

POLITICAL INTERVIEW AND ARGUMENTATIVE STRATEGIES

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Abstract: *Among journalistic genres, political interview holds a special place, considering the multiple components that need to be analyzed. One of them is the targeted communication medium, and we specify that it is the television interview. As such, it has a certain amount of time, a fixed number of participants and a well-defined theme to be addressed. The specialty literature has attempted to identify the milestones in the study of political interview. To begin with, it is considered by some linguists as a verbal exchange between two people, the interviewer and the interviewee, in order to communicate information of public interest to interested parties. This kind of communication can be analyzed from a linguistic point of view, taking into account the achievements of verbal exchanges, of argumentative strategies, such as argumentative scales, rhetorical argumentation and other possible argumentative strategies. Such an analysis would imply also a study of lexical and semantic means, such as recurrent lexemes and their connotation in the context. It would also imply a study concerning the notion of the ethos, which is vital in our case of study for the interviewee. The present article deals with two interviews of two French politicians, both belonging to the Far Right wing. We try to identify the similarities and differences between the two interviewees as shown in their interviews.*

Keywords: *political interview; argumentative strategy; verbal exchange; irony; interrogation*

1. INTRODUCTION

In a political debate, the media is the most direct and fastest way to reach an audience. Among journalistic genres, political interview holds a special place, considering the multiple components that need to be analyzed. One of them is the targeted communication medium which is, in our case, the television interview. As such, it has a well-defined format, a certain amount of time, a fixed number of participants and a well-defined theme to be addressed. The specialty literature has attempted to identify the milestones in the study of political interview, which is considered by some linguists as a verbal exchange between two people, the interviewer and the interviewee, in order to communicate information of public interest to interested parties. We intend to analyze this process of this kind of communication from a linguistic point of view, taking into account the achievements of verbal exchanges, of argumentative strategies, rhetorical argumentation and other possible argumentative strategies which are going to be developed further on. Such an analysis would also imply a study of the lexical and semantic means and resources, such as recurrent lexemes and specific connotations. As presidential elections are quite near in France, the candidates from all parties and orientations try their

best to convince the voters that they and their programs are the solution to their problems and they deserve their vote. To achieve this goal, they need to address the voters and they give interviews to the well-known and appreciated channels.

This article will deal with two such interviews, one of Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Rally, a Far Right party, and the second of Eric Zemmour, who is considered one of her opponents, even if he has the same political orientation. The first part of the article will deal with the theoretical approach of the interview as a journalistic genre. The second part of the article will deal with detailed analyses of their interviews, both with famous and experienced journalists of British media.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH

2.1. Political interview as media communication. The specialty literature dealt a lot with the concepts of media communication and mass media, trying to decide whether they are synonyms or not. Although they are used as such by some scholars, others consider that mass communication refers to a process, while mass media refers to channels of information dissemination. (Potter, 2013:3-4).

Information and communication are two concepts of great importance in the life of societies and concern all fields: politics, economy, finance, technology and science. At the same time, the information transmitted by the media helps to build an image according to certain values generally accepted in society: politicians work for the good of citizens, technology and science make research and efforts to ensure the progress of society in order to facilitate people's lives, the economy ensures the production and consumption of goods and services to ensure a respectable standard of living for members of society. That is why information must be carefully chosen and even more carefully transmitted and it represents a real art of making. It implies a well-chosen discourse, a well-chosen rhetoric meant to persuade the audience, good and persuasive arguments and examples, a certain confidence in the exposition of his point of view. It is at the limit of persuasion and manipulation, but it is well known that politicians use the media to manipulate public opinion.

This is done through all kinds of journalistic genres, including the political interview. If it is televised, so much the better, the interviewed politician will have a larger audience, he will be heard by his adherents but also by the undecided and by his opponents. The two last categories mentioned may be watching and listening by mere curiosity. So, the interviewee must choose well his words, his arguments, to strengthen his support from his adherents and to convince, perhaps, the undecided and, hopefully, some of his opponents.

It's a tough job, but politicians who are well versed in it do very well, sometimes you get the impression that they already see themselves winning their race. If they succeed in giving this impression, this means that they are good rhetoricians and that half the race is won.

