

# Analyzing Presidential Debates

## *Functional Theory and Finnish Political Communication Culture*

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### **Abstract**

One of the most used theories in the research of political debates is the functional theory of campaign discourse. However, the theory has been criticized for being too culturally limited. In the present article, a Finnish presidential debate is analyzed from the perspective of functional theory. The goal is to critically evaluate the applicability of functional theory to the analysis of Finnish political campaigning. The results show that a Finnish presidential debate differs in many ways from an American presidential debate. The study shows how strongly the culture is reflected in political television debates and how important it is to take account of the cultural perspective in the development of a theory.

**Keywords:** culture, debate, Finland, presidential, television, theory

### **Introduction**

American presidential debates are the most well-known political debates. They are also the most followed, viewed, controlled, and the most researched political television programs. The theoretical development of television debate research therefore also started from and concentrated on them. They have been intensively studied, from the Nixon–Kennedy debate of 1960 to the present. In their 50-year history, they have been studied from several perspectives with varying results.

The most popular target of the research concerning television debates has been their effect. The content of debates has been the other main target of the research, but it has not been as popular (McKinney & Carlin 2004). Content has been studied from numerous different theoretical perspectives, but the systematic development of theoretical perspectives focused on television debates' contents has not been extensive.

One of the most used and systematically tested theories in the studies of the content of television debates has been functional theory (e.g., Benoit 2007). The theory has been used in several studies on American presidential campaigns and debates. An attempt has also been made to improve the generalizability of the theory by also testing it in other countries. These studies have provided support for the principles of functional theory, although cultural differences are also reported in all of them (e.g., Lee & Benoit 2005; Benoit & Klyukovski 2006; Benoit, Wen, & Yu 2007).

However, the theory has also been criticized for being too culturally limited. Isotalus and Aarnio (2005; 2006), for example, have concluded that the theory was developed to

analyze campaigns in a two-party system only, and it is difficult to apply it to multi-party system. They have also concluded that the theory is not equally suitable, for example to an analysis of Finnish political television discussions. However, they have not tried to apply the theory systematically to Finnish political debates or campaigns.

In the present paper, functional theory is applied to an analysis of a Finnish presidential debate. Because the theory was developed in the American culture of political communication and is here applied in another culture, the study can be seen as comparative research. In comparative political communication research, two opposing approaches are suggested: most similar systems design or most different systems design (Wirth & Kolb 2004, 97). Applying a theory developed in the American political communication culture to the Finnish political communication culture may be regarded as a most different systems design, because the political culture, the media system and the communication culture in general are so different. However, comparisons of this kind are needed if we wish to develop inter-culturally valid theory or to see what challenges the theory may confront in different cultures. Because functional theory has worked well in American political culture, it is reasonable to investigate whether it could also offer a tool for analyses in other, different cultures.

Comparative political communication culture research is one of the main trends in the research area of political communication at the moment. For example, Gurevitch and Blumer (2004) mention fertile areas for comparative research, and the present study represents one of them – the encoding of political messages. Therefore, the study not only tests the applicability of the theory, but may also help to illustrate cultural characteristics and differences. In studies of political communication culture, however, the communication culture is regularly seen quite narrowly (e.g., Pfetsch 2004), because researchers only consider communication as media communication. In the current study, communication culture is seen more widely, encompassing all kinds of communication, including how people communicate with each other face-to-face. In other words, the speech culture (Wilkins & Isotalus 2009) is also considered central when discussing communication culture.

The goal of the paper is to describe the characteristics of a Finnish television debate by means of the theory and to critically evaluate the applicability of functional theory to the analysis of Finnish political campaigning. The goal is to ascertain the extent to which the theory can be applied to a Finnish presidential debate and to consider what results are obtained by using the theory. In the results, I also describe the content of the categories in the theory in light of the results and evaluate how well the categories describe this debate. In the evaluation, attention is paid to what characteristics the theory is able to capture, but also what turns are difficult to fit into the model. The general purpose is to evaluate the inter-cultural applicability of this approach.

## **Functional Theory**

One of the most used theories in the research on political debates is the functional theory of campaign discourse. William L. Benoit has been the main developer of the theory and it has been used especially in studies of American presidential campaigns. It has been used in analyses of the discourse of an entire campaign and most often television debates. The theory sees campaign discourse as inherently instrumental, a means to a

desired end: securing enough votes to win the election. In his books, Benoit (2003; 2007) defines five axioms on which his functional theory is founded. They are:

1. Voting is a comparative act.
2. Candidates must distinguish themselves from opponents.
3. Political campaign messages allow candidates to distinguish themselves.
4. Candidates establish preferability through acclaiming, attacking, and defending.
5. Campaign discourse occurs on two topics: policy and character.

