

Argumentation and its acceptance in political debates

Autor(en): **mejrková, Svtla**

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SVĚTLA ČMEJRKOVÁ*

ARGUMENTATION AND ITS ACCEPTANCE IN POLITICAL DEBATES

Most of polemical exchanges on political issues staged on TV are controversies that in Dascal's (Dascal 1998: 22) classification occupy an intermediate position between discussions and disputes. Controversies are neither *solved* as discussions nor *dissolved* as disputes: they are, at best, *resolved*. In this way, media debates can be considered a powerful instrument in shaping public opinions, presenting multiplicity of arguments and standpoints. Though argumentation represents the very nature of debates presented on TV, one of the goals of argumentation is lost in media – the ultimate goal of persuading the opponent. Media dialogues lack the willingness of the participants into media debate to come to an agreement about disputed issues and particularly the willingness to be persuaded by the force of a better argument. The present article addresses three forms of possible agreement in political debates staged on Czech TV.

Keywords: media, interview, polemical discourse, interaction, consensus, agreement

* Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, cmejrkova@ujc.cas.cz

1. Argumentation in media dialogues

As Edda Weigand states, dialogue in the grip of public media (Weigand 1999: 36) loses some characteristics of its natural form and gains other potentials. Not only the media dialogue but institutional interaction in general involves some reduction in the range of interactional practices deployed by the participants in casual dialogue, restriction in the contexts they can be employed in and also reduction of their variety. At the same time, institutional interaction including media dialogue frequently involves some specialization and re-specification of the interactional relevance of the practices that remain (Drew and Heritage 1992). Specialization and re-specification of the interactional relevance of practices found in media dialogues concern also argumentation practices, both productive and receptive, i.e. both active and passive moves in argumentation (in Stati's 1994 terminology).

Polemical discourse displayed "on stage on television" in which controversial questions are presented "but not decided nor solved on stage" (Weigand 1999: 38), is a discourse that offers plurality of voices, opinions and arguments. It elucidates disagreement on a specific controversial issue without offering univocal solution or consensus in the end. On the contrary, it is often the task of the moderator to accelerate disagreement between the opponents, making the difference in their opinions as broad as possible and closing the struggle of opinions:

On this issue you will not agree... let us take another issue... in this respect you also do not agree... well, it was a nice dueling discourse... I hope the viewers have enjoyed it.

As the dialogue unfolds, it reveals characteristics resulting from its audience design (Bell 1984) or, in other words - from its public oriented drive (Dascal 1989). The public oriented drive of the dialogue manifests itself on several levels: postures and gazes of interviewers and invited guests; forms of addressing a viewer; various forms of engaging a viewer in the course of the interviewer asking questions and participants of the dialogue answering them. The viewer can be addressed explicitly or taken into account implicitly. A dialogue between two or more participants in a studio becomes a dialogue for the audience (Čmejrková 1999: 249, 2000: 3).

I-er: Well. Just *to make it clearer for the viewer...*

I-er: Mr. Minister, could you try, *could you try to tell the viewers* who the Prime Minister had in mind speaking about troglodytes?

I-er: Gentlemen, *let's try to leave these political games and just tell the viewers* what would it mean for the Czech Republic if we did not join the European Union. Would it be a tragedy or not?

I-ee: *My message to the viewers* is quite simple. In case they are listening, it is very simple. Think ahead, don't rely on the state and start saving for your old age.

The audience design also concerns argumentation: the one who is to be persuaded is not the opponent but the audience, the public for whose sake this dialogue is displayed. This is also the explanation of the thesis that dialogue in the grip of media loses some characteristics of its natural form and gains other potentials.

The main goal of the paper is to investigate the forms and the functions of agreement in a type of interaction such as TV political debates where disagreement between the participants is presupposed and the resolution of disagreement is not envisaged as a goal (the goal being persuasion of the audience).

The corpus I am going to analyze consists of video-recordings of interviews and debates broadcast by Czech TV, which have either dyadic or triadic framework. In interviews with a triadic framework, consisting of one interviewer and two interviewees, the interviewer confronts two experts whose opinions, as a rule, represent opposing approaches to a particular problem; both interviewees try to defend diverse positions and to win the approval of TV viewers.

