: The manifestation of power in Iranian televised presidential debates

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ABSTRACT

The current study scrutinizes the use of hedges and boosters by the Iranian 2009 presidential election winner (Ahmadinejad) in three presidential debates in which he participated. Starting with power in the sense defined by Locher (2004) and García-Pastor (2008), we adopted a bottom-up approach to analyze the debates. A functional model of hedges and boosters in light of what surfaced in the analysis coupled with an awareness of the existing literature was proposed. We demonstrate that Ahmadinejad's hedging and boosting strategies underwent significant fluctuations from one debate to another leading to different displays of power through language.

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1. Introduction

Politicians enter the political arena armed with the linguistic strategies peculiar to political discourse. Meticulously selected words are the weapons politicians draw upon whenever they want to defeat an adversary, persuade their viewers, disguise disagreements, reconcile points of view, evade a direct answer, mitigate responsibility, garner the electoral support and, generally, manipulate reality. As political figures run for elections, they seem to deploy their linguistic resources (assets) as shields to protect themselves and weapons to overcome their opponents. The manifestation of this is the presidential candidates' participation in televised debates. During a debate, candidates may tend to influence electorates by 'clashing on their policy positions' (Benoit, 2000, p. 22), dodging responsibility, intensifying commitment or detachment, expressing im/politeness, degrading each other, exerting power over one another, or strategically enacting their dominance or their underlying ideologies to tactfully create power asymmetry between their rivals and themselves in a way that galvanizes voter support. Therefore, they put their linguistic assets to good use to sound powerful at times and cautious at others in the hope of presenting a positive image of themselves.

Since in a political debate one candidate's victory entails another's defeat, García-Pastor (2008) talks of these debates as 'zero-sum games' (p. 100). This win–lose essence of political debates has made debaters adopt an aggressive stance towards each other, and this, in turn, has rendered electoral debates 'a paramount instance of contexts where the interrelation between power and impoliteness becomes evident' (García-Pastor, 2008, p. 103).

Power, due to its nebulous nature, has been talked of as 'the many-headed Hydra in voluminous literature' for which no comprehensive overview or critique can be provided (Culpeper, 2008, pp. 17–18). Scrutinizing the literature on power, however, suggests that the lowest common denominator is that power has the potential of restricting the actions of the target (Locher and Bousfield, 2008, p. 9). It is claimed that there is 'no interaction without power', and the exercise of power is realized in terms of impoliteness, since impoliteness has the potential to restrict the future action–environment of one's interlocutor (Wartenberg, 1990, as cited in Locher and Bousfield (2008, p. 9)). Another agreed upon feature of power is that it is

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'highly dynamic, fluid and negotiable', and even higher status participants can be coerced through impoliteness manifested by lower status interactants (Locher and Bousfield, 2008, p. 9). This shows that power is 'social', 'up for grabs' and resistible (García-Pastor, 2008, p. 105). Locher (2004, pp. 39–40) has provided a checklist which summarizes the nature and exercise of power in social practice:

1. Power is (often) expressed through language.
2. Power cannot be explained without contextualization.
3. Power is relational, dynamic and contestable.
4. The interconnectedness of language and society can also be seen in the display of power.
5. Freedom of action is needed to exercise power.
6. The restriction of an interactant's action–environment often leads to the exercise of power.
7. The exercise of power involves a latent conflict and clash of interests, which can be obscured because of a society's ideologies.

Being in pursuit of attaining the electorates' persuasion, as maintained by García-Pastor (2008, p. 105), candidates need to exert power either in an 'official' or 'unofficial' form. Official power is 'institutionalized and expected by the participants', hence overt. On the other hand, unofficial power which candidates exert through persuasive attempts is 'associated with the audience' and 'lacks institutional recognition and is power of a covert kind'. The essence of this persuasion, which sometimes becomes manipulation, according to Van Dijk (1995a, p. 31) is 'mind control' which leads to 'action control'. Therefore, it is through minds that action is controlled, and if a socially powerful candidate can influence electorates' minds or their knowledge or opinions, s/he will persuade them to act as s/he wishes, and this is the indirect control of action (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 355) which is sometimes termed as hegemony. This dominance may be exercised over discourse which is taken as a 'basis or resource of power' (Van Dijk, 1995b, p. 20). By means of tactful manipulation of discourse, persuaders try to reach their ends, and metadiscourse markers (e.g., hedges and boosters) can be among the linguistic devices which contribute to this process of persuasion.

