

A Functional Analysis of the Finnish 2012 Presidential Debates

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<p>Abstract:</p> <p>Functional theory of political campaign discourse has been applied widely to analysis political campaign discourse, especially political debates. However, there have been claims that the theory is not a suitable tool for analysing political debates outside the United States. In this paper the functional theory of political campaign discourse is applied to the analysis of Finnish 2012 presidential debates. In addition to forming a clearer picture of Finnish political campaign discourse, the aim is to compare the results to those reached in the United States and to reach a better understanding of possible differences between the two political cultures. Finally, the paper poses a question: to what extent is functional theory of political campaign discourse a suitable tool for analysing political campaign discourse in Finland?</p> <p>The theory was applied to the analysis of two 2012 presidential debates, both taking place between Mr Sauli Niinistö from the National Coalition Party and Mr Pekka Haavisto from the Green Party. The results of the analysis generally supported the hypotheses presented by the functional theory. However, there were also clear differences – namely, the large amount of utterances that did not fit into any of the categories presented by the theory – that suggest the theory could be developed further to take into account the differences in political cultures.</p>	
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Introduction

Presidential elections are likely to be the most anticipated and high-profiled event of a democratic society: every number of years, the people gather together and express opinion on who should be the leader of their nation for the near future. Presidential candidates do their best to distinguish themselves from one another and to present themselves in a positive light, and the people will try and make an informed decision on who, from their personal perspective, is the best candidate for the job. In making this important decision they are influenced by different forms of campaign messages that do their best not only to provide information, but also to influence the voters' final decision. Perhaps the most important of these message forms is presidential debates.

Televised debates are said to be “extremely important” (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013) due to the various advantages they possess compared to other campaign message forms. Compared to for example a television spot or an advertisement aired in radio channels, televised debates give the candidates much more room to present their case and to distinguish themselves from one another. In debates, candidates are engaged in dialogue, which makes it easier for the voters to make comparisons between the candidates. Since candidates are usually not allowed to bring any notes to these debates, they offer voters a chance to see a more spontaneous side of them. Finally, debates usually generate a lot of attention both from media and from general public, which means increased public discussion that ultimately benefits the voters (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013). Several studies on the effects of watching televised debates indicate that not only does watching these debates increase the knowledge of the voters, but also has the capability of affecting their final voting decisions, especially in cases where they were originally undecided (eg. Benoit et al., 1998; Benoit & Stephenson, 2004; Lemert, 1993; Schrott, 1990). Therefore, it is clear these televised presidential elections merit scholarly attention.

In this research I will apply the functional theory of political campaign discourse, developed by William L. Benoit et al. (eg. Benoit, 2007), to analyse the televised presidential

debates of the 2012 presidential elections in Finland. The functional theory makes a series of assumptions and predictions on the utterances performed by candidates in their campaign discourse and has been used to analyse every presidential debate in the United States (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013), among other forms of campaign messages, which include television spots, direct mail advertising and talk show appearances. In recent years the theory has also been applied to presidential elections in other countries with mixed results: most of the studies seem to indicate that presidential campaign discourse is the same across borders and cultures, yet a few studies (eg. Cmeciú & Patrut, 2010; Hrbková & Zagrapan, 2014; Isotalus, 2011) have presented criticism towards the theory, claiming it to be too culturally limited to be useful in cultures different from the United States. Isotalus (2011) has already applied the functional theory to Finnish elections, analysing the 2006 presidential elections in Finland. He criticized the theory for not being applicable in multi-party systems and for not being suitable for analysing political campaign discourse in Finland as the Finnish speech culture differs greatly from the American speech culture. The functional theory of political campaign discourse was chosen for this very reason: It has clearly delivered consistent results in the United States, yet from an intercultural perspective, further research is needed to determine its applicability. Since this is first and foremost a Master's Thesis of Intercultural Communication, choosing this theory seemed appropriate.

Even though the functional theory of political campaign discourse has already been applied to Finnish presidential debates, there are strong reasons for conducting another study. First of all, applying the theory to another set of presidential debates in the same country helps determine whether the results of the first study are really caused by cultural differences or whether they were only applicable to one set of debates. Second, the Finnish political system offers an interesting comparison to the political system in the United States: the 2012 instead of a two-party system, Finland is a parliamentary multi-party system. Whereas, in the United States the president is clearly in charge of running the government, in Finland the president has in recent years been stripped from

a large amount of political power. Instead of running the government, the president is seen as a “symbol of the nation”, somebody who represents the core values of the country and is in charge of international relations of the country (Halonen, 2002) – again, symbolically, as for example the matters concerning the European Union are mainly handled by the Prime Minister and the government. Third, the 2012 presidential elections in Finland were particularly interesting and deserve a closer analysis, which has not been provided so far. In the 2012 elections there was no incumbent candidate, as President Tarja Halonen was leaving the office. Out of the eight candidates, Mr Sauli Niinistö was predicted by many as the clear winner (Kinnunen, 2011). Nevertheless, the elections preceded to a second round, where Mr Niinistö was challenged by Mr Pekka Haavisto – the first openly homosexual candidate in the history of Finland. Therefore, in the end, the 2012 presidential elections was an election of values and ideals: many voters, especially younger ones, voted for Mr Haavisto simply for the reason of wanting to support gay rights in Finland. Some people also voted Mr Niinistö for the same reason: because they did not want to have a homosexual president in Finland (Blencowe, 2012). Therefore, although one of the assumptions made by the functional theory of political campaign discourse is that in presidential elections, policy issues matters more than the character of the candidates; in this particular set of elections it is clear that character and personal attributes played a decisive role. It is interesting to see whether it will have a visible effect to the results.

The research conducted here serves as an analysis of the political campaign discourse in the context of Finnish presidential elections. In addition to that, it also serves as a cross-cultural study, where the results of this Finnish analysis will be compared to those of the studies conducted in the United States. The aim of this research is to shed light on possible differences in political campaign discourse between Finland and the United States as well as the possible causes of these differences. From another perspective, this research is also an intercultural one. In this research I ask the question: can the functional theory of political campaign discourse, originally created to

analyse elections in the United States, be applied to other cultures as well, or is political campaign discourse too culturally bound to be analysed with this method?

The research proceeds as follows: First, I review previous literature on the functional theory of political campaign discourse. Second, there is an overview of the process of electing a president in Finland, as well as an overview of the 2012 presidential campaign. Third, I present the results of my study, in which the functional theory of political campaign discourse is applied to analyse the 2012 Finnish presidential election televised debates, and discuss the implications of these results.

Functional theory of political campaign discourse

Political campaigns have one purpose: to help the campaigning politician to gain victory in elections. Thus, every part of the campaign, from debates to public appearances and televised advertisements is aimed at supporting this goal. Therefore, it is no wonder political campaigns have attracted much attention from scholars – after all, when someone is trying to convince us to do something as important as to vote for them in elections, it only makes sense to attempt to understand what tools and methods they are using to sway our opinions.

One of the most popular tools for analysing political campaign discourse is the functional theory of political campaign discourse, developed in the United States by Benoit et al. The theory is focused on analyzing the content of the campaign messages and classifying that content to attacks, acclaims, and defences according to what was said, thus resulting in better understanding of "tactics" employed by the campaigning politicians. The functional theory has been applied to many different kinds of campaign messages as well as various different cultures.

In this monograph I present a review of the functional theory of political campaign discourse. I begin by examining the contents of the theory and the assumptions that it makes. Then I move on to reviewing previous applications of the theory, both in the case of types of discourse and

culture. Finally I discuss the benefits and possible drawbacks of applying the functional theory to the study of political campaign discourse.

Functional theory of political campaign discourse

As stated above, the functional theory of political campaign discourse was developed in the United States by Benoit and associates. For this reason, most of the research applying functional theory is also conducted by Benoit, either alone or together with other researchers. Therefore, most of the sources cited in this literature review are sourced written by Benoit.

The functional theory of political campaign discourse states political campaign messages are inherently functional in their very nature, as they are delivered to achieve one purpose: the winning of the election. This is most likely true in two-party systems, where both candidates have a reasonable chance of winning the debate; however, as is acknowledged by Benoit (2007), it is possible that sometimes in the elections there are candidates who do not stand a chance of winning the elections and who therefore use the campaign to fulfil some other purpose, such as laying groundwork for the next elections or furthering the agenda of their own party. Benoit does not provide a clear answer on how the functional theory is applied in the case of these candidates; however it is vital to remember that these candidates do exist and are represented at different political campaigns.

The functional theory of political campaign discourse is based on five different assumptions or axioms (Benoit, 2007): first, that voting is a comparative act, second, that candidates must distinguish themselves from their opponents, third, that political campaign messages allow candidates to distinguish themselves, fourth, that candidates establish preferably through acclaiming, attacking and defending, and fifthly and finally, that campaign discourse occurs on two topics: policy and character.