This means that a citizen makes a decision to choose between competing candidates and this clearly entails a comparative judgment. Citizens have no reason to prefer one candidate over another if the candidates look the same. Therefore, candidates must appear different from one another. It is essential for candidates in contested campaigns to develop distinctions between themselves and their opponents. Once a candidate decides which distinctions to stress to voters, he or she must convey that information to voters. Different campaign messages are used to this end (Benoit 2007).

For the purposes of the present paper, the fourth and fifth axioms of functional theory are the most interesting. According to the fourth, the discourse can take only one of three forms: acclaim, attack, and defend. First, candidates may acclaim their positive characteristics or their policy positions. Second, candidates may attack their opponents by addressing an opponent's undesirable character or policy position. A successful attack increases the attacker's net favorability by reducing the desirability of an opponent. If a candidate decides to respond to attacks, he or she will mount a defense. Defense, then, is the third potential function of discourse. It attempts to restore or prevent additional damage to a candidate's perceived preferability (Benoit & Hartcock 1999; Benoit et al. 2003; Benoit 2007).

Functional theory argues that these three functions – acclaim, attack, and defense – are likely to occur with different frequency. The theory makes two predictions about the functions of political campaign discourse. First, it is expected that candidates will use acclaims more frequently than attacks. Second, political candidates will use attacks more frequently than defenses (Benoit 2007). These predictions have also received support in several studies (e.g., Benoit et al. 1999; 2003; 2005).

The fifth principle of the theory is that the campaign discourse may occur on both policy (issue) and character (image) grounds. In other words, candidates try to persuade voters of their preferability in terms of policy and character. Functional theory predicts that policy comments will be more frequent than character comments in presidential campaign discourse.

Further, the policy utterances may address three topics: past deeds, future plans, and general goals. Past deeds concern outcomes or effects of action taken by a candidate. Future plans are a means to an end, specific proposals for policy action. Unlike future plans, general goals refer to ends rather than means. The character utterances occur, in turn, on personal qualities, leadership ability, and ideals. Functional theory also makes three predictions as to how these subforms are used. First, general goals will be used more often to acclaim than to attack. Second, ideals will be used more often to acclaim than to attack. Third, general goals will be used more frequently than future plans (Benoit & Hartcock 1999; Benoit et al. 2003; Benoit 2007).

Benoit (2007) also mentions a sixth axiom, but says that it appears to be so trivial that it is not worth mentioning. Namely, a candidate must win a majority (or a plurality) of the votes cast in an election. This means that a candidate does not need to persuade everyone to vote for him or her and that only those citizens who actually cast votes matter. Benoit considers that these principles also lead to the three goals of a candidate: (1) attracting the votes of independent or third party voters, (2) discouraging one's own party members from defecting or voting for one's opponent, and (3) enticing some members of the opposing party to defect.

As can be concluded based on the above axioms and predictions, functional theory is well suited to studying American presidential campaigns. However, the studies in which the theory is applied are not restricted to American campaigns. Functional theory has also recently been applied to other cultures. It has been used to analyze, for example, presidential debates in Korea (Lee & Benoit 2005), Ukraine (Benoit & Klyukovski 2006), Taiwan (Benoit, Wen, & Yu 2007) and prime ministerial debates in Israel (Benoit & Sheafer 2006). In all these debates, there were two participants, except in Korea where there were three. The idea in all these studies has been that functional theory has been applied to these debates and the results of analyses have been compared to previous results from American presidential debates. In all of these studies, numerous similarities with American results have been reported, but also some cultural differences. The main conclusion, however, has been that some features of the political campaign discourse cross national borders and cultures. The studies have also supported the idea that functional theory has some applicability beyond American politics.

Functional theory is well suited to simplifying the forms of campaign discourse and has proven an excellent analytical tool. It has been used successfully in numerous studies. It has been shown to be practical and capable of predicting forms of campaign discourse. Benoit (2007) considers that one advantage of functional theory, for example, is that it categorizes statements in a more multifaceted way than do many other analyses. Another advantage is that it uses the theme as the coding unit. Further, it can be applied to a variety of political campaign messages: televised political spots, radio spots, debates, talk radio appearances, television talk show appearances, web pages, and nominating convention speeches.