Political interview is characterized by certain particularities: the time, the circumstances and the people involved, as it is the case of the communication situation. Journalists know too well who needs to be interviewed and when. Sometimes, more than often, they know by whom, because it is important for the interviewee to have a well-intentioned and kind interlocutor instead of a malicious interlocutor, with whom one can suppose to have clashes. These remarks concern the participants in the communication situation: the interviewee and the interviewer. It is well-known that the French president François Mitterrand accepted only interviews with chosen journalists and refused the others. With regard to the moment of the interview, this is also an important element to be

taken into consideration important. It very much depends on social-political circumstances: elections of all kinds, social movements or unrest, international conflict situations, natural disasters or disasters caused by humans. The third element to be taken into consideration is the topic of the interview: is it of political interest, of humanitarian interest, entertainment? Depending on the topic, there could be a friendly ambiance, or quite the opposite, a tense and even confrontational ambiance. The interviewer would want to extract as much information as he can from the interviewee, on one side, and on the other, the interviewee would want to express only the convenient words and opinions, the ones we usually call "politically correct" or those who are in accordance with the ideology he is trying to promote. In this way, the conversation becomes a confrontation and both participants try to show in their best light. It all depends on what side they represent or on what they try to emphasize, to criticize or to promote alongside a certain audience. The interviewer is supposed to be well informed on the topic addressed, while the interviewee should be well prepared to give the right answers. This kind of interview is considered by Charaudeau (1997:229-232) as a media agreement entailing situational constraints and discursive constraints, developing into strategies and media event.

Other linguists (Andersen, 2020-2021: 2-3) see the interview as a social activity, more like a game, in which the interviewer and the interviewee engage in a question and answer exchange. In this way they build together a dialogue, a verbal exchange. More often than not, the journalist has his own style of conducting the interview, but things can indeed become interesting when the interviewee has his own style of approaching his dialogue partner or a certain topic. From a journalistic point of view, it is considered that the two participants create some kind of discourse. It is a discourse if we take into account Maingueneau's considerations (2007:29-34) on discourse, summing up that discourse is made up by communication of a message by an enunciator to an enounce in a specific communication situation. Their discourse develops according to rules which correspond to various fields, and it is considered a discourse from the point of linguistic analysis, a dialog from a pragmatics point of view and an argumentative point of view.

2.2. Argumentative strategies in political interview. Political interview is not only a verbal exchange. Both participants in a verbal interaction must construct their intervention in such a way that, on the one hand, the question is asked with full

knowledge of the subject, and, on the other hand, the answer is formulated to show in-depth knowledge of the problem and the ability to provide a viable solution. We are already entering the field of argumentation: the interviewer formulates a short speech to support his question and the interviewee has to think about arguing his point of view as best he can. He has to convince not only his interlocutor, but also the audience, invisible, but supposedly known. On both sides, this implies a well-chosen speech, prepared in advance. Normally there should be no backlash, but sometimes it happens. From the point of view of argumentation, the argumentative speech is supposed to convince the audience and make them adhere to its point of view. Both participants in the verbal exchange that is the interview do their best to convince the audience that their knowledge about the topic being discussed is correct and complete.

At the same time, it is in their interest to present themselves in a favorable light: the interviewer by the questions he asks and the way he formulates them, while the interviewee pursues the same goal in the answers he gives. This notion goes back to Aristotle, quoted by Ruth Amossy (2000:61) where she defines ethos as “the self-image that the speaker projects in order to act through speech”. She also cites Roland Barthes’ definition of ethos (Amossy, 2000:61) who is not so benevolent, as he considers that ethos “consists of the character traits that the speaker must show to the audience (no matter how sincere) in order to make a good impression”.

The interview is considered by some scholars as discourse constructed by both participants. To construct this speech, both participants must carefully choose their arguments. In their study, Anscombe and Ducrot (1997:51-57) and Ducrot (1980) mention the intervention of two important concepts: argumentative scales and implicative scales. As far as the argumentative scales are concerned, it is important to know how to choose the right order of the arguments: either we start with the strongest argument and go to the weakest; or the opposite.

For implicative scales, one assertion implicates the previous and the next one. The study covers the strategic operators that have the role of orienting the discourse in a certain direction.

Obviously, the most important part in a political interview consists of the message conveyed by the two participants. In order to do so, they will choose carefully not only their argumentative strategy, but also a specific vocabulary to sustain their opinions. Some politicians try to use politically correct language.

Others do quite the opposite, hoping in this way to be more convincing to their adherents.

3. POLITICAL INTERVIEW. COMPARATIVE APPROACH OF TWO CASES

In what follows we intend to analyze two political interviews with two French politicians engaged in the race for the presidency of France in 2022. They belong to the same political orientation, the Far Right Wing, to different political parties, they defend the same political ideas, but they express them in different manners.