The first axiom, that voting is a comparative act, states that when voters are making the decision who to vote for in the election, they are doing this by comparing the candidates to one

another and then giving their vote to the candidate who seems most preferable compared to the other candidates. What this means in practice is that no candidate has to – or even could – be “perfect” in the eyes of the voter; it is enough to be perceived as preferable to the other candidates. In this case, the definition of *preferable* is entirely dependent on the voter, as each voter has their own criteria they use to measure the candidates: thus, what is appealing in the eyes of one voter might seem unappealing to the other. The voters make the comparison based on their pre-existing attitudes and the information available to them in the form of campaign messages and other sources. Benoit (2007) noted that the idea of comparing candidates has become more important as the power of political parties diminishes: people are no longer necessarily avid supporters of a certain party, whoever their candidate might be, but can be swayed from one party to the other depending on which party’s candidate seems most preferable to them at the moment of elections. Thus, it could be argued that politics is becoming less party-driven and more centralized on the traits and characteristics of a person (Benoit, 2007).

What follows logically from the first axiom is the second axiom, which states that in order to win the elections, candidates must distinguish themselves from the other candidates. As pointed out by Isotalus (2011), voters have no reason to prefer one candidate over the other if all the candidates appear similar to them. Benoit (2007) noted that it is natural for candidates to agree on some issues, for example their stance on national security or the need to develop the economy. However, for a candidate to seem preferable to others there must also be differences. According to Benoit, candidates can differentiate themselves from one another either by discussing character or by discussing policies. Differences in character could include traits such as reliability, honesty or leadership ability; differences in policies could include anything from a stance towards nuclear energy to arguments on how to strengthen the national security. To differentiate themselves, candidates can either highlight their own strengths or attempt to point out the weaknesses of their contenders.

According to the third axiom, candidates use political campaign messages to distinguish themselves. Again, this is a logical consequence of axiom number three: once a candidate has decided what message they want to convey to the audience, they must deliver that message to the voters; to reach this goal, they use political campaign messages. These can be anything from public appearances to televised debates and advertising via mail; each candidate has their preferences, guided by the limitations set by country – for example in the United Kingdom, political advertising on television is restricted (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013). Political campaign messages are a way for the candidates to paint themselves in a favourable light. Of course, in addition to these campaign messages there is always a certain amount of messages the candidates are not able to control, such as stories published by media and claims made by their opponents. However, political campaign messages are still a way to react to these stories and to attempt to limit any possible damage.

The fourth axiom states candidates establish preferability through attacking, acclaiming, and defending. *Attacking* means criticizing or attacking the opponent in order to increase one's preferability by pointing out the negative traits of the other options. Attacks can be focused either on character or on policy; for example a successfully delivered attack about a candidate's private investments might reduce that candidate's desirability in the case of a voter who is against politician's private investments. However, another voter might actually appreciate this particular trait, so pointing it out might actually do more damage to the attacker than to the person attacked. In addition to this, attacks also have another drawback: it has been found out that many voters dislike "mud-slinging", so trying to paint the opponent in an unfavourable light might turn out to be counterproductive. Nevertheless, Benoit (2007) stated that the fact that voters dislike mud-slinging does not mean an attack or a well-performed criticism would be ineffective in delivering a message: on the contrary, a good attack does stand a chance of reducing someone's desirability as a candidate. Attacks also differ from one another: research has indicated that the audience would

react more positively to policy attacks than to attacks directed against character (Jonhson-Cartee & Copeland, 1989, in Benoit, 2007). Therefore, attacks can be both a useful and a dangerous tool, best used sparingly and carefully.

Where there are attacks, there must also be defences. When candidates defend themselves in campaign messages, they are basically reacting to attacks that have been directed against them, either by providing their own side of the story or by proving the attack false. Defences can be beneficial, as they can prevent further damage from the attack or help to restore the candidate's damaged image (Benoit, 2007). However, they also have their drawbacks: to defend themselves, candidates are forced to draw attention to the attack they are trying to defend themselves against, which means repeating a negative message that the voters might already have forgotten about or never heard of in the first place. Therefore, as candidates are defending themselves to limit damage, they are also taking the risk that the action of the defence itself might cause some additional damage. In addition to this, the candidate also runs the risk of sounding defensive and drawing too much attention on a topic that favours the attacker. What naturally follows from this is that a candidate needs to think very carefully whether the attack is serious enough to take the risk.

Out of these three options, *acclaims* are the only ones that Benoit (2007) declares risk-free. These are statements that highlight the candidate's positive characteristics, expertise, and policy stance. For example if the general public is deemed to be against immigration, a candidate could state that should they be elected, they will be setting limits on immigration, thus painting themselves in a favourable light in the eyes of those who agree with this idea.

According to Benoit (2007), only these three statements or functions of discourse are capable of distinguishing the candidate, as they either highlight the positive sides of the candidate or the negative sides of the contenders. This has been criticized by Isotalus (2011), who argued these functions of discourse are culturally bound and do not take into consideration differences in speech

cultures. As an example Isotalus used the case of Finland, where according to him, attacks and defences are “not basic forms of communication” in political campaigns, and that there is one additional form of communication that is missing from Benoit’s list: expressions of agreement. This is an interesting statement that questions the viability of the functional theory as a tool for analysing political campaigns in different cultures: how much do political speech cultures really differ from one another, and are three functions of discourse enough to analyse political campaigns in different cultures? Nevertheless, the theory has been tested in many political cultures with results “generally consistent” with those of American elections (Benoit, 2007).

The functional theory makes two predictions about the frequency of which these three functions are used by candidates. The first prediction is that candidates will use acclaims more frequently than attacks, and the second prediction is in turn that candidates will use attacks more frequently than defences. The argument behind these predictions is that since acclaims have no visible drawbacks, they are the best and the safest option for a candidate to use. Attacks do have one drawback – that voters may dislike a candidate who uses too many attacks – but defences in turn have three, so again, it makes sense that attacks are used more frequently than defences. Different studies on political campaign messages support these predictions (Benoit, 2007).

The fifth and final axiom presented by the functional theory is that campaign discourse occurs on two topics: policy (issues) and character (image). Policy utterances are defined to include “governmental action (past, current or future) and problems amenable to governmental action” (Benoit, 2007), whereas character utterances include issues concerning “characteristics, traits, abilities or attributes of the candidates” (Benoit, 2007). Both of these are important when a voter is making a decision on who to vote for: they can only vote for a candidate if they agree with (most) of the policies the candidate is supporting, and if they are assured that the candidate is a decent person who has the capabilities and expertise to do the job properly. Benoit (2007) acknowledged that policy and character can sometimes have a complicated and intertwined

relationship: utterances focusing on policy can affect the image of the candidate and vice versa.

Sometimes it is possible that candidates attempt to shift the conversation from one topic to the next and turn a policy conversation into a conversation about their own abilities and traits.

According to functional theory, policy comments will be more frequent than character comments in presidential campaign discourse. This is the third prediction made by the theory. The reasoning behind this prediction is that presidents are elected to run governments, and for that reason voters are interested in their policies. Again, previous research seems to support this prediction (Benoit, 2007). However, the idea that a president is elected to run a government is not necessarily this simple, as the role of the president can be different in different countries. For example in the United States the president is clearly an important figure with lots of political power; in Finland, in contrast, the president's actual political tasks have been stripped down in recent years, making the president a relatively powerless figure, whose most important task is often seen to represent Finland in different institutions. If this is the case, then it would make sense to question, whether policy is seen as more important than character. After all, representing a country is much more tied to an image than to actual policies, which the president has very little to no control over. It seems that so far no research has been done on this area.

Policy and character utterances can be divided into further subsections. Firstly, policy comments can be divided into three categories: past deeds, future plans, and general goals. Past deeds discuss actions that have already been taken by the candidate, usually in some kind of elected position, and the effects those actions have had. These can be either positive or negative outcomes, and thus, can be used for either acclaims or attacks. In the case of future plans, a candidate is presenting his or her plans for the future – usually in the spirit of “if I will win this election I promise to do this”. Examples could include anything from tax cuts to better social services. For example in Finland in the parliamentary elections of 2007 the National Coalition party promised to give a pay rise to nurses, who had been visibly campaigning for more pay and better working

conditions, even going on a strike (Akkanen, 2014). The National Coalition party painted a picture of “Sari Sairaanhoitaja” (Nancy the Nurse) who needed to be helped – and would be helped, should only the party get votes in the elections (Akkanen, 2014). In the end, the party did win the parliamentary elections, and this promise to address the nurses’ situation is still seen as a major reason behind the victory (Akkanen, 2014). Therefore, future plans can clearly play an important role in gaining votes in the elections. However, as Benoit (2007) pointed out, it is possible voters want to hear specifics on how some plan will be actualized in the future, instead of a general promise of “making it happen”. Finally, policy utterances can also concern general goals, which address the ends instead of means – for example talking about tax cuts without specifying how it will happen in practice. The functional theory predicts that general goals will be discussed more than future plans. The reasoning behind this prediction is that general goals take less time to articulate than a proper plan, and they are also more likely to gain positive response from the audience, who may approve of the idea of cutting taxes but would disagree with a specific proposal to reach that goal. According to the functional theory, general goals and ideals are also used more for acclaims than attacks, as they are more likely to be perceived as “generally desirable” and also difficult to attack due to their unspecified nature (Benoit, 2007).