However, Isotalus and Aarnio (2005; 2006) claim that functional theory is not equally suitable to analyzing political campaign discourses in all cultures. They find that functional theory has been developed to analyze campaigns such as presidential campaigns, where the character of a candidate is crucial. For example, in parliamentary debates, the character of a party leader is not as crucial as the character of a presidential candidate. Further, the theory seems to be more appropriate in a two-party system. It seems to be a limited perspective for the multi-party system, because the discourse in these debates is more wide-ranging. The main principle of the theory about winning the elections reveals that it is better suited to a two-party system, where the winner is always definite, but in a multi-party system, it may sometimes be difficult to find only one unambiguous winner.

Additionally, it seems to include implications of forms of interaction that are culturally bound. Isotalus and Aarnio (2005; 2006) claim that attack and defense are apparently not basic forms of communication in Finnish political campaigns. The analysis of Isotalus (2009) also confirms this observation. He also notes that expressions of agreement

are typical in Finnish political television debate and that these expressions do not fall into the categories of functional theory.

## **The Context of the Finnish Presidential Debate**

According to the Finnish Constitution, the President of the Republic is elected for a term of six years. The same person may be elected President for no more than two consecutive terms of office. The President is elected by a direct vote, if necessary in two rounds. If one of the candidates receives more than half of the votes cast in the election, he or she is elected President. If none of the candidates receives a majority of the votes cast, a new election must be held between the two candidates receiving most votes in the first election. The candidate receiving most votes in the second round is elected President.

In 2006, the president was elected for the third time by direct vote in Finland, but it was the first time an incumbent was a candidate in a direct vote. It was also the first time an incumbent prime minister was a candidate in a direct vote. Thus, these two institutions came face to face as candidates in a presidential election. There were eight candidates in the first round, and in the second round Mr. Sauli Niinistö (the candidate of the National Coalition Party) and the incumbent Mrs. Tarja Halonen (the candidate of the Finnish Social Democratic Party). Finally, Tarja Halonen won the election and was elected for a second consecutive term of office. In the second round, Tarja Halonen received 51.8 percent of all votes and Sauli Niinistö 48.2 percent. Participation in these elections was 77.2%. From the late 1980s onwards, the turnout has remained about 10 percent points higher in presidential elections than in the parliamentary elections (Moring 2008: 51).

Generally, political campaigning in Finland has followed the same trends as in other democracies all over the world (Hallin & Mancini 2004; Mancini & Swanson 1996) – including other Nordic countries (see Nord 2001). This development has been described using a variety of concepts, such as Americanization, mediatization, modernization, or globalization, all of which emphasize different aspects of this development. In any case, these trends have also been noted in Finland (Herkman 2008; Isotalus 2001; 2007). This entails, among other things, the professionalization of political communication, the growing importance of the media (especially television), the increasing news value of polls, personalization and the increased entertainment features of politics and the growing importance of images. Many of these trends are also connected to the television debates and thus emphasized their role in campaigns.

In Finland, as in most other countries, television debates have become a crucial part of campaigning. However, some researchers have suggested that it would be better to talk about discussions than debates in Finland, because the interaction between participants seldom resembles a traditional debate (Isotalus & Aarnio 2006). Further, in the Finnish political television discussions, the moderators usually take a more prominent role than, for example, in the American presidential debates (Isotalus 2009). The role of moderators may even resemble that of an interviewer, and in these cases debating between politicians is virtually non-existent. Additionally, turn-taking between candidates is not as structured; they are freer to comment informally and interrupt each other than in the American presidential debates.

In the 2006 Finnish presidential campaign, too, the debates had a prominent role. The media generated a great deal of anticipation, and it was supposed that the debates

would even be a decisive factor in the election. Both candidates and television companies paid them a great deal of attention and other media followed them widely. The second round lasted two weeks and included five television debates between the two candidates. All these debates were also among the most viewed television programs in this period in Finland.