Their intention is, obviously, to win votes from French people living in Great Britain in order to enlarge their voting base, since they accept to be interviewed by British media.

3.1. Interview with Marine Le Pen. The interview we are going to analyze dates back to The 7th of February, 2022 and it was shown on BBC, an English television channel with a large audience all over the world. The programme, *Hard talk*, and its presenter, Stephen Sackur, are also well known, the programme having a long existence and its presenter has extensive experience in political interviews.

As any interview, it begins with a brief presentation of the interviewee, Marine Le Pen, who is introduced as a “veteran of French politics, an unsuccessful candidate in the last presidential elections and now campaigning to win the Elysée the third time”. In a brief incursion in her life as a politician, the interviewer mentions some of her notable acts: she dismissed her own father from the party leadership, and then threw him out of the party, as she considered him the cause of her failure in the 2012 elections. She seemed to realize that the main cause of her failure was the hard line anti-immigrants, anti-European Community policy and populist politics. She changed the name of her political party to National Rally and she engineered a modification of her party’s image. The former political party was accused of racism and anti-Semitism. Now, for the present race, it is considered that she has to beat Emmanuel Macron. In addition to that, she faces other challenges from her own political orientation, that of Eric Zemmour. After a second failure in presidential elections, she decided to get rid of some of some of her collaborators. Stephen Sackur’s introduction of the French politician ends with a question addressed to the viewers of the programme: is this third race the beginning of the end of Marine Le Pen as a “torch bearer for the Far Right?” It is obvious that such a presentation and most of all the final question addressed to the viewers of *Hard Talk* lead from the beginning to a tense, or at least, less friendly relationship between the

interviewer and the interviewee. The proper interview begins with the usual polite exchange, followed by a question implying Marine Le Pen's lack of political support. The next question deals with some "severe political blows coming from her own family, represented by Marion Maréchal Le Pen and by his opponent, Eric Zemmour". Marine Le Pen is always ready to counterattack. With a tone that shows a strong self-confidence, she answers questions punctually. Her argumentative strategy consists of contradicting her interlocutor. Her arguments are plausible, such as "I defend the interests of the French people, I'm not a studio candidate, I am the candidate of France's forgotten people". We think that "forgotten people" is not the best translation for "la France profonde", which means for any French the people who live in other parts of France than the capital or major cities and who know and respect the old, classical values of the French Nation. It is not the first time when she discusses concepts belonging to the extreme right, such as Nation, but now she tries to construct a new image of the Nation, in the sense that now she refers to "la France profonde". The difference between her former political discourse, a national political discourse, and the present one is some kind of renouncement to discussion of religious conflicts on the territory of France, as she declares herself as "the leader of a large popular movement which does not intend to have a clash of civilizations or conflicts between religions". Another topic discussed during the interview is that of immigration, which was one of the points she insisted on in her previous campaigns. The question consists in asking her why she moderated her attitude regarding immigration. Some of the questions of the interviewer are counteracted with humor, which consists of an ironic remark addressed to the BBC. Her response is constructed as if she has followed the model of argumentative scales: she does not want to add division to division, she does not want to be over the top, she does not want violence in the country. Some other times, she combines negation with irony: "Non! Non! Non, Monsieur! Vous n'avez rien compris. Laissez-moi vous expliquer." ("No! No! No, sir, you have got it all wrong. Let me explain it to you."). She explains that she is against chaotic, massive and illegal immigration that could cause major problems, among which insecurity, social problems, cultural problems, identity problems and budgetary problems. Here is one of the topics usually developed by the Far Right parties, the national identity, linked with the notion of nation. It seems as if for the most part of the interview, Marine Le Pen counteracts accusing BBC of presenting a caricature of her political view and intentions, instead of