Also character utterances are divided into three categories: personal qualities, leadership ability, and ideals. Personal qualities discuss characteristics of the candidate, leadership ability refers to the candidate’s past experience in the office relevant to the position, and ideals include the values and principles of the candidate.

Previous applications of functional theory

As already mentioned, most of the research that applies functional theory into the study of political campaign discourse is conducted by Benoit and various associates. Considering that the theory was created by Benoit, this is not surprising. Neither is it surprising that most of the research applying the functional theory of political campaign discourse is done in the US and concerns American

elections – after all, the theory was developed in the US to study political campaign discourse of American elections. So far, the theory has been applied widely.

Perhaps the most popular application of the functional theory of political campaign discourse is election debates. Debates are said to be “an extremely important campaign message form” (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013, p.464) as they have various advantages to other message forms, such as the possibility to convey considerable amounts of information to audience due to the length of the debates or the possibility they offer to the voters to make comparisons between candidates: usually in debates, candidates are engaged in discussion and taking turns presenting their viewpoints, which makes it easier for the voters to distinguish the candidates from one another. Of course, this possibility for differentiation also benefits the candidates. Another benefit of debates is the candidates are usually not allowed to bring notes to the debate, which means they are forced to answer even unexpected questions or comments spontaneously. Benoit and Benoit-Bryan (2013) do acknowledge debates can never be completely spontaneous, as candidates can still prepare for them beforehand. However, compared to other message forms, such as televised advertisements or speeches, the level of spontaneity is higher, offering audience more insights into the candidates. Finally, debates often generate a lot of attention both from media and from the general public, which means increased public discussion and more possibilities for the voters to discuss their viewpoints and to gain more information (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013).

A considerable amount of research has gone into determining the effects that watching televised debates have on voters. Most of this research seems to be focused on presidential debates, possibly because they are considered to be the most significant because they attract most attention from voters. In the case of presidential debates, there seems to be an agreement among most researchers that televised debates do inform voters and help them learn information related to policies, campaigns, and candidates (Lemert, 1993). According to a study conducted by Lemert (1993), exposure to at least two presidential debates clearly increased the knowledge voters had on

the elections and the candidates; added to that, the voters' knowledge increased even more after watching a debate and a news special about the debate. These results are generally supported by others. Another topic of research is whether televised debates have the ability to affect the voting behaviour of voters. In West Germany, Schrott (1990) found that for a candidate, being perceived the "winner" of a political debate increases the amount of votes they are given. According to Schrott, especially those voters who are undecided and do not strongly identify with any party are more likely to vote for a person they feel "won" the debate. More recently, another study (Benoit, Webber, & Berman, 1998) found that watching televised debates not only increased the knowledge of the voters, but also affected their perceptions of the candidates: people who had watched the debate perceived one of the candidates more positively than people who had not watched the debate. However, due to the nature of the research – the researchers were not able to randomly assign people to either watch the debate or not – it is not possible to establish a cause-effect relationship between watching the debate and forming opinions on the candidates. Nevertheless, this finding is replicated in other studies: for example in 2004 Benoit and Stephenson found watching presidential primary debates affected the voters' perception of the candidates, importance of issues, candidate preference on issues, perceived viability and electability, voting preference, and certainty of voting choice.

According to Benoit and Benoit-Bryan (2013), the functional theory has been applied to every general election presidential debate in the US. Also many of the presidential primary debates between the years 1948-2000 (Benoit et al., 2002) have been covered by the theory. The results of all these studies are similar: in presidential election debates, acclaims are generally used more than attacks, which are used more than defences, and policy is discussed more than character. The challengers use more attacks than incumbents, who are more prone to using acclaims (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013). Also the results of research on other campaign mediums – web pages, radio spots, television spots, talk show appearances and convention speeches – seem to follow a similar

pattern (Benoit, 2007). The similarity between all these is not surprising, as all of these mediums still have the same goal: to positively distinguish oneself from the other candidates.

Even though the functional theory of political campaign discourse was first created to analyse presidential elections, the theory has also been applied to other elections. These other applications include presidential primaries, where candidates campaign to be elected their party's candidate for the presidential elections (eg. Benoit et al., 2011; Benoit et al., 2013; Glantz, Benoit & Airne, 2013), vice-presidential debates (Benoit & Henson, 2009) and midterm election campaigns (Henson & Benoit, 2008). Also congressional, gubernatorial, and senate campaigns have been analysed with the application of the functional theory (eg. Benoit et al., 2007, 2010; Brazeal & Benoit, 2001, 2006). Even though these campaigns are quite different by their very nature – for example in presidential primaries candidates are competing against the members of their own party instead of members of the opposing party – the results remain similar: attacks are more common than acclaims, which in turn are more common than defences in all of the campaigns presented above. Policy was also generally discussed more than character, even though one study (Brazeal & Benoit, 2006) does reach the conclusion that in congressional TV spots, policy, and character are discussed equally. However, this is only applicable to the year 1992 (when looking at a timeline from 1980 to 2004); after that, policy becomes more important than character, thus supporting the argument that policy is discussed more than character. These studies also attempt to reveal differences between parties: some studies indicate Democrats tend to discuss policy more than Republicans (eg. Brazeal & Benoit, 2006). However, other studies show this is true only in some elections (Benoit et al., 2008) or not true at all (Benoit et al., 2007). If there is a difference, it could possibly be attributed to differences in parties' viewpoints: Democrats tend to focus more on finding governmental solutions to problems whereas Republicans are more likely to rely private operations such as charity, thus leaning more on character (Benoit et al., 2008). Nevertheless, more research is needed to determine whether such correlations exist.

The functional theory of political campaign discourse was originally designed to analyse election campaigns in the United States (Benoit, 2007). In recent years, however, the functional theory of political campaign discourse has travelled also to other continents and been applied to several elections in various countries. So far, functional theory has been used to analyse political campaign discourse in Slovakia (Hrbková & Zagravan, 2014), United Kingdom (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013), France (Choi & Benoit, 2013), Spain (Herrero & Benoit, 2009), Israel (Benoit & Sheaffer, 2006), Taiwan (Benoit et al., 2007), Romania (Cmeciuc & Patrut, 2010), Ukraine (Benoit & Klyukovski, 2006), Germany (Benoit & Hemmer, 2007), Korea (Lee & Benoit, 2004, 2005), Finland (Isotalus 2010, 2011), Canada (Benoit, 2011; Benoit & Henson, 2007) and Australia (Benoit & Henson, 2007). Applying functional theory to research the political campaign discourse in countries other than the United States has inevitably raised the question of whether the theory is too culturally bound to its origins to be really useful in other cultures and political systems different from that of the United States. Critique towards the functional theory has been brought forward by Isotalus (2010, 2011) who claims, first, that the theory was developed to be used in a two-party system and is therefore difficult to apply to a multi-party system, second, that the functional theory only works in elections where the character of the candidate is important (Isotalus & Aarnio, 2005, in Isotalus, 2011) and third, that some forms of political discourse are culturally bound and therefore the division to attacks, acclaims and defences is not flexible enough to analyse political campaign debates in all cultures. Cmeciuc and Patrut (2010) agreed with this critique, stating that “election campaign discourses are not consistent across borders and cultures” (Cmeciuc & Patrut, 2010; p. 40); indeed, their study of the 2009 Romanian presidential debates revealed that the debates were not focused on acclaims and policy, as argued by the functional theory, but instead on attacks and defences. Also Hrbková and Zagravan’s (2014) research of the 2012 election debates in Slovakia reached similar conclusions, arguing the categories of content analysis should be expanded as with the current categories more than 30 percent of the content of the debates would be excluded

from the analysis – an argument also made by Isotalus (2011). Nevertheless, from the content analysed, acclaims were still the most common category, followed by attacks, which means that the results reached in Slovakia are at least somewhat similar to those reached in the United States. A different result was reached in Ukraine (Benoit & Klyukovski, 2006) where attacks were more common than acclaims; however, according to Benoit and Benoit-Bryan (2013), this result is at least partly due to the exceptional nature of the Ukrainian campaign in general: the campaign included a vote fraud as well as accusations of one candidate poisoning the other.