In the second round, Tarja Halonen as an incumbent was in a role of a defendant in the debates. Both journalists and the challenger candidate Sauli Niinistö criticized her. She was often seen to be responsible for many aspects of the current state of Finnish society and especially foreign policy. Moreover, in the media reports on the debates, Niinistö was handled in a more positive light (Tiittula, Nuolijärvi, & Isotalus 2007). In their study, Tiittula et al. (2007) considered that the communication styles of Halonen and Niinistö were very different in the debates. Halonen's communication style was more colloquial and characterized by rapid turn-taking. She also had a great deal of variation in her nonverbal communication. Niinistö, by contrast, was characterized by indirect formulation and hesitation in verbal style. His language was also more literary and his nonverbal communication less varied.

## **The Purpose and Method of the Article**

In the present article, functional theory is applied to the analysis of a Finnish presidential debate. The purpose is to evaluate the applicability of functional theory to the analysis of Finnish political debate. The first goal is to ascertain the extent to which the theory can be applied to a Finnish presidential debate. The second goal is to consider what kinds of results are obtained by the theory, namely how it describes the debating styles of the candidates. The third goal is to describe the content of the categories of the theory in light of the results and to evaluate how aptly the categories describe this debate. Fourthly, attention is paid to turns that do not seem to fall into the categories of the theory.

In the present paper, a debate from the second round of the Finnish presidential campaign 2006 is analyzed. It was the first debate between Halonen and Niinistö and was broadcast on 18<sup>th</sup> January on YLE (Finnish public service broadcasting company) TV1. There were two moderators in the program and it lasted an hour. This program was chosen because it included more disagreements between the candidates than some other debates, and the setting is closer to that of a traditional debate: the candidates stood opposite each other and the moderators between them. This program was also chosen because equivalence is a central point in this kind of research (Wirth & Kolb 2004), and this program may be more comparable with debates from other cultures than other programs available. In this way, the effects of the political communication culture could be better examined than when choosing a program that is completely different (in terms of, for example, the program format or the goal of interaction), because a different program might include so many other variables that could explain the differences.

First the debate was transcribed carefully. After that, the transcription was coded using QSR N'Vivo7 software according the coding procedure of functional theory (Benoit 2007: 247-251). The first step in the content analysis was to classify the utterances by thematic function: acclaims, attacks, and defenses. After that, a coder classified the topic of each theme: policy or character. Then a coder identified which of the three forms of policy (past deeds, future plans, general goals) or the three forms of character (personal



qualities, leadership ability, ideals) was used in each theme. In this analysis, however, it was possible to leave utterances uncoded if they did not fit any of the possible categories, in order to discover whether there were discourses that did not follow the categories of functional theory. The text was analyzed by the researcher alone.

After categorization, the division of the utterances into different categories was considered and the results between candidates were compared. The contents of each category were also considered more carefully to gain a better picture of what kind of utterances they included. After that, utterances thus far uncoded were also considered. The procedure of functional theory is based on quantitative content analysis, but in addition to this the categories were also analyzed qualitatively and evaluated critically.

## Results

Most of the turns of the candidates in the debate could be coded according to the main functions of functional theory. A total of 238 turns of the candidates in the debate were coded. However, 21% of turns could not be assigned to the three main classes. The most common turns were defenses (35% of turns), after that attacks (28%), and then acclaims (16%). All turns that were coded to the three main functions could be coded to the topics policy or character. Further, all turns about character were classified into three forms: personal qualities, leadership ability, and ideals. However, not all turns about policy could be coded to subcategories past deeds, future plans, or general goals. Thirteen percent of policy turns remained outside these subcategories. Ultimately, most of the discourse in the debate could be assigned to the categories of functional theory, but a notable amount could not be coded into these categories, although the categories were comprehended extensively in the analysis.

Both of the candidates used defenses more than other kinds of turns. Of Halonen's turns, 41% were defenses while the corresponding figure for Niinistö was 30%. Niinistö had nearly as many attacks (29%) as defenses, but Halonen had clearly fewer attacks (27%). However, the candidates used approximately the same number of attacks. Both of them had more uncoded turns than acclaims. Halonen had acclaims in 14% of her turns and Niinistö 18%.

The candidates had a similar relation between policy and character topics: one third were character topics and two thirds policy topics. Halonen had policy topics in 71% of her classified turns and Niinistö 68%. The subdivision of the turns into the subcategories of policy and character topics was similar between the candidates. There were only minute differences between them. Of the policy turns, general goals was the biggest category. It included 43%, past deeds 26%, and future plans 18% of the policy turns. Forty-five percent of character topics were coded as personal qualities. Thirty-three percent of them concerned ideals and 22% of them were leadership qualities. The greatest difference between the candidates in subcategories concerned policy topics. Halonen seemed to use policy topics, especially general goals, in defenses more than Niinistö did. Instead Niinistö used policy topics, especially general goals, in his attacks more than Halonen did.