2. Agreement as manifestation of surprise: between *no* and *yes*

As an example of temporary agreement and even collusion of two dialogical partners I will introduce a debate between the representatives of the two leading parties on the Czech political scene of the 90's, the leader of the Social Democrats - Miloš Zeman and the leader of the Civic Democrats - Václav Klaus. One of the few moments in the debate when

the two party representatives are in accord occurs when they define their parties against the background of other parties on the political scene. Following this particular aim, the representatives of the two main parties reach complete agreement.

7 – Seven Days – 25.1.1998

Interviewer: Jan Vávra - JV

Interviewees: Václav Klaus – VK
Miloš Zeman – MZ

JV: Okay but do you think that such new groups can succeed in the elections? Are you aware of it? I mean, are you nervous that suddenly, there is... [there is some competition for you here?]

MZ: [I am definitely not nervous.]. And about a possible success or lack of it in the elections, my opinion is - but maybe it's only a naive idea of mine - but so far it has always worked out for me - that *each political party can gain success based on its program and, of course, providing that it is able to communicate this program to its voters*. No matter how great this ability, it won't help you if you have no program. And here I simply see a bunch of people getting together, agreeing that they should run for the elections, that they should be in Parliament again, and *only later they think about what their program might actually look like. This I call harnessing a wagon in front of a horse*.

VK: *No, I must agree with this. [Hundred percent.]*

JV: [Yes.]

VK: Because I think these parties define themselves only through negative portrayal of the other. And *I don't know about any of them writing some original programs... and they never had a chance... never had a chance to eh-hm... bring these program ideas into practice somewhere in existing political parties*. ODS has never changed its program in the past, not a iota changed.

When the first interviewee (MZ) claims that *each political party can gain success based on its program and, of course, providing that it is able to communicate this program to its voters*, the second interviewee (VK) agrees completely with the thesis declared by his opponent. It is not because he has been just persuaded by Zeman's argumentation (which is supported by the unquestionable comparison *harnessing a wagon in front of a horse*), but because Klaus' standpoint in this particular question corresponds to

that of Zeman. He only adds *I must agree with this, hundred percent* and expands on the argument (*I don't know about any of them writing some original programs...*). This example provides us with a model situation: the two main parties, though their programs differ substantially, categorize themselves as parties with distinct and clear programs (their accord and harmony on this particular issue may be, however, appraised by the viewers as dubious conspiracy).

Though we can read this interchange as a downright agreement, the acceptance of the thesis is surprisingly opened by *no* (*No, I must agree with this...*). What are the functions of *no* in this case? The marker *no* may be interpreted as a trace of regular and persistent disagreement between the two opponents through the course of this particular debate and also through other debates between these opponents that shaped the Czech political scene of the 90'.

The occurrence of the marker *no* within the context of agreement shows that political dialogues presented on TV have rich intertextuality. The dialogue that appears on the screen is only a part of a broader political, social and psychological context. The moves used by the participants have not only interactional dimension (dialogue between the participants in the studio), institutional dimension (dialogue with the viewers) but refer, explicitly or implicitly, to a very broad context of other prerequisites and expectations beyond the scope of the TV debate. For this reason, it may be useful to differentiate between **explicit dialogue** and **implicit dialogue**, or **real dialogue** and **virtual dialogue**. In Kerbrat-Orecchioni's (1986) terms, the former dimension is called dialogal while the latter dialogical. Argumentation procedures refer to both real and virtual sides of a dialogue. In the debate of the two opponents introduced above, the marker *no* is not employed in the adversative sense, to contradict the particular thesis of the opponent but rather as a signal of what is often a very general disagreement with the standpoints of the opponent on other issues (Kraus 2002). Or, there may be also other readings of the initial *no* used in the turn of agreement. *No*, used to introduce unexpected agreement may have the function to contradict the expectation of disagreement, which is part of the presuppositions of this particular interaction setting of a TV duel. *No*, in such reading, presents the utterance as an exception to general presupposed disagreement. It appears thus, that the notion of virtual, or implicit dialogue, hidden behind the explicit, or real dialogue, may have different interpretations with different listeners, viewers, readers...