This critique notwithstanding, there are still several studies outside the US that seem to confirm the original assumptions of the functional theory of political campaign discourse: acclaims outnumber attacks, which are in turn more popular than defences (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013). Policy is also generally discussed more than character. Nevertheless, it is clear that analyses of political campaign discourse in different cultures provides mixed and contradicting results; this would seem to indicate that more research is needed. Even further research would be needed to determine the cause of these possible differences: whether it lies in the political system (parliamentary versus presidential), in the political culture (focus on policy versus focus on character) or in the speech culture (attacking versus consensus-seeking). At least the political culture and speech culture should be treated with caution; too much emphasis on the differences in national culture runs the risk of reducing political candidates to mere products of their culture, which is in my opinion too simplistic a view. On the other hand, it does also make sense to question the feasibility of applying one model of analysis to all political elections around the world: whether it is possibly or merely idealistic.

Benefits and drawbacks of functional theory

In this section I review both benefits and possible drawbacks of applying functional theory of political campaign discourse. Benoit argued the functional approach is especially appropriate for researching campaign messages because “such discourse is intended as a means of accomplishing a

goal: winning an election”, meaning political campaign discourse is by its very nature functional (Benoit, 2007, p. 32). According to Benoit (2007) there are also several other clear benefits for applying the functional theory to analyse political campaign discourse. One of these benefits is conformity with previous approaches in dividing utterances into negative (attacks) and positive (acclaims) ones; however, compared to previous research, the functional theory also introduces the concept of defences, which do have an important function in reducing harms caused by attacks. Another improvement presented by the functional theory is the division of categories of policy and character into smaller subcategories that enable reaching a better and deeper understanding of political campaign discourse. Also coding units of the functional theory of political campaign discourse are smaller than those of previous approaches; instead of analysing for example a whole television spot as either positive or negative, the functional theory is focused on analysing specific themes and utterances, thus taking into account the fact that an individual television spot can include both positive and negative utterances. Furthermore, this division into themes also enables researchers to apply the functional theory to other forms of campaign messages as well: a whole speech as a coding unit would simply be impossible to analyse (Benoit, 2007). Being able to analyse various forms of campaign messages using the same theory enables making better comparisons between different message forms, which in turn helps to create a clearer picture of political campaign discourse in general.

No theory, however, is without its possible drawbacks, and the functional theory of political campaign discourse is not an exception. Most of the possible drawbacks have already been discussed in this review and stem from critique presented towards the theory. One of these is the claimed lack of suitable categories; both Isotalus (2010, 2011) and Hrbková and Zagraban (2014) called for more functions to be included in the theory, stating that under the status quo too many utterances are left outside the analysis process. Both are especially calling for a function that includes expressions of agreement. Interestingly enough, both Finland and Slovakia are

parliamentary democracies: perhaps expressions of agreement are somehow linked to multi-party systems and functional theory, created to analyse a two-party system, does not include this function. Similarly it has been questioned whether the topic of character is relevant to cultures where politics is clearly more focused on policies than character. Again, this trait might be linked to parliamentary democracies and elections with multiple candidates representing different parties.

It still remains unclear whether the functional theory of political campaign discourse is suitable for analysing campaign discourse in cultures that are markedly different from the United States. It does seem very optimistic to assume that one theory, simplifying real life interaction under a few categories, would be able to describe political debate culture in different countries with different political systems and traditions. Therein lies also the main drawback of the functional theory: applying the theory to a culture such as Finland or Slovakia, where a significant amount of utterances are left outside the scope of the theory, and thus, unanalysed further, poses the risk that these uncategorised utterances are simply ignored, classified as something miscellaneous, when in reality analysing them further might reveal something important about the political debate culture of that particular country (such as the Slovakian inclination to express agreement, or Finnish habit of making utterances that showcase one's political expertise.)

Another possible drawback of the theory is that it focuses solely on the content of the debates and ignores the manner. Again, it seems simplistic to assume that the audience would only focus on what the candidates are saying and not pay attention to manner, when it is a well-known fact that listeners are easily affected by other things such as rhetorical skills or public speaking skills. It might very well be that the audience completely ignores the message of one of the candidates and focuses on listening to the other, who might be a better or more practiced speaker or simply capable of delivering funnier comebacks. If this is the case, then it is not the quantity that matters but the quality. There are also other possibilities: the opinion of the audience might not be affected by the media or by their own pre-held images of the candidates, or they might completely

ignore what is said by the candidates and vote for the one who seems to have the most “Presidential” personality (Vancil & Pendell, 1984). Again, in this case the functional theory would have very little to say.

Nevertheless it should be noted that within the United States the functional theory does not seem to have faced remarkable amounts of critique. Actually, as pointed out by Benoit (2007) many of the assumptions and predictions of the functional theory are corresponding with those of previous theories, which adds to the credibility of the theory.

Presidential elections in Finland

Finland is a parliamentary democracy, in which the parliament is formed by multiple parties and governed by the Prime Minister. Unlike in a presidential system, in Finland the president has relatively little political power. The tasks of the president have been reduced several times, the latest of which took place in 2000 and left the president with little political power mainly consisting of international relations. However, even in that field the tasks of the president are restricted. For example matters concerning the European Union are mainly handled by the Prime Minister (Halonen, 2002). It has been claimed that these days the role of the president in Finland is mostly symbolic, that of representing the nation and its values to outside world (Halonen, 2002). Nevertheless, there are still those in Finland who long for a strong president to lead the country and its politicians (Halonen, 2002).

The president is elected every six years and can have two consecutive terms of office. The president is elected through a direct vote. Since Finland is a multi-party system, there are always several candidates. Should one of these candidates get more than 50 percent of the votes in the first round, that candidate is elected president. In case none of the candidates get more than half of the votes, the elections proceed to a second round, in which the president is elected among the two candidates that gained most votes in the first round. Usually the second round is needed before a winner can be determined. Even though the president has relatively little political power,

presidential elections matter: ever since the late 1980's, the voter turnout at presidential elections has been about 10 percent higher than in parliamentary elections (Moring, 2008, in Isotalus, 2011). One possible reason is that the people still perceive the president as their leader. Another reason might be the fact that voting for president is considered to be "easier" than voting in the parliamentary elections as there are fewer candidates to choose from.

2012 Presidential elections

In the 2012 presidential elections in Finland there were originally eight candidates, none of whom was the incumbent as President Tarja Halonen was leaving the office after two consecutive terms. A clear favourite according to the polls was Mr Sauli Niinistö from the National Coalition Party (eg. Yle, 2011). Despite this, in the first round he got less than 50 percent of all votes, which meant the elections proceeded to the second round. In the first round, Mr Niinistö got 37 percent of the votes, followed by Mr Pekka Haavisto from the Green Party (18,8 %) and Mr Paavo Väyrynen from the Centre Party (17,5%). The other candidates - Mr Timo Soini from True Finns (9,4%), Mr Paavo Lipponen from the Social Democratic Party of Finland (6,7%) Mr Paavo Arhinmäki from the Left Alliance (5,5%), Mrs Eva Biaudet from Swedish People's Party of Finland (2,7%) and Mrs Sari Essayah from the Christian Democrats (2,5%) – were left far behind (Statistics Finland, 2012). In the second round of the elections, Mr Niinistö was challenged by Mr Haavisto, but still managed to win the elections as expected with a clear result, 62,6 percent of all votes compared to Mr Haavisto's 37,4 percent (Statistics Finland, 2012).

In the 2012 presidential campaign there were two distinct features. First, Mr Sauli Niinistö was a clear favourite throughout the whole campaign – so much so that it most likely affected the overall campaign (Kinnunen, 2011). It is possible that with such a clear winner, most of the other candidates were not really campaigning with the goal of winning the election, but had other aims in mind, such as gathering more support for their party or laying groundwork for future

elections. It has also been noted that in the first round of the election debates, Mr Niinistö's performance was quite lacklustre (eg. Iranto, 2012; Hallamaa, 2012). It could be asked whether his position as the predicted winner meant he did not see the need for campaigning. Second, the 2012 presidential elections were the first elections in Finland with an openly homosexual candidate: Mr Pekka Haavisto from the Green Party, who eventually proceeded to the second round of the elections with Mr Niinistö. According to estimates it is clear Haavisto's sexual preference was a central factor with the elections, with many people choosing to vote for his rival because they were not ready to have an openly homosexual president in the country (Blencowe, 2012). Similarly, many people rallied to vote for Haavisto because they wanted to show support for gay rights in Finland. This challenges the assumption made by the functional theory of political campaign discourse that policy matters more than character: clearly, in the 2012 presidential elections in Finland, personal characteristics, not political expertise, were a decisive factor (Blencowe, 2012).