Functional theory also predicts that general goals will be used more often to acclaim than to attack. In this debate, Halonen used general goals twice to acclaim, three times to attack, and 24 times to defend. Niinistö used general goals four times to acclaim, nine times to defend, and 12 times to attack. The theory also predicts that ideals will be used

more often to acclaim than to attack. Halonen did not use ideals at all to acclaim, but four times to attack. Niinistö used ideals four times to acclaim and two times to attack. Third, according to the theory, general goals will be used more frequently than future plans. This prediction was supported by the results, because the ratio was 43% and 18%.

Next, I will consider contents of categories qualitatively. For the attacks, it was typical for candidates to talk about what the other candidate had said earlier or said in the debate. The attacks were also often formulated as questions:

Extract (1)

*Halonen*: “Mistä se nyt sitten Sauli Niinistö se uhka teidän arviossa tässä arviossanne ni sitten tulee?”

*Halonen*: “Where is the threat then, Sauli Niinistö, coming in your evaluation, in this your evaluation?”

Most of the attacks concerned policy issues. Attacks on character were rare. The next example is Niinistö’s attack on Halonen’s character. This attack is the most forthright in this debate:

Extract (2)

*Niinistö*: “Tuon äskeisestä minulle jäi nyt vain se kuva, että te olette huolissanne. Ja olette olлу kuusi vuotta huolissanne tai ainakin viisi ja nyt sitten uudenvuodenpuheessa kiinnititte asiaan huomiota. Onko se ihan rehellistä ihmisiä kohtaan, että esiinnytte kaiken hyvän tuojana? Mutta teidän aikananne on sitten, asiat ovat kehittyneet kuitenkin ihan päinvastaiseen suuntaan. Siinä voisi ehkä hiukka vilkaista peiliinkin.”

*Niinistö*: “About the last, I now got a picture that you are worried. And you have been worried for six years or at least five and now in your New Year’s speech you paid attention to the matter. Is it entirely honest toward people that you present yourself as the bearer of all good? But in your time, things have, however, developed in exactly the opposite direction. In that situation you might just take a look in the mirror.”

These two examples are clear attacks, but many of the turns coded in this category are not so direct. In these turns, a candidate may express disagreement or criticize something that has no specific target.

The defenses were the most common turns in this debate. Some of the defenses were responses to the other candidate’s attacks, but many of them were also answers to moderators’ critical questions. Halonen especially had a great deal of defenses where she defended current policy. Because of this, most of Halonen’s defenses related to general goals. Halonen’s defending turns were also quite often rather long. In the next example, Halonen answers a moderator’s question that the hints in the press about her easily provoked temperament had affected her campaigning:

Extract (3)

*Halonen*: ”No en mä tiedä, mutta toisaalta on kai niin päin, että jos kansainvälisen politiikan ihmisiä katselee, niin kyl niis kaikissa tietysti särmiä pitää olla. Mutta se on semmonen puoli, jota pitää tietysti itse hallinnassa ja vaikka niinkun koko ilmevalikoima on poliitikoillekin sallittu...”



*Halonen:* "Well, I don't know, but on the other hand, that if people in international politics are watching, so they all must have a certain edge of course. But it is that kind of part that you of course control yourself and although a whole repertoire of expressions is allowed for politicians..."

Acclaims were quite rare in this Finnish debate. The acclaims focused more often on character topics than on attacks or defenses. In this debate, most of the acclaims related to the fact that the candidates were competing for the votes of people in the rural areas in the second round of the election, but they both were considered to be candidates of urban people. So they acclaimed how well they knew the rural areas and how interested they were in farmers. Further, Halonen emphasized many times that she had worked as the president of all Finnish people, which was also the main slogan of her campaign.

Extract (4)

*Halonen:* "Mutta tuota niin, nyt mun mielestäni, mä olen ollut koko kansan presidentti ja pidän siitä kiinni."

*Halonen:* "But well, now in my opinion, I have been the president of all the people and I stick to that."

Extract (5)

*Niinistö:* "... Sen vuoksi minä korostan ehkä sitten aika laillakin tätä kansantaloudellista puolta, mutta se kuitenkin on seikka, johon presidentti voi vaikuttaa. Voi sitten tietysti korostaa esimerkiksi nyt varsin tärkeätä maaseudun kehittämisrahan saamista."