3. Agreement as a phase of bargaining: between *yes* and *but*

Agreement as a strategic move of negotiation can be best illustrated by political debates in the course of which both participants categorize themselves, e.g. as left wing and right wing politicians who can, nevertheless, agree on some common issues of their political programs. In the following debate, the representatives of Social Democrats (Miloš Zeman) and Civic Democrats (Libuše Benešová) reach understanding in considering unemployment a serious social problem and agree on the necessity of seeking steps against the growth of unemployment.

7 – Seven Days - 21. 3. 1999

Interviewer: Jan Vávra – JV

Interviewees: Libuše Benešová – LB
Miloš Zeman – MZ

JV: Legislative power and, at the same time, opposition-through-agreement ODS, are represented by the chairperson of the Senate and vice chairperson of ODS, Libuše Benešová. Good afternoon.

LB: Good afternoon.

JV: And the executive power is represented by the Prime Minister and chairman of the Social democratic party Miloš Zeman. Good afternoon.

MZ: Good afternoon.....

JV: Fine - but the answer to the first question was that unemployment had been caused by the previous governments.

MZ: The other way round. *Unemployment was primarily caused by the dropping dynamics of economic... [by negative dynamics].*

JV: [caused by the activity]

MZ: *caused by the economic policy of previous governments.*

JV: So, Mrs. Chairwoman...

LB: *Of course, in any case, the growing unemployment is connected to the fall of economic growth. Here we could name all kinds of factors that caused the fall of economic growth. We can point out some interior and exterior influences but we cannot simply say that everything that's happening in economy is the doing of some government - be it the past government or yours. Mr. Chairman, if you want to make these connections, then the interval you have mentioned before will expire soon, and then everything will be up to you. Then...*

MZ: *Yes. That's fine.*

LB: *But in case everything is the responsibility of a government, then it won't be Klaus any longer who is to be blamed but yourself.*

MZ: *And why not?* To make it clear, in our report about the state of the Union, as we call it, *we admitted some factors.* For example, we included that factor you are so right about mentioning yourself - meaning *the high discount rate of the Czech National bank* and I know that Governor Tošovský was strongly against it... *Anyhow we are trying to be objective and not to blame solely - and this solely I want to point out - the past government.* **But** then again, Mrs. Chairwoman, for example, we managed to achieve very good communication with the Czech National bank, it has lowered those discount rates some eight or nine times, and nowadays, these rates represent roughly half of the previous discount rates... *so, I am not claiming that it is solely the economic policy of the previous government that is to be held responsible, since the year 1996 it has been also the responsibility of the Czech National bank. You, on the contrary, claim that it has been solely the responsibility of the Czech National bank and you would not admit any responsibility [of your own].*

LB: [In case that] two year interval of yours was valid, then we must say that the restrictions of the Czech National bank happened in the summer of 1996 and thus we should be in the period right now but -

JV: *Mrs. Chairwoman, are the steps against the growth of unemployment, taken by the Social democratic party correct? Would you agree to them?*

LB: *I think that... that many steps within the frame ... the frame of active unemployment policy as performed today... got into the national plan of unemployment... in fact these are the same steps that were done here before. There is nothing new in it that we wouldn't have known here before, something radically new. It is true that the national plan of employment is a certain complex document which concentrated in itself all kinds of possible solutions. Providing certain... high co-dependence of all organs of civil service... which I also believe is right? [So, in principle...]*

JV [So, in principle, your evaluation is a positive one?]

LB: *Yes, in principle, my evaluation of the plan is positive. I am only afraid of one thing, which is that our unemployment is also caused by relatively high expenses on labor power. Those forty seven percent that are deducted per one employee, health insurance, social security, these are relatively high, and thus, in a way, exclude some people from the labor market. This*

mostly affects people with low qualification and thus moving in this direction, meaning that we will make the cost of labor even higher, be it through additional payment of social security or higher taxes, this would be probably very bad and possibly counter-productive.

JV: So, in your opinion, it would slow down economic growth.

LB: [Eh...]