Method

This study analysed two Finnish presidential debates from 2012. Both of these debates took place in the second round of the 2012 presidential elections. Participants included the two remaining presidential candidates, Mr Sauli Niinistö of the Coalition Party and Mr Pekka Haavisto of the Green Party, as well as two moderators. The debates took place on January 26, 2012 and February 2, 2012 and were broadcast by YLE (Finnish public service broadcasting company). Both of the debates lasted an hour. There were also other televised debates arranged by other broadcasting companies; the debates broadcast by YLE were chosen because of the company's nature as a public service – and thus, deemed to be most objective – company. Debates also took place in the first round of the presidential elections with all the initial eight candidates; however, a decision was made to focus on the second round debates as they, with two remaining candidates, resembled more closely the format of the American presidential election debates. Due to this resemblance, it was possible to look past the differences between political systems (two-party vs. multi-party systems)

and focus on the possible cultural differences between Finnish and American debates. It should be taken into account that the results of the study are most likely affected by this choice, and an analysis focusing on the debates taking place in the first round of elections might produce very different results. In fact, in the future it would be a good idea to do another study on the 2012 Finnish presidential elections focusing on the first round and compare the results to pinpoint the likely differences.

The data was analysed applying the same procedures used in previous studies using functional theory (e.g. see Benoit, 2007, 2011; Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013). Statistical significance was ensured with *chi-square* test. First, the debates were transcribed into a text and the text was divided into themes, which are defined as complete ideas, arguments or claims capable of expressing different functions. The length of a theme can vary from a single phrase to several sentences. In the case of this particular study, dividing the text into themes was quite challenging, as the shifts from idea to another one were at times very subtle and it was difficult to distinguish them from one another. At times it was a simple case of interpretation and could have possibly been interpreted differently, which would of course affect the results of the study.

Once the themes were identified, they were categorised by function: acclaims, attacks, defences, and agreements. Next, the themes were classified by topic – policy or character. Finally, policy utterances were divided further into utterances concerning general goals, past deeds, and future plans, and character utterances were divided personal qualities, leadership abilities, and ideals. Again, the process of categorising the themes was very challenging, most likely due to the nature of these particular debates, in which acclaims were often hidden behind expressions of expertise and attacks uttered by the candidates were almost invisible in their nature. The biggest challenge was deciding how to categorise the very frequent utterances in which the candidates mainly expressed their opinion on some issue (eg. same-sex marriage) or analysed the current political situation (eg. relations between Finland and Russia). It is possible these utterances could be

interpreted as acclaims – for example by expressing an opinion the candidate might assume the audience will agree with that opinion and thus think positively of him. However, opinions are more likely to divide the audience into those who agree and those who disagree, in which case they are not true acclaims and should not be categorised as such. Categorising the expressions of expertise were even more difficult. On one hand, they could be seen as acclaims (assuming that a candidate showcasing their expertise is likely to be seen in a positive light by the audience). On the other hand, these utterances bear no resemblance to acclaims and classifying them as such seems like a far-fetched attempt to force everything to fit into pre-defined categories. In the end the decision was made to classify most of the expressions of opinion and expertise into the undefined “other” category, unless there was something else in the utterances clearly identifying them as acclaims. The reasoning behind this decision was that these utterances should be analysed on their own, as they might play a significant role in the Finnish presidential debates. Still, it should again be noted that this was a decision based on interpretation and a different decision might have significantly affected the results of this study.

The original method was modified slightly to take into account some characteristics of these televised debates. Originally, the functional theory only consisted of three categories: acclaims, attacks, and defences. In this particular study, a fourth category called agreements was added. Isotalus (2011) claimed agreements are a characteristic typical to Finnish presidential debates; this category was added to determine the real significance of these agreements. Second, the original method does not take into account the utterances made by the moderators as they do not play a meaningful role in the debates. In the Finnish presidential debates, however, the role of the moderators is very visible. Their questions are guiding the discussions, and they are even actively making attacks against the candidates. Since these attacks frequently forced the candidates to defend themselves, it was decided they should be included in the analysis. All the other utterances made by the moderators were left unanalysed.

The text was divided into themes and the themes were categorised by myself only. I was also responsible for calculating the results, while the *chi-square* test was performed by Mr. Croucher. The first draft of the following article was written by myself, with Mr. Croucher and Mr. Benoit giving feedback and making changes to improve the article further.

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A Functional Analysis of Finnish 2012 Presidential Elections

Introduction

Presidential elections are one of the most anticipated and high-profiled events of a democratic society: every few years, the people gather together and express their opinion on who should be the leader of their nation for the next several years. Presidential candidates do their best to distinguish themselves from one another and to present themselves in a positive light, and the people will try and make an informed decision on who, from their personal perspective, is the best candidate for the job. In making this important decision they are influenced by different forms of campaign messages that aim not only to provide information, but also to influence the voters' final decision. Perhaps the most important of these message forms is presidential debates.

Televised debates are extremely important (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013) due to their various advantages compared to other campaign message forms. Compared to for example a television spot or an advertisement aired on radio channels, televised debates give the candidates much more room to present their case and to distinguish themselves from one another. In debates, candidates are engaged in dialogue, which makes it easier for the voters to make comparisons between the candidates. Since candidates are usually not allowed to bring any notes to these debates, they offer voters a chance to see a more spontaneous side of them. Finally, debates usually generate a lot of attention both from media and from general public, which means increased public discussion that ultimately benefits the voters (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013). Several studies on the effects of watching televised debates indicate that not only does watching these debates increase the knowledge of the voters, but also has the capability of affecting their final voting decisions, especially in cases where they were originally undecided (eg. Benoit et al., 1998, 2006; Benoit & Hansen 2004; Benoit & Stephenson, 2004; Lemert, 1993; McKinney & Warner, 2013; Pfau, 2000; Schrott, 1990). Therefore, it is clear that televised presidential elections merit scholarly attention.

In this research the functional theory of political campaign discourse, developed by Benoit et al. (eg. Benoit, 2007), will be applied to analyse the televised presidential debates of the 2012 presidential elections in Finland. The functional theory makes a series of assumptions and predictions on the utterances performed by candidates in their campaign discourse and has been used to analyse presidential debates in the United States (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013), among other forms of campaign messages, which include television spots, direct mail advertising and talk show appearances. The theory has also been applied to presidential elections in other countries with mixed results: most of the studies seem to indicate presidential campaign discourse is the same across borders and cultures, yet a few studies (eg. Cmeciú & Patrut, 2010; Hrbková & Zagraban, 2014; Isotalus, 2011) have presented criticism towards the theory, claiming it to be too culturally limited to be useful in cultures other than the United States. Isotalus (2011) applied the functional theory to Finnish elections, analysing the 2006 presidential elections in Finland. He criticized the theory for not being applicable in multi-party systems and for not being suitable for analysing political campaign discourse in Finland, as the Finnish speech culture differs greatly from the American speech culture.

Even though the functional theory of political campaign discourse has been applied to Finnish presidential debates, there are strong reasons for conducting another study. First, applying the theory to another set of presidential debates in the same country helps to determine whether the results of the first study are really caused by cultural differences or whether they were only applicable to one set of debates. Second, the Finnish political system offers an interesting comparison to the system in the United States: instead of a two-party system, Finland is a parliamentary multi-party system. Whereas, in the United States the president is clearly in charge of running the government, in Finland the president has in recent years been stripped from a large amount of political power. Instead of running the government, the president is seen as a “symbol of the nation”, somebody who represents the core values of the country and is in charge of

international relations of the country (Halonen, 2002) – again, symbolically, as for example the matters concerning the European Union are mainly handled by the Prime Minister and the government. Third, the 2012 presidential elections in Finland were particularly interesting and deserve a closer analysis, which has not been provided so far. In the 2012 elections there was no incumbent candidate, as President Tarja Halonen was leaving office. Out of the eight candidates, Mr Sauli Niinistö was predicted by many as the clear winner (Kinnunen, 2011). Nevertheless, the elections preceded to a second round, where Mr Niinistö was challenged by Mr Pekka Haavisto – the first openly homosexual candidate in the history of Finland. In the end, the 2012 presidential elections was an election of values and ideals (Yle, 2012). Many voters, especially younger ones, voted for Mr Haavisto simply for the reason of wanting to support gay rights in Finland. Some people also voted Mr Niinistö for the same reason: because they did not want to have a homosexual president in Finland (Blencowe, 2012). Therefore, although one of the assumptions made by the functional theory of political campaign discourse is that in presidential elections, policy issues matters more than the character of the candidates; in this particular set of elections it is clear that character and personal attributes played a decisive role.

The research conducted here will serve as an analysis of the political campaign discourse in the context of Finnish presidential elections. In addition to that, it will also serve as a cultural comparison, where the results of this Finnish analysis will be compared to those of studies conducted in the United States.

Literature review

This section presents a review of the research on televised political leaders' debates. A large portion of the research is focused on analysing presidential elections in the US. This US-focused research includes analysis of the language and rhetoric of presidential debates (e.g. Cienki, 2004; Halmari, 2008; Peifer & Holbert, 2013; Rhea, 2012), argumentation strategies (e.g. Beller & Hunt, 2012; Hollihan, 2009; Roitman, 2015; Straub; Zarefsky, 2008;), issue ownership (e.g. Benoit & Hansen,

2004; Cole & Hawthorne, 2013;) and effects of political leaders' debates on issue knowledge and voter behaviour (e.g. Benoit & Hansen, 2004; Benoit, Hansen & Verser, 2003; Benoit, McKinney & Stephenson, 2006; McKinney & Warner, 2013;; Pfau, 2002). According to these studies televised debates increase issue knowledge and influence voters' perception of the candidates and voter behaviour, especially in situations where voters were undecided before watching the debates.