Hedges and boosters, two subcategories of metadiscourse markers, have been shown to fulfill various functions, and their undeniable role in expressing doubt, certainty, commitment, detachment, and evasion (e.g., Bhatia, 2006; Holmes, 1990; Hyland, 2005; Hidalgo, 2002) deserves a great deal of attention. It has been suggested that modifying the illocutionary force of a speech act can be due to two basic reasons which can serve both positive and negative face wants (Holmes, 1984; Jalilifar and Alavi-Nia, 2011). One of the reasons is to convey the speaker's attitude towards the content of the proposition. In such a case, a speaker may use hedges to express his/her doubt about the truth a proposition contains or his/her reluctance to take responsibility for its validity (approximators). The second reason is to manifest affective meaning or the speaker's attitude to the interlocutor in the context of an utterance (shields). The use of hedges to attenuate a negatively affective speech act (i.e., mitigation) can contribute to building a rapport with the interlocutor, hence decreasing the social distance between the interlocutors (Holmes, 1984, pp. 349–350). In political discourse, it is often through this mitigation that illiberal discourse masquerades as liberal (Blackledge, 2005, p. 25).

Like hedging, boosting modifies the illocutionary force of speech acts and, in fact, it is a complementary strategy to hedging (Holmes, 1984, p. 346). Boosters can be used to sound 'assertive' (Vassileva, 2001, p. 88), 'straightforward' (Vassileva, 2001, p. 89) and 'confident' (Vassileva, 2001, p. 90); however, this kind of claim-making can be conflictive and face threatening and, thus, it can express impoliteness (Bousfield, 2008, p. 72). To sound even more impolite, boosters can be used to hype the intended face damage (Bousfield, 2008).

Recent years have witnessed increased attention being given to the politicians' use of stance markers (or attitudinal markers, including hedges and boosters) in a vast array of genres staged by television, i.e., interviews, press conferences, debates, and speeches (e.g., Bhatia, 2006; Blas-Arroyo, 2003; Fetzer, 2008; Fraser, 2010a; Jalilifar and Alavi-Nia, 2011, 2012; Simon-Vandenbergen, 2008; Hidalgo, 2002). These studies have demonstrated how some hedges (e.g., doxastic expressions), which are conceived of as revealing displays of conventional politeness or mitigation in political interviews (Fetzer, 2008), can be used in the adversarial genre of face-to-face debates to serve completely egocentric purposes (Blas-Arroyo, 2003) or in a non-hedging manner in a press conference (Fraser, 2010a). It has been argued that, in a debate, hedges can contribute to the maintenance of 'positive indirectness' which refers to 'the absence of clear statements of policy' while boosters may conduce to the expression of 'negative directness' which refers to 'the presence of strong language in the attacks on both the discourse of the debate and political opponents' (Simon-Vandenbergen, 2008, p. 351), whereas in press conferences, intensifiers have been shown to contribute to expressing 'power statements' by means of which politicians dominate and influence one another (Bhatia, 2006, p. 186). Therefore, these linguistic strategies allow politicians to exercise power in discourse by accentuating or trivializing certain words and voices through their emphasis or dilution (Boussofara-Omar, 2006, p. 330).

Considered from the perspective of the general characteristics of political discourse, 'power is jointly produced' (Simpson and Mayr, 2010, p. 2), and televised presidential debates seem to be the epitome of a context wherein candidates, under the constraints that weigh heavily on the choices of what can be said, try to imbue their discourse with power statements in order to demobilize the electorates and rally them around themselves while downplaying certain ideological positions to fend off the upcoming criticisms and attacks. In such a context, even the minutiae of a text's linguistic make-up can lay bare ideological standpoints, and fruitful comparisons can be drawn between the ways in which a particular linguistic feature is deployed across different presidential candidates in different contexts.