MZ: *[I would like] to thank cordially Mrs. Chairwoman here and I do appreciate this stand of a serious opposition party, that it appreciates the National program of unemployment. Anyhow, I would not agree completely with the statement that identical steps from the past are being used again, and I would want to use one specific argument.* Mrs. Chairwoman, you know that this government is striving for - and has already taken first steps - for the minimal wages becoming higher than the minimum necessary for living is. If we are to motivate people to go and work, and welfare is practically calculated to make up to the minimum limit, it is essential that minimal wages be higher than this minimum. Otherwise, these people would not work and they would simply collect welfare money.

The fragment shows many examples of harmony of voices, both participants reach seemingly complete understanding. On the rhetorical level, several manifestations of an overt agreement can be found – *of course, in any case; yes, that's fine; why not; in principle I agree; my evaluation is positive; I do appreciate this stand*, etc. The signals of agreement are apprehended by the interlocutor who holds the agreement and confirms the harmony of views: he thanks the opposition for support: *I would like to thank cordially...*

However, under the surface it appears that both interview participants enter it with different approaches to the issue under discussion, i.e. unemployment, its causes and steps to be taken against its growth. They negotiate the way in which unemployment will be discussed. Their points of view differ substantially. First, there is an everlasting question as to who has caused the unemployment; to what extent the previous government is to be blamed etc.; in this particular point, the two parties representing the previous and the present government, obviously express different standpoints. However, they also exhibit some disagreement in assessing the efficiency of political and economical steps leading towards reduction of unemployment. What we see in the respective pieces of argumentation are differences in interpretation of causes of unemployment and in stressing particular aspects of its solution. The difference

within general consensus is expressed by such expressions as *I am only afraid of one thing, the unemployment is caused also by, I would not agree completely*. The reserved attitude is expressed also by the discourse markers *but, anyhow, nevertheless, however* and other hedging expressions that can be found in several passive argumentative moves.

Both signals of agreement and disagreement contribute to the **overall coherence of the dialogue as a single text created by two speakers – two opponents**. Each move follows on in part from the previous move of the speaker himself, and in part from the previous move of the partner in the dialogue. In the former case we can speak of **vertical coherence** (coherence in the succession of moves made by one speaker) and in the latter case we can speak of **horizontal coherence** (i.e. coherence between the moves of speaker A and speaker B). A higher degree of horizontal coherence, as a rule, reflects a higher degree of readiness on the part of the participant in the dialogue to listen to his/her partner (Kraus 2002).

In the debate mentioned in this section, the readiness of both partners, Mr. Zeman and Mrs. Benešová, to express strategic agreement with the opponent's statements and to differentiate their views afterwards contributes to the collaborative proceeding of the debate. We can see that many turns in this particular polemic interaction exhibit a reasonable proportion of both vertical and horizontal coherence. Thus, e.g., in the statement

(MZ) *Anyhow we are trying to be objective and not to blame solely - and this solely I want to point out - the past government*

1) Mr. Zeman refers back to his initial claim (= the expression of **vertical coherence** in Zeman's successive turns, based mainly on cohesive repetition of *previous government*)

(MZ) *Unemployment was primarily caused by the dropping dynamics of economic... caused by the economic policy of previous governments and*

2) reacts (= the expression of **horizontal coherence** in Zeman's turn, based mainly on particle *solely* and its intonational and verbal pointing out) to the opponent's turn

(LB) *but we cannot simply say that everything that's happening in economy is the doing of some government - be it the past government or yours.*

Mrs. Benešová's turn

1) reacts to Mr. Zeman's initial claim (= the expression of **horizontal coherence** in Benešová's turns, based mainly on pronoun *everything*) and

- 2) bears traces of referring back (= the expression of **vertical coherence** in Benešová's turns, based mainly on relating the pronoun *everything* to *all kinds of factors*) in her initial counterstatement *Here we could name all kinds of factors that caused the fall of economic growth.*

The turns expressing insistence on one's own claims with a certain deal of concession to the partner's counterclaims, typical of negotiation and bargaining, feature the dialogue as a whole: *so, I am not claiming that it is solely the economic policy of the previous government that is to be held responsible, since the year 1996 it has been also the responsibility of the Czech National bank. You, on the contrary, claim that it has been solely the responsibility of the Czech National bank and you would not admit any responsibility of your own.*