Benoit's (e.g. 1999, 2007; Benoit et al., 1998, 2002, 2003) functional theory on political campaign discourse is one of the most used theories in research of televised political leaders' debates. The theory is focused on analysing the content of the campaign messages and classifying that content into attacks, acclaims, and defences according to what was said, thus resulting in better understanding of "tactics" employed by the campaigning politicians. The functional theory has been applied to many different kinds of campaign messages in the US, including various political leaders' debates ranging from presidential debates (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013) to presidential primaries (Benoit et al., 2002, 2011; Glantz et al., 2013) and vice-presidential debates (Benoit & Henson, 2009). The results of these studies are similar: in presidential election debates, acclaims are generally used more than attacks, which are used more than defences, and policy is discussed more than character. The challengers use more attacks than incumbents, who are more prone to using acclaims (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013). Also the results of research on other campaign mediums – web pages, radio spots, television spots, talk show appearances, and convention speeches – seem to follow a similar pattern (Benoit, 2007).

The functional theory of political campaign discourse was originally designed to analyse election campaigns in the United States (Benoit, 2007). In recent years, however, the functional theory of political campaign discourse has been applied to several elections in various countries outside of the US. So far, functional theory has been used to analyse political campaign discourse in Slovakia (Hrbková & Zagraban, 2014), the United Kingdom (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013), France (Choi & Benoit, 2013), Spain (Herrero & Benoit, 2009), Israel (Benoit & Sheaffer,

2006), Taiwan (Benoit et al., 2007), Romania (Cmeciú & Patrut, 2010), Ukraine (Benoit & Klyukovski, 2006), Germany (Benoit & Hemmer, 2007), Korea (Lee & Benoit, 2004, 2005), Finland (Isotalus 2010; 2011), Canada (Benoit, 2011; Benoit & Henson, 2007), and Australia (Benoit & Henson, 2007). Applying functional theory to research the political campaign discourse in countries other than the US has raised the question of whether the theory is too culturally limited to be useful in political systems different from that of the US. Critique towards the functional theory has been brought forward by Isotalus (2010, 2011) who claims, first, the theory was developed to be used in a two-party system and is therefore difficult to apply to a multi-party system, second, the functional theory only works in elections where the character of the candidate is important (Isotalus & Aarnio, 2005, in Isotalus, 2011) and third, some forms of political discourse are culturally bound and therefore the division to attacks, acclaims and defences is not flexible enough to analyse political campaign debates in all cultures. Cmeciú and Patrut (2010) agreed with this critique, arguing that political campaign discourse is not consistent across borders and cultures; indeed, their study of the 2009 Romanian presidential debates revealed the debates were not focused on acclaims and policy, as argued by the functional theory, but instead on attacks and defences. Also Hrbková and Zagrapan's (2014) research of the 2012 election debates in Slovakia reached similar conclusions, arguing the categories of content analysis should be expanded as with the current categories more than 30 percent of the content of the debates would be excluded from the analysis – an argument also made by Isotalus (2011). Nevertheless, from the content analysed, acclaims were still the most common category, followed by attacks, which means the results reached in Slovakia are at least somewhat similar to those reached in the United States. A different result was reached in the Ukraine (Benoit & Klyukovski, 2006) where attacks were more common than acclaims; however, according to Benoit and Benoit-Bryan (2013), this result is at least partly due to the exceptional nature of the Ukrainian campaign in general: the campaign included voter fraud as well as accusations of one candidate poisoning the other.

In Finland, televised presidential debates – sometimes called discussions in the media – are still a relatively understudied phenomenon. Research has been done on argumentation in presidential debates (Kaija & Malinen, 2007), communication style (Kuivasmäki, 2000; Tiittula, Nuolijärvi & Isotalus, 2007), and constructing the candidate's identities (Halonen, 2000). Isotalus (2009, 2011; Isotalus & Aarnio, 2005) applied the functional theory of political campaign discourse to the analysis of Finnish presidential debates in 2006; he stated that while generally the results correspond to the results found in US, the theory itself is not a suitable tool for analysing Finnish presidential debates, as so many utterances are left unanalysed. Nevertheless, with so little attention being given to content analysis of Finnish presidential debates, another look is warranted.

Theoretical underpinning

The functional theory of political campaign discourse, developed in the US by Benoit (1999; Benoit et al., 1998, 2002, 2003) provides the theoretical foundation for this study. The theory is based on the idea that political campaign messages are always inherently functional in their very nature, as they are delivered to achieve one purpose: the winning of elections. This is most likely true in two-party systems, where both candidates have a reasonable chance of winning the debate; however, as acknowledged by Benoit (2007), it is possible that sometimes in the elections there are candidates who do not stand a chance of winning the elections and who therefore use the campaign to fulfil some other purpose, such as laying groundwork for the next elections or furthering the agenda of their own party. In his theory, Benoit (2007) presents five different assumptions or axioms that lay the groundwork for the theory: first, voting is a comparative act, second, candidates must distinguish themselves from their opponents in a positive light, third, political campaign messages allow candidates to distinguish themselves, fourth, candidates establish preferability through acclaiming, attacking and defending, and fifth and finally, campaign discourse occurs on two topics: policy and character. The underlying idea is that candidates can only seem preferable to other candidates if they seem different – if all the candidates were indistinguishable, no one would know

who to vote for, and the voter turnout would probably hit record lows. Candidates can make themselves look more preferable either by highlighting their own strengths (by acclaiming and defending) or pointing out the weaknesses of their opponents (by attacking). This can happen either on the level of policy (governmental action and problems amenable to such an action) or character (the characteristic or qualities of the candidates.) Both policy and character are then divided into three further categories for closer analysis: policy can be discussed either on the level of past deeds, general goals or future plans, and character can focus on personal qualities, leadership abilities, and ideals. This study tests four hypotheses derived from the functional theory and confirmed through previous research (eg. Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013; Benoit et al., 2010, 2011, 2013; Brazeal & Benoit, 2001, 2006).

According to the functional theory, acclaims are the “safest choice” for candidates: they highlight the best qualities of the candidates without having any visible drawbacks. Attacks can be useful in highlighting the weaknesses of other candidates, yet they have their dangers too: studies have shown voters dislike “mud-slinging”, so too many attacks or badly timed attacks may cause the voters to turn on the candidate making these attacks. Compared to the other two, defences are said to be the least useful function: while they can help to reduce damage made by an attack or to restore the candidate’s damaged image (Benoit, 2007), they also force the candidates to draw more attention to the attack in the first place, reminding the voters of the attack. They also prevent the candidates from using the time for other, more beneficial utterances, such as highlighting their strengths by acclaiming. Thus, based on research about the function of acclaims and defences, the first hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Acclaims will be the most common function and defences will be the least common function in the 2012 Finnish presidential debates.

Previous research shows that in American presidential elections policy is discussed more than character (even 75% to 25%). This result has also been confirmed in other countries (eg. Benoit,

Wei-Chun & Tzu-hsiang, 2007; Choi & Benoit, 2013). Therefore, based on the research suggesting differences in the frequency of policy and character discussion the second hypothesis is put forth:

H2: Policy will be discussed more than character in the 2012 Finnish presidential debates.

The reasoning for both hypotheses 3 and 4 is the same: general goals and ideals are both vague and unspecific in their very nature, which is why attacking them is more difficult than attacking for example very specifically laid out future plans. It can be difficult, and even harmful, to disagree with general goals such as “I want to reduce poverty in this country” or with ideals such as “I believe in equality”, as the general population sees reducing poverty and equality as positive ideas. For this reason, both general goals and ideals are considered to be “safe” tools for acclaiming: the likelihood of backlash is relatively small, since attacking generally accepted ideas would be most likely to hurt the attacking candidate than the candidate being attacked. These results have been confirmed in previous research (e.g. Benoit 2007, 2011; Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013). Therefore, based on previous research, the following two hypothesis are presented:

H3: General goals will be used more frequently to acclaim than to attack in the 2012 Finnish presidential debates.

H4: Ideals will be used more frequently to acclaim than to attack in the 2012 Finnish presidential debates.

Originally, the functional theory of political campaign discourse also included two other hypotheses. Both of these hypotheses concern the role of the incumbent candidate in the debates. Since in the 2012 Finnish presidential elections there was no incumbent candidate, these two hypotheses (hypotheses 3 and 4 in the original theory) were not included in the analysis.