*Niinistö:* "... That's why I perhaps stress this economic side quite a bit, but it is however a matter where the president can make a difference. One can stress for example a very important issue now about getting the development funds for the rural areas."

Coding the turns to the categories of acclaims and defenses was fairly easy with the Finnish debate, but the category of attacking must be understood broadly. There were only a limited number of direct attacks, but there were various turns including some sort of criticism of or challenge to the other candidate that can be considered attacks rather than other kind of turns. Applying the topic categories policy and character was easy with the Finnish material.

However, the debate also included turns that could not be coded as any of the main functions. In these turns, the candidates did not launch any sort of attack against the other candidate, they did not defend their own opinions, speeches or actions, nor did they try to acclaim or tell about themselves or their ideas in a positive way. In most cases, these uncoded turns can be seen as analysis of the prevailing situation in Finnish society, the EU, or other international settings. In many cases, these turns are answers to moderators' questions and the candidates do not address them to each other. Halonen especially had long turns in which she analyzed or explained current aspects of Finnish society or development of the EU. In the next example, Niinistö answered a moderator's question about why Finns' attitudes toward the EU are so negative in the following way:

Extract (6)

*Niinistö*: “Joo, mä uskon kuitenkin, että ehkä pääsyy on kuitenkin se, että tällainen ärsytyskynnys ylittyy liian usein. EU menee alueille ja asioihin, joita ihmiset ei vaan alkuunkaan ymmärrä, että mitä ihmettä tämä Brysselille kuuluu. Vaikeuksia sitä välillä onkin ymmärtää.

*Niinistö*: ”Yes, I believe however, that perhaps the main reason is however, that this kind of irritation threshold is exceeded too often. The EU goes into areas and matters where people do not at all understand why this is Brussels’ business. At times there are difficulties understanding this.”

Sometimes these uncoded turns were also expressions of agreement or ice-breakers. They might also be short facts about an issue addressed.

Further, some turns on the policy topic could not be coded as past deeds, future plans, or general goals, although they were coded as attacks or defenses. These turns do not relate to past or future nor do they describe general goals, but they rather address the current situation. Therefore, they can also be seen to be analyses of the prevailing political situation. In this debate, there were turns like “the security review is already being renewed little by little” (defense) or “many pensioners are clearly in difficulties” (attack), which were left uncoded to the subcategories.

## Discussion

In the present paper, the functional theory of campaign discourse was applied to the Finnish presidential debate. Of the five axioms in the theory, the analysis focused especially on the fourth and fifth. The fourth axiom “candidates establish preferability through acclaiming, attacking, and defending” seems only to be applicable in part. In most cases, the categories of the theory were applicable to the turns in the debate, but not all – although the categories were understood in a broad sense. Therefore, there seems to be something more than acclaims, attacks, and defenses, although these do indeed cover most of the discourse in this case, too.

It seems to be typical of Finnish political discussion that it includes a certain amount of neutral discourse on the present social situation. In the present analysis, these parts of the discourse could not be coded as acclaims, attacks, or defenses. Such turns also occurred in the coding of policy topics, because some of them could not be coded as past deeds, future plans, or general goals. Isotalus and Aarnio (2005; 2006) also observed that discourse that is at times connected is the key element in the Finnish televised political discussion. They mention three forms of such discourse, namely discourses oriented to the past, present, or future. Functional analysis seems to include discourses oriented to the past and future, but neutral discourse oriented to the present is missing. This could be taken into account in the future development of the theory.

Although the axioms and categories of functional theory did work partly with the Finnish material, the predictions of the theory did not seem to function equally well. The theory has two predictions about the frequencies of three main functions: candidates will use acclaims more frequently than attacks and political candidates will use attacks more frequently than defenses. In the debate analyzed, candidates used attacks more frequently than acclaims and defenses more frequently than attacks. The

frequency of these main functions was thus completely opposite to what the theory predicts.