presenting it in a proper state. In order to support her point of view, she uses examples, such as her visit to Mayotte, where the population is half black, half Muslims; nevertheless she won 45% of the votes. As for the topic of the economy, which we know from the previous election of 2017, is not the strongest point of Marine Le Pen campaign, she tries to divert the discussion to the cost of living, unemployment and to her proposals to help medium people go on with their life. Obviously, the interview could not leave aside the previous idea of the French politician which she has now abandoned, that of France getting out of the European Union. Showing she is an experienced politician, Marine Le Pen's answer could convince her audience, as she explains that her new position is determined by a change in the European Union politics. She seems to have an answer to any question, and moreover, an answer to her advantage. Other major topics are tackled, such as the European Union response to the Covid crisis, her political friendship with some European leaders, openly opposed to Brussels institutions. All the inconvenient questions are answered by criticism on the part of Marine Le Pen, based on a lack of comprehension of political French life, of European situation in present days and of the necessity to oppose some of Brussels decisions. The relationship with president Putin is also questioned, and the answer is again from the point of view of a politician. Nevertheless, she considers that Europe made a mistake conducting a cold war against Putin and pushing him towards China. By the end of the interview, another topic constantly approached by the Far Right parties is brought into discussion, that of the sovereignty of France and the integrity of its territory. The French politician expresses her strong conviction that her political party will fight for these values.

In this political interview, it is not difficult to remark a certain tension between the two participants, which lead to violent reaction on the part of the interviewee. In most cases, she criticizes his approach of some topics, the approach of the BBC as a television channel so everyone is to blame except for her. Certainly, this kind of approach could win her some more votes coming from French people living in Great Britain. The question is how many remained in Great Britain after Brexit and what percentage of them are her supporters.

3.2. Interview with Eric Zemmour. This is an interview with Eric Zemmour conducted by Freddy Gray, *The Spectator's* deputy editor, about immigration, Islam, Brexit and Emmanuel Macron. (<http://www.spectator.co.uk.flashsale>) First of all, we

must say that *The Spectator* is a weekly British magazine, having as main subject areas politics and culture. Being of conservative orientation, having a long period of existence, one can easily imagine what influence it has in the political world, at home and abroad.

Eric Zemmour is a well-known French journalist, writer, essayist, editorialist, columnist, polemicist and politician of the Far Right Wing. He only became a politician recently, but he can make up for his lack of experience in politics with his extensive experience as a journalist. As a journalist, he has been taken to court several times for his claims, released but convicted of provoking racial hatred and provoking hatred towards Muslims. This looks like the perfect portrait of a presidency candidate on behalf of the Far Right Wing, which sees its ranks and its members multiplying. Even if Eric Zemmour is an opponent of Marine Le Pen, the historic and flamboyant representative of the extreme right, another candidate could improve their chances of winning the race. Zemmour's family history is not insignificant, as he is, according to his origins, an Arab Jew. We will see in his interview how he explains and seek advantage of his own family life history. As we said before, he is an experienced observer of political life, so he knows exactly what he must say and what he must not say during an interview.

As in each and every political interview of some importance, the interviewer presents the interviewee. Most of the adjectives characterizing Eric Zemmour are superlatives, “the most famous journalists in France”, and we know why he is famous, for all his controversial apparitions on television channels. When the interviewer speaks about his intellectual capacities, it goes down to positive grade of an adjective, he, Eric Zemmour, is “only” a French intellectual. In the first part of the interview there is an explanation for his coming to United Kingdom, to raise funds for his presidential campaign. Despite the support he shows to Eric Zemmour, the British reporter can't help but tell us that his coming to the United Kingdom was not welcome everywhere he went. He was banned from an event he was supposed to attend at the Royal Institution and the event was cancelled, the reason being his toxic attitude on Islam and immigration. Nevertheless, the *Spectator's* reporter presents him as 2nd or 3rd in the presidential polls.

A remark is necessary: the interview is entirely in French, the questions are quite short and targeted, the answers well prepared in advance. Sometimes, the British journalist, who does not seem to master the subtleties of the French language, often needs

Eric Zemmour's help to finish his sentences. And, what is more important in a political interview, the relationships seem quite cordial, the interviewer and the interviewee seem to have common opinions on the subjects discussed.

