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Progressive and conservative rhetoric in political advertising

Abstract: The starting point of the study referred to in this article is the Hugh Rank's concept of progressive and conservative rhetoric. Used in advertising, these two types are derived from the actor's attitude to a particular benefit and are characterized by certain permanent features. The aim of the study was to verify the assumption that based on the analysis of advertising messages of specific political entities, it is legitimate to conclude whether they are seeking re-election or aspiring to power they do not currently have. The subject of the study was advertising content sponsored by election committees, broadcast during the Polish parliamentary campaign in 2015 as part of free of charge blocks of election programs by TVP. The analysis is of a qualitative nature and was made on the basis of electoral spots of committees whose campaigns were successful, i.e. which won parliamentary representation.

Key words: political advertising, progressive and conservative rhetoric, parliamentary elections

The language of politics is of interest to many researchers (See e.g.: Głowiński, 1990; Anusiewicz, Siciński, 1998; Kamińska-Szmaj, 2001; Brańczyk, 2003; Ożóg, 2004; Fras, 2006; Rak, 2013) who concentrate mainly on its persuasive functions. Being aware of the great diversity of this language, however, does not mean that making certain generalizations is impossible. As Irena Kamińska-Szmaj writes,

“[a]ll texts related to the sphere of politics are connected by the fact that they are addressed to a mass audience, and the choice of linguistic means they apply is subordinated to the persuasive function. Their aim is to persuade the recipients to act in accordance with the sender's intention, to change attitudes and behaviors, to adopt specific views or ideas, and to accept the world of values postulated by the sender” (Kamińska-Szmaj, 2001, p. 8).

Politics is power, and – in democracy – power comes from citizens who are convinced that this particular politician and this particular party deserve to exercise this power. Politics is related to the possibility of making decisions, controlling resources, controlling other people's behavior, and of constructing and controlling the symbolic space in which public discourse takes place and values are shaped (Denton, Woodward, 1998).

Language is a powerful instrument for shaping ideas about the world in which we operate. Politicians who are aware of this are exceptionally careful in constructing their statements, because they express their power by influencing the thinking of others. Taking into account the properties of language, including its specialization (Hockett, 1968), from the point of view of recipients, the meaning of words is relative and depends on the context, including who the sender is and what motivates them. Politicians usually control their statements, but recipients can decode them in terms of one of the following three

models: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated or oppositional (Hall, 1987). The first one assumes reading the message as intended by the sender; the second one involves recipients adjusting the content of the media message to their own knowledge and beliefs; and the third one involves reading the message contrary to the intention of the sender. If these models were applied to politics, in the first case, recipients of a political message would read and accept the content and sense of the message in full. This usually happens in the case of supporters of a given political entity. The second situation is more complicated because we are dealing with a mix of text elements that are accepted and those which are rejected by recipients. They are aware of the sender's intentions, understand the meanings intended and accept them to some extent, while rejecting certain other elements, and modifying meanings due to their own experiences and knowledge. In practice, this means that situational factors can ultimately affect the reception and interpretation of the meaning of a message. In political practice, such negotiated decoding of a message occurs when a voter agrees with a politician/political party about the necessity of solving a socially important problem, while their personal situation does not allow them to accept the specific solution recommended by this politician/political party. If we assume that the reception of political content affects electoral behavior, in this case the support (or lack thereof) of the voter for a particular political entity is difficult to predict and depends on the relationship between abstract and situational factors. However, according to the theory of rational choice,¹ situational factors and interest defined in particular terms will be more important for the voter than an abstract problem and solution which is not beneficial for them subjectively.

Finally, the last decoding model proposed by Hall is oppositional decoding. Recipients understand the denotative and connotative meanings of the message, but decode the message in a way contrary to what the sender wishes. This behavior is typical of opponents of the political entity that is perceived to be the author of the message.

Although the coding/decoding concept of Hall has been highly influential, there have been attempts to supplement it, because researchers point out that it does not solve some important issues, such as the role of the media in reporting the statements of political entities and their coding. Hence the postulates to expand Hall's concept with new variables that may facilitate a more thorough analysis of possible interpretations of political texts by recipients (See e.g. Schröder, 2000, pp. 233–258; Morley, 2006, pp. 101–121; Ross, 2011).

Party election broadcasts, however, are a special kind of advertising message, fully controlled by its author, whereas the media only present this message on terms agreed with its author. One of the constitutive properties of advertising is thus ruled out, namely the possibility of third parties (for example, an editorial board) interfering with the content of the advertising message.² Therefore, the above-mentioned claims that Hall's concept requires complementing, although interesting and worth considering, are not

¹ The "economic model of electoral behavior" refers to the classic concept of the rationality of choice, developed by Downs. It assumes, among other things, that decisions are made by individuals who are selfish and rational, that therefore calculate personal interests and needs in a pursuit to maximize the usefulness of their choice (See. Downs, 1957).

² Considering broadly available studies on advertising, including political advertising, it seems unnecessary to define it here.

related to the perspective presented in this article, which focuses on analyzing of what may be inferred from the content of a party election broadcast, although it is not overtly expressed.