This opposite result can be explained by the role of the moderators and the Finnish communication culture. In this debate, as in most of the Finnish televised election discussions (see Isotalus 2009), the role of the moderators is active. They are television journalists who want to channel the discussion and they ask the candidates tricky questions. Therefore, the candidates have to defend themselves when answering these questions, which explains the large number defenses in Finnish debates. On the other hand, in Finnish culture direct attacking and praising of oneself are often avoided. The main function of discussion in Finnish culture is to maintain harmony and conflictual themes are generally avoided (Carbaugh 1995; Sallinen-Kuparinen 1986), which may explain why direct attacking is rare. The Finnish communication culture has also been described as listener centered (Sallinen-Kuparinen 1986) and oriented toward matters of fact (Wilkins 2005), which means that a speaker would not emphasize him-/herself as a person and that issues are regarded as more important than the speaker in public situations. This, in turn, may explain why acclaims are so rare. Thus it seems obvious that the communication culture has a strong influence on television debates. These examples also show that political communication culture should not be seen only as media communication (Pfentsch 2004), because speech culture, too, has a strong influence on candidates' communication.

The division into policy and character topics (fifth axiom) seemed to work well with the Finnish material. The prediction, that policy comments will be more frequent than character topics, was accurate for the Finnish presidential debate. The classification, in general, also helped to describe the communication style of the candidates. For example, the results show that Tarja Halonen used a great number of defenses in this debate. This result helps to understand why she made a generally defensive impression in the second round (see Tiittula et al., 2007). In turn, it was easy for Sauli Niinistö to attack on general goals, because Halonen, as the incumbent, could be seen as responsible for the general goals of Finnish policy. Most of Halonen's defenses also concerned general goals.

Functional theory also predicts that general goals will be used more often to acclaim than to attack. Further, the theory predicts that ideals will be used more often to acclaim than to attack. The present results do not support these predictions. Instead, the prediction that general goals will be used more frequently than future plans was supported by the results. A similar result from earlier studies (e.g., Benoit & Sheaffer 2006; Lee & Benoit 2005) was also that a challenger candidate attacked more than the incumbent did.

In conclusion, functional theory can be used as an instrument for analyzing Finnish presidential debates, but the use is not unambiguous. The categories must be understood in a broad sense, because direct attacks, for example, are difficult to find in Finnish material, and many earlier results and most of the predictions of the theory do not seem to be valid in the Finnish culture. The results seem to be consistent with earlier results on Finnish election discussions (e.g., Isotalus 2009, Tiittula et al. 2007). After all, the results show that a Finnish presidential debate differs in many ways from an American presidential debate.

Nevertheless, the theory could be used as a starting point for inter-cultural research, because it does seem to include features that transcend national cultures. However, the theory still needs further development in order to be seen as inter-culturally valid. On the

basis of these results, the theory should take better account of neutral discourse oriented to the present. Further, the theory takes for granted that all defenses are caused by the attacks of other candidates. However, in the Finnish debate studied here, a great deal of the candidates' defenses were responses to questions and statements by the moderators. The role of moderator may be quite different in different countries and even in the programs inside one country, and the moderator's communication style affects the communication of politicians. This observation should also be considered in all attempts to develop an inter-culturally valid theory.

A campaign with only two parties and where voting is a comparative act between two options, however, is rare in a multi-party system. Such a campaign offers a comparative possibility to apply functional theory, but limits the applicability of the results to the Finnish television election discussions in general. It is probable that if the theory had been applied to a Finnish television discussion with more parties represented, the results would have been different and the applicability of the theory even worse. This is important to consider when the inter-cultural validity of the theory is evaluated. Another limitation of the research is methodological. In the present study, the coding procedure of functional theory (Benoit 2007) was not faithfully adhered to in the first phase. Here, the turns were not divided into themes, the unit of analysis was not as anatomized as in the earlier studies. In most cases, a turn was coded as one theme and only if needed was a turn divided into several themes. This seemed to be more reasonable in Finnish contexts where turn-taking between candidates is not so structured. The more anatomized approach would probably have changed the results only slightly. The main results or interrelations, orders, and trends of the results would not have changed.

In conclusion, the study shows how strongly cultural characteristics are present in political television discussions, although there also seem to be some features that transcend national borders and cultures. Even more importantly, the study reveals that functional theory does not fit all cultures as well as the American culture, where it was developed. To be inter-culturally valid, it still needs considerable further development and testing. The development of a novel theoretical model for the analysis of television debates may also be needed. For example, Isotalus and Aarnio (2005; 2006) have attempted to develop a different approach, but this model has also been developed within a single culture, so that its inter-cultural validity is questionable. Therefore, a theory based at the outset on comparative research could be more functional internationally. Such a theory could better take the local political communication culture into account, but it would also be applicable in different cultures.

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