Method

This study analysed two Finnish presidential debates from 2012. Both of these debates took place in the second round of the 2011 presidential elections. Participants included the two remaining presidential candidates, Mr Sauli Niinistö of the Coalition Party and Mr Pekka Haavisto of the

Green Party, as well as two moderators. The debates took place on January 26, 2012 and February 2, 2012 and were broadcast by YLE (Finnish public service broadcasting company). Both of the debates lasted an hour. There were also other televised debates arranged by other broadcasting companies; the debates broadcast by YLE were chosen because of the company's nature as a public service – and thus, deemed to be most objective – company. Debates also took place in the first round of the presidential elections with all the initial eight candidates; however, a decision was made to focus on the second round debates as they, with two remaining candidates, resembled more closely the format of the American presidential election debates. Due to this resemblance, it was possible to look past the differences between political systems (two-party vs. multi-party systems) and focus on the possible cultural differences between Finnish and American debates.

The data was analysed applying the same procedures used in previous studies using functional theory (e.g. see Benoit, 2007, 2011; Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013) and statistical significance was ensured with *chi-square* test. The text was divided into themes. Themes are complete ideas, arguments or claims capable of expressing different functions. The length of a theme can vary from a single phrase to several sentences. Once the themes were identified, they were categorised by function: acclaims, attacks, defences, and agreements. Next, the themes were classified by topic – policy or character. Finally, policy utterances were divided further into utterances concerning general goals, past deeds, and future plans, and character utterances were divided personal qualities, leadership abilities, and ideals.

The original method was modified slightly to take into account some characteristics of these televised debates. Originally, the functional theory only consisted of three categories: acclaims, attacks, and defences. In this particular study, a fourth category called agreements was added. Isotalus (2011) claimed agreements are a characteristic typical to Finnish presidential debates; this category was added to examine this claim further. Second, the original method does not take into account the utterances made by the moderators as they do not play a meaningful role in

the debates. In the Finnish presidential debates, however, the role of the moderators is very visible. Their questions are guiding the discussions, and they are even actively making attacks against the candidates. Since these attacks frequently forced the candidates to defend themselves, it was decided they should be included in the analysis. All the other utterances made by the moderators were left unanalysed.

Context of the 2012 Finnish debates

Finland is a parliamentary democracy, in which parliament is formed by multiple parties and governed by the Prime Minister. Unlike in a presidential system, in Finland the president has relatively little political power; the tasks of the president have been reduced several times, the latest of which took place in 2000 and left the president with little political power mainly consisting of international relations. However, even in that field the tasks of the president are restricted: for example matters concerning the European Union are mainly handled by the Prime Minister (Halonen, 2002). It has been claimed that these days the role of the president in Finland is mostly symbolic, that of representing the nation and its values to the outside world (Halonen, 2002). Nevertheless, there are still those in Finland who long for a strong president to lead the country and its politicians (Halonen, 2002).

The president is elected every six years and can have two consecutive terms of office. The president is elected through a direct vote. Since Finland is a multi-party system, there are always several candidates. Should one of these candidates get more than 50 percent of the votes in the first round, that candidate is elected president. If none of the candidates get more than half of the votes, the elections proceed to a second round, in which the president is elected among the two candidates who gained the most votes in the first round. Usually the second round is needed before a winner can be determined. Even though the president has relatively little political power, presidential elections matter: ever since the late 1980's, the voter turnout at presidential elections has been about 10 percent higher than in parliamentary elections (Moring, 2008, in Isotalus, 2011).

One possible reason is the people still perceive the president as their leader. Another reason might be the fact that voting for president is considered to be “easier” than voting in the parliamentary elections as there are fewer candidates to choose from.

In the 2012 presidential elections in Finland there were originally eight candidates, none of whom was the incumbent as President Tarja Halonen was leaving the office after two consecutive terms. A clear favourite according to the polls was Mr Sauli Niinistö from the National Coalition Party (eg. Yle, 2011). Despite this, in the first round he got less than 50 percent of all votes, which meant the elections proceeded to the second round. In the first round, Mr Niinistö got 37 percent of the votes, followed by Mr Pekka Haavisto from the Green Party (18,8 %) and Mr Paavo Väyrynen from the Centre Party (17,5%). The other candidates - Mr Timo Soini from True Finns (9,4%), Mr Paavo Lipponen from the Social Democratic Party of Finland (6,7%) Mr Paavo Arhinmäki from the Left Alliance (5,5%), Mrs Eva Biaudet from Swedish People’s Party of Finland (2,7%) and Mrs Sari Essayah from the Christian Democrats (2,5%) – were left far behind (Statistics Finland, 2012). In the second round of the elections, Mr Niinistö was challenged by Mr Haavisto, but still managed to win the elections as expected with a clear result, 62,6 percent of all votes compared to Mr Haavisto’s 37,4 percent.

In the 2012 presidential campaign there were two distinct features. First, Mr Sauli Niinistö was a clear favourite throughout the whole campaign – so much so that it most likely affected the overall campaign. It is likely that with such a clear winner, most of the other candidates were not really campaigning with the goal of winning the election, but had other aims in mind, such as gathering more support for their party or laying the groundwork for future elections. It has also been noted that in the first round of the election debates, Mr Niinistö’s performance was quite lacklustre (eg. Iranto, 2012; Hallamaa, 2012). It could be asked whether his position as the predicted winner meant that he did not see the need for campaigning. Second, the 2012 presidential elections were the first elections in Finland with an openly homosexual candidate: Mr Pekka

Haavisto from the Green Party, who eventually proceeded to the second round of the elections with Mr Niinistö. According to estimates it is clear Haavisto's sexual preference was a central factor with the elections, with many people choosing to vote for his rival because they were not ready to have an openly homosexual president in the country (Blencowe, 2012). Similarly, many people rallied to vote for Haavisto because they wanted to show support for gay rights in Finland. This challenges the assumption made by the functional theory of political campaign discourse that policy matters more than character: clearly, in the 2012 presidential elections in Finland, personal characteristics, not political expertise, were a decisive factor (Blencowe, 2012).

Results

A total of 331 turns were coded. These included all of the turns of the candidates (Niinistö, 153 turns, Haavisto, 144 turns) as well as attacks uttered by moderators (34 turns). Most of these turns could be categorised into functions; however, 91 of the turns (28%) could not be applied into any one category.

Hypothesis 1 predicted acclaims would be the most used function in the Finnish presidential debates, followed by attacks and finally, defences. In the analysed debates, there was a significant difference between the different functions: $\chi^2(4) = 98.29, p = .0001$. Overall, acclaims were the most preferred statement by the candidates ($n = 120$), with agreement being the least preferred ($n = 15$). The results can be seen in Table 1. In the first debate, Niinistö made an acclaim concerning his character and personal qualities:

“My reason for participating in these elections from the very beginning has been the strong knowledge that I have the capability of dedicating myself to what I'm doing at any specific moment, and I believe I have lots to give when it comes to making sure that good life will exist in Finland also in the future. That is the goal I want to serve and I dedicate myself to that task.”

However, it should be taken into account that most of the attacks recorded were actually made by moderators (67%) – should the attacks made by moderators be left out, the results would be different, with acclaims being the most used function, defences the second and attacks the third. In the following passage, one of the moderators attacked Haavisto:

“It is said about you, Pekka Haavisto, that you know people from the Russian opposition and non-governmental organisations, but you do not have any ties to the Russian leadership in Kreml. Just what kind of president would you be, when you do not even have any ties to Kreml?”

The attacks made by moderators were often very direct, while the attacks made by the candidates themselves were not so direct. The candidates would for example disagree with facts presented by the other candidate, or question their abilities in some other way. In the following passage, Haavisto attacked Niinistö about the funding of his campaign:

“Well dependability is, I’m not accusing you Sauli about anything, but the fact is that when one has a lot of big financiers, it does bring into mind the question that what is the interest of these large companies, and president’s trade promoting functions and so on.”

Even though Haavisto claimed he is not making any accusations, the paragraph above is clearly an attack questioning Niinistö’s integrity and financial dependability. Finally, Isotalus (2011) suggested that agreements are an important function of Finnish presidential debates. In the debates analysed, agreements formed 5% of all the turns, indicating they are used to some extent, but other functions are still much more common.

Table 1. Functions of the 2012 Finnish presidential debates

	Acclaims	Attacks	Defences	Agreements
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Niinistö	53 (35%)	10 (7%)	29 (19%)	8 (5%)
Haavisto	68 (47%)	7 (5%)	22 (15%)	7 (5%)
Moderators	-	35 (67%)	-	-
Total	120 (36%)	52 (16%)	51 (15%)	15 (5%)

Hypothesis 2 predicted policy would be discussed more than character. This was supported: with a significant difference between the topics: $\chi^2(2) = 90,30$, $p = .0001$. As predicted, policy ($n = 142$) was discussed more than character ($n = 76$). 22 turns (30%) could not be classified into either policy or character, corresponding with the percentage of turns not categorised into functions. 44% of Niinistö's utterances concerned policy and 19% concerned character (37% uncategorised), while Haavisto discussed policy in 54% of his turns and character in 15% of the turns (31% uncategorised). The results of this can be seen in Table 2. Both policy and character were also topics of attacks made by moderators: policy was used in 14% of the moderators' attacks, while character was the topic of 69% percent of these attacks. The rest of the attacks could not be assigned into either of these topic categories. One of the moderators provided an example of a character-focused attack:

“Last Sunday at the election results party you said that everyone needs someone in their house who cooks for them, irons their shirts and takes care of them. Now you've had to many give explanations for this statement. Did you accidentally happen to reveal something real about your attitude, Sauli Niinistö?”