Political debates can be characterized above all by the production, projection, and resolution of disagreement showing slight nuances or significant differences in opinions. The interlocutor is not supposed to accept the opponent's argumentation, however, he is expected to take it into account and to elaborate, to expand on it. It is left to the viewer to decide whose argumentation sounds more convincing. The moderator concludes:

I-er: Gentlemen, I think that based on your opinions, *the viewers had a chance to create a picture for themselves.*

I-er: I believe that following our exchange of opinions and certain shifts of these, *any viewer can form an opinion of his or her own.*

I-ee: What Mr. Tlustý is saying here, making the comparison between the case of Social Democracy and the case of ODS ... if it were not so sad, I would find it funny but probably *it does not make any sense to keep arguing about this any further because I believe that each of our viewers can arrive to some conclusion of his or her own.*

4. Agreement as manifestation of surrender: between yes and well

Agreement can be regarded as a final surrender of the interviewee only occasionally. In media dialogue, the construction of meaning by the dialogue participants is not only negotiated during the dialogue but it may also be determined in advance. The asymmetry of opportunities available

to the participants in order to achieve their goals in the interview is very distinctive. The rules that structure the questioning and answering in the news interview provide the main protagonists, interviewer and interviewee, with different resources for dealing with one another. It is the interviewer who manages the question-answer format of interviews within certain constraints. The interview format dictates the asymmetry and enables the interviewer to use his power. In the following example, the interviewee is forced to capitulate and to accept categorization step by step construed by the interviewer.

Naostro:	Interviewer:	Milan Šíma	MS
Interviewee:	Václav Klaus	VK	

MS: Good evening. Today ODS celebrates the eleventh anniversary of its existence but that's not the main reason why Václav Klaus, the chairman of this party, is the guest of today's Naostro show. Good evening.

VK: Good evening. I wanted to mention those eleven years myself. You've taken me by [surprise... such a]

MS: [Well, such information]... anyhow, accept my congratulations. You probably know it but you are the only chairman leading a political party for such a long time who has not been replaced.

VK: Well...

MS: We managed to track down three similar cases in the whole world. Would you care to guess who else...

VK: If you put it like this, I think it's going to be an attack directed at Václav Klaus when you're gonna say that it's Fidel Castro or Kim Ir Sen or [somebody like that so]

MS: [Kim Ir Sen is] no longer the head...

VK: I'm expecting some kind of this company but I think that there were others who had been longer... had been longer, Helmut Kohl was [longer]

MS: [Yes]

VK: Also [Margaret Thatcher was longer]

MS: [I meant... like... who still is the head] of some political party.

VK: I guess that Castro [probably is but otherwise I don't know]

MS: [Yes, Castro is] also Vladimír Mečiar, you forgot about him.

VK: Oh, well but I am not counting... if they started in the same year or what [exactly]

MS: And Le Pen is another one, he has been the head of his party for the past thirty years.

VK: Thirty. Well, myself, I still have quite ...

Though the interview develops like a polite introduction of the guest in the studio, there appears a trap, signaled already by the comparison. The interviewee starts to understand the face-threatening context construed by the interviewer. Though he tries to make his best from the comparison mentioned by the interviewer, he finally capitulates: explicitly, the interviewee admits that he has been the chairman of the party for eleven years, and, simultaneously, he is forced to accept the whole implicit context construed by the interviewer.

5. Conclusion

Political debates on the radio and particularly on television shape opinions about current affairs and controversial issues. They often have a strongly confrontational and antagonistic character. What is the role of an agreement between two parties in the debates, how often do they reach agreement? In TV political debates we cannot find a situation when one party says *I am convinced, that's new to me, I did not know that before and now I agree*. I made an attempt to show that agreement in political interviews could be interpreted as manifestation of surprise, as a temporary phase of negotiation and only exceptionally as a manifestation of surrender. Other pragmatic nuances of agreement in the general context of disagreement are to be investigated.

In the transcribed interview, the punctuation stands for transcription signs, as follows:

eh	hesitation
.	utterance falling intonation
?	utterance rising intonation
<u>this</u>	emphasis
[but]	overlap of two utterances

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