At the beginning of the interview, in order to provoke a certain answer on behalf of the interviewer, the journalist brings into discussion the relation between the two countries, France and United Kingdom. For the time being, no explanation is given, but it will be approached later on. In his answer, Eric Zemmour insists on the “fundamental error” made by Brussels technocracy and by the French, represented by Emmanuel Macron who is, in his opinion, “a hard-core European”, they consider that the choice of the English people to leave the European Community is a mistake consequently they must pay for that. On the contrary, Zemmour considers that the choice of the English people must be respected. He even praises the representatives of the British conservative elites for having respected the choice of the British people expressed by vote. Nevertheless, he expresses his concern about the interests of French fishermen who saw their fishing rights suppressed. In an argumentative approach he tries to show himself as a patriot, defending the rights of his own people. Another conflicting topic between the two countries is brought into discussion, that of the immigration problem. The problem is an old one, beginning with the immigrants' camps in Calais who constantly try to cross the frontier between France and United Kingdom. In his opinion, “it is a shame that France has accepted to be paid to protect British borders”. In what follows, he expresses his firm conviction that all these migrants should have never arrived in Calais. He considers that a strong opinion on this matter could be to his advantage in the presidential elections. For the first time during this interview we can notice a difference between his opinion and the opinion of Marine Le Pen, more moderate in her remarks. His rhetoric against the migrants is well documented and well organized in a mounting argumentative scale: they receive social benefits, they are accepted into French society, which is to their advantage, but they make life unbearable in Calais. It seems that the British journalist has given Zemmour the opportunity to criticize the French policy by allowing him to say what he would do if he were president. As a response, Zemmour refers extensively to the measures he would be able to take to prevent this critical situation. He criticizes the weakness and inefficiency of Frontex. He has the courtesy not to accuse Macron of using migrants as a weapon against the United Kingdom. In exchange he accuses him of wokeism. Wokeism is quite a new

concept which supports the idea that every individual is basically the same and that he can live wherever he chooses, as he chooses. The concept also alerts against racism and social discrimination. It seems as if the interviewer is encouraging the interviewee to develop on this idea, which seems to have some importance in the economy of the interview. Eric Zemmour takes the opportunity to criticize all those philosophies which “deviate from Christian humanism, it’s Christian virtues gone mad”. He goes even further saying that Christianity is “indeed respect for the human being, but that is rooted in a culture, a religion, a people, a land”. This is another good opportunity to criticize globalism, the Republicans who gave up defending the values they once believed in and this little discourse culminates with an accusation of cowardice on behalf of both right and left parties. The next question of the interviewer gives Zemmour the opportunity to tackle another of his favourite topics, Islamism. In the past it was also a favourite theme for the National Front, now the National Rally, but Marine Le Pen seems to have given up to approach it or approaches it in a moderate way. The two participants to the interview seem to converge in their view on global events, so this seems to be a calm and easy interview. Another topic of the interview is the origin of Eric Zemmour, and he insists on his origins: his parents were Jews from Algeria, with French nationality. They immigrated to France during the France-Algeria war. He very much insists on the fact that he was raised according to French values and principles. The importance of this mention is that he grew up with them, he appropriated them and, most of all, he believes in them. This is an opportunity for Zemmour to express the importance he gives to the concept of Nation. Again, a concept very dear to the Right Far, previously, but now a little bit neglected by Marine Le Pen, who did not want to return to the old faults which were reproached to her or to her father. Therefore, the French can trust him, Eric Zemmour, he will never betray his principles and values, which are the same as the ones of the French people. Even if he says that he is some kind of “a Romanized barbarian, a Gallo-Roman”, he is very proud of his origin. Being a Gallo-Roman is, indeed, a reason to be proud of and to make disappear all fears of deception. He considers that his family should be proud for its attitude of assimilating French culture and civilization and sincere patriotism. He even prides the French colonization, which is contrary to other opinions, most of them expressed quite recently in several former colonies, both of France and of Great Britain. This is an opportunity to bring again into discussion the concept of Nation saying that

nations are “the pinnacle of civilization”. His arguments are well chosen, he considers that “there is no democracy outside nations, there is no proximity without nations.” He comes back to the topic of globalization, which destroyed these boundaries. He insists on the fact that globalization and all its consequences must be fought against. To underline this position as a patriot, he says that globalization should be fought against to protect French unity and values.

We must say that his words are more explicit and his comments direct to specific topics and to a specific audience. In his discourse, he sometimes shows some hesitation, and this is in order to convince his audience that the interview was not rehearsed, that it was genuine. No one doubted that, given his extensive experience as a journalist and given his fame of a controversial one. After so many years of experience of a political journalist, he could very well face any kind of interview.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This approach to political interview tries to establish the most important components and the real strategies of what is usually called a genre of journalistic writing or broadcasting. The elements involved are to be considered with special attention, due to the specific of television interview. All the components of this media communication have a certain importance in the communication economy. It involves the partners of the communication, the interviewer and the interviewee, the message to be communicated, and the expected results. We also must take into consideration the importance of the interviewer, the importance of the interviewee the timing of the interview and of course, the audience.

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