Table 2. Topics of 2012 Finnish presidential debates

	Policy	Character
Niinistö	67 (44%)	29 (19%)
Haavisto	78 (54%)	22 (15%)
Moderators	6	18
Total	151 (46%)	79 (24%)

Hypothesis 3 predicted general goals would be used more frequently to acclaim than to attack in the 2012 Finnish general presidential debates. This hypothesis was supported: $\chi^2(6) = 15.16, p < .05$. As predicted, general goals ($n = 131$) were used more frequently to acclaim ($n = 94$) than to attack ($n = 13$). These results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Subtopics of the Finnish 2012 presidential debates.

Functions	Acclaims	Attacks	Defences	Agreements
Subtopic				
Past deeds	5 (5%)	2 (13%)	3 (20%)	0 (0%)
General Goals	94 (95%)	13 (87%)	11 (73%)	13 (100%)
Not categorised	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)
Total	99	15	15	13

Hypothesis 4 predicted ideals would be used more frequently to acclaim than to attack in the 2012 Finnish general presidential debates. This hypothesis was supported: $\chi^2(6) = 16.28, p < .05$. As predicted, general goals ($n = 14$) were used more frequently to acclaim ($n = 8$) than to attack ($n = 3$). These results can be seen in Table 4.

	Functions	Acclaims	Attacks	Defences
Subtopics 2				
Leadership ability		6 (29%)	7 (26%)	9 (30%)
Personal qualities		5 (24%)	17 (63%)	18 (60%)
Ideals		8 (38%)	3 (11%)	3 (10%)
Not categorised		2 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total		21	27	30

Coding the turns to different functions was not completely unproblematic. While categorising into defence and agreements was fairly easy, a broader approach had to be taken with acclaims and attacks. In the Finnish debates, candidates rarely made clear statements declaring a certain course of action they would take up as a president (such as “I will cut the taxes” or “I will decrease unemployment”). Instead, they expressed their opinion on policies they generally perceived as desirable or on the direction they would like to see the country to go in the future. In the context of this study, these were nevertheless classified as acclaims, as they were understood to be policies the candidates would drive forward should they have the opportunity. The same perspective was applied to attacks: even utterances that were not direct attacks would be classified into that category if they contained a clear criticism or challenge towards the other candidate.

A notable amount of turns could not be classified into any category. These included, among others, jokes made by the candidates, reacting to Twitter comments made by audience members, as well as analysing the current political situation in globally or in Finland. An example:

“I think we need to be very careful when it comes to these terms. Binding ourselves to the West is too broad a term, it includes two different elements. Since we joined the EU this old term called neutrality is no longer so relevant, because as EU members we do express our opinions, we express our opinions on the crisis in Libya, we express our opinions on Iran and so on.”

While these analyses cannot be categorised as acclaims, they nevertheless do have a role in painting a picture of the candidate as an expert on national and global politics, which might cause voters to see them in a more favourable light. In future studies it might be interesting to add another function – *expressions of expertise* – to research these turns further.

Discussion

The results of this analysis are generally consistent with the results of studies of presidential elections in the United States: candidates used acclaims more than attacks or defences and policy

was discussed more than character. However, there were also differences. Most of the attacks were uttered by the moderators, meaning that the candidates themselves used more defences than attacks. It is possible the reason for this difference lies in the different formats of the presidential debates; in the Finnish debates, the moderators are clearly in charge of the discussion, asking questions and making attacks against the candidates. This forces the candidates to react to the questions and attacks posed by the moderators and leaves them with relatively little room to engage in a direct discussion with one another - thus they simply do not have the time to attack each other. Another reason might be the fact that Niinistö was predicted as the clear winner throughout the whole campaign – perhaps the candidates did not see any point in making attacks, when the results seemed to be already decided. This is even hinted at by Niinistö in one of the debates when he, accused by one of the moderators as having been more quiet than normal, states that he sees little point in fighting with the others for the second place, when the results are already clear.

Policy was discussed more than character in the Finnish debates. While this result again correlates with the results from the United States, it is slightly contradictory with statements from election experts, in which they claim that character, in fact, was the decisive factor in the 2012 election: namely the facts that Haavisto is homosexual, does not belong to any church and never served in the army, but opted for civil service instead (Blencowe, 2012). These are all questions of personal values, and while they were discussed shortly in the debates, much more time was dedicated for discussion of policy. This is also interesting considering the fact that in Finland, president has little say over any actual policies. President has, for example, the duty to confirm Acts into laws, but Acts can be entered into force even without the president's confirmation - leaving legislative power essentially in the hands of the government and the parliament. Also all significant decisions in the area of foreign policy made by the president must be done in accordance with the government (Office of the President of the Republic of Finland, 2012). With president's power in

Finland being mostly symbolic, it could be questioned why so much of the discussion still happens on the level of policy.

The president's diminished duties and power are also likely visible in the way policy is discussed in these debates. An overwhelming amount (85%) of all policy utterances were made on the level of general goals; only 6% of the utterances focused on past deeds, and future plans were not discussed at all. While the difference between general goals and future plans also exists in the US debates, it is not as drastic as in the Finnish debates. In the United States it is still possible to see candidates making promises to cut taxes or to increase the military spending, yet in the Finnish debates analysed, this did not happen. The most likely reason is the president's limited power in Finland: there is little point for the candidates to present elaborate future plans for their turn as a president when they do not possess the political power to make those plans into reality. Instead, it makes much more sense to discuss on the level of general goals – policies that the candidates see as generally desirable, at the same time acknowledging that they might not be able to act on those policies. This was again demonstrated by Niinistö in one of the debates where he first outlines his view of the economic situation in Finland and the direction he would like to see it go and then reminds the audience that the president does not have the power to decide on matters of economics in Finland.

Perhaps the clearest difference between the presidential debates in the United States and in Finland is the number of themes that did not fit into any category. In the presidential debates in the United States the percentage of themes left uncoded is very small; in the debates analysed here, the portion is significant (28%). Isotalus (2011) has produced similar results. Isotalus (2010; 2011) claims that agreements form a large portion of the themes left uncoded. However, the analysis here shows that the portion of agreements is not all that significant: only 5% of all the turns coded, meaning that even with agreements, the percentage of uncoded turns would not be more than 33%. Therefore, the majority of the uncoded turns still consists of something else besides

agreements. To some extent, these turns are “empty speech” – jokes, reactions to comments from audience et cetera. However – as has been noted by Isotalus (2010; 2011) earlier, these turns also include something that could perhaps best be characterised as “analysis of the current political / economic / societal situation in Finland / globally”. The candidates not only made these analysing statements themselves, but also questioned the accuracy of the other person’s analysis or facts. In this sense it could be argued that these analyses serve a purpose in political campaign discourse: the candidates attempt to paint a picture of themselves as experts as well as question the expertise of the other candidate(s), in a way attempting to claim to have the right narrative on how the world works. While these expressions of expertise have not been reported to appear in the US presidential debates, it is possible that they are a meaningful part of Finnish political campaign discourse and should be paid attention to in the future.

Conclusions

This study indicates that there are both similarities as well as differences between the political campaign discourse of presidential debates in Finland and the United States. However, neither earlier research nor the scope of the present study provide sufficient information on the significance of these differences: more research on the Finnish presidential debates would have to be conducted to determine whether the differences exist in all debates or whether they are simply a part of this particular campaign. The 2012 campaign was special for many reasons: the predicted clear victory for Mr Niinistö, the existence of an openly homosexual candidate and the historically low voter turnouts. Based on the special nature of the campaign, it would be presumptuous to assume that the results could be generalised to all presidential campaigns in Finland.

In this research, debates from the second round of the elections were chosen because their format resembled more closely the format of the US presidential debates. In the future, it could be interesting to analyse the debates from the first round of elections, with all the eight candidates

present, and see whether there is any difference in the results. Another interesting possibility would be to study debates from the second round of 2012 elections, broadcast by different commercial broadcasting companies. These debates by different broadcasting companies might also have different formats, which could possibly be helpful in trying to determine the extent to which these differences are caused by formats, and to which extent they are caused by actual cultural differences. This would also help to determine whether the functional theory of political campaign discourse is a suitable tool for analysing Finnish presidential debates, or whether it would need to be modified to suit the context better.

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