When analyzing the language of politics, including party election broadcasts, the theory of conversational implicatures is useful (Grice, 1975), which focuses on decoding hidden acts of speech, rather than explicit ones, as was the case in Hall’s concept. The rules of politeness (Leech, 1983) or pragmatic considerations force politicians to formulate certain thoughts and opinions not in a direct, but in a veiled way; sometimes they also convey information that they may not have planned to make public. The author of the concept, Paul Grice, argued that, given the linguistic and non-linguistic context, the hidden content can be read in the messages if the following assumptions are made: (1) recipients understand the literal meaning of the message; (2) for hidden acts of speech there is an exponent that the explicitly expressed meaning has to be modified in the process of understanding; (3) there are principles and rules of inference which allow the meaning of the statement intended by the sender to be discovered in the denotative meaning and context (Zdunkiewicz, 2001; Grice, 1991). Implicatures therefore derive from the distinction between what politicians say and what they additionally want to say, or say unconsciously. Implicatures depend on the context and are a result of inference rather than decoding. They may, although they do not have to, suspend or limit the rules of interpersonal communication, including the rules of cooperation, truthfulness and informativeness.

Another interesting proposal for analyzing the language of politics, in association with Grice’s theory of implicature, developed by an American researcher, Hugh Rank, is rarely referred to in Polish studies. Rank argues that all human behavior can be interpreted in terms of seeking benefits; benefits are usually perceived subjectively, and whatever serves the purpose of achieving them is relativized as good or as evil. The author proposes to focus on two key factors in the description of benefit-seeking behaviors, namely the perception of what is “good” and “bad” (beneficial/harmful), and having what is “good.” Considering the relations between these variables, four types of actions can be identified based on a shared assumption which generalizes that “all people seek benefits.” These are: protection, relief, acquisition and prevention (Rank, 1984) (Fig. 1).

perception:	“good”	“evil”
possession: the haves	protection to keep the “good”	relief to change the “evil”
the have-nots	acquisition to get the “good”	prevention to avoid the “evil”

Figure 1. Types of benefit-seeking behaviors

Source: Own study based on: Rank, 1984, pp. 9–10.

As can be seen from the figure above, *protection* applies when people are in a state, or have an object that they perceive as “good” and want to maintain it. The actions described as *relief* are undertaken when the current state of affairs is perceived as “evil” and the operating entities want to get rid of it. *Acquisition* occurs when people do not have a “good” and want to obtain it, and *prevention* is to ensure that the situation perceived as “evil” is avoided. In this model, benefit-seeking behaviors involve intensification and downplaying, and their specific variety is derived from having or not having a value perceived as desired. Intensification turns into glorification when one talks about one’s positive properties, and denigration when talking about the mistakes and defects of competition; downplaying involves the justification of one’s own mistakes or diminishing the advantages of competition. Intensification is performed by means of repetition, associations and composition, while downplaying is achieved by means of abandonment, distractions, and deceit (Rank, 1984, pp. 49–80).

Benefit-seeking behaviors result in two types of statement constructions, which were defined respectively as conservative or progressive rhetoric. The former is associated with protective and preventive activities, the second characterizes change and describes activities related to relief and acquisition. Conservative rhetoric is used by the incumbent authorities, who have power and control. They emphasize the need to maintain the *status quo*, expose threats resulting from change, and position themselves as defenders of the community. They express satisfaction, contentment, appreciation of achievements, and pride in the group’s achievements and value. Progressive rhetoric, on the other hand, expresses disappointment, anger, and frustration with the existing state of affairs, as well as a hope for changes that are to result in progress, improvements, and possibilities of fulfilling plans and dreams. It is used by those who do not have power and aspire to it, presenting themselves most often as defenders of the poor, the excluded, and victims of unfair redistribution of jointly created resources. The general characteristics of conservative and progressive rhetoric are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Conservative and progressive rhetoric – general characteristics

Conservative Rhetoric	Criteria	Progressive Rhetoric
protection/prevention		relief/acquisition
protection, prevention, stabilization, order	ideals, goals	relief, acquisition, progress, improvement
satisfaction with the “good,” anxiety, fear of the “bad”	emotions, feelings	desires, hopes; anger, frustration
loss of the “good” possessed	key threat	continued deprivation
past, good old days	“golden age”	future, promised land
to protect, to maintain, to defend, to ensure, to avoid, to support	key verbs	to reform, to change, to improve, to limit, to stop, to get rid of, to do better
it has never been so good; we are staying on course	typical slogans	time for change, it does not have to be like this
defenders of the country, culture and order	self-perception	defender of people, of the weak and the poor
ruthless, greedy, conceited	in the eyes of opponents	irresponsible, dreamers, naïve, lazy, malcontents
rituals, ceremonies, anniversaries	presentation of power	a vote of no confidence, strikes, riots
“good times” – peace and prosperity	in general	“bad times” – depression, poverty, difficulties

Source: Own study based on: Rank, 1984, p. 12.

Taking the above into account, one can assume that, based on the analysis of party election broadcasts of specific entities, one can infer whether they are seeking re-election, or gaining power which they currently do not have. The aim of this study is to verify this assumption on the example of the party election broadcasts of Polish electoral committees during the last parliamentary campaign in 2015. The subject of the research was the content sponsored by electoral committees, presented in the blocks of party election broadcasts on Polish state television TVP, which is legally obliged to broadcast them free of charge.³ The analysis is qualitative and made on the basis of election spots of the committees that conducted successful campaigns, winning parliamentary representation: *Platforma Obywatelska*, PO (Civil Platform), *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS (Law and Justice), *Kukiz'15*, *.Nowoczesna* (Modern Party) and *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*, PSL (Polish Peoples' Party). Considering the then composition of parliamentary forces and the political situation, determined especially by the results of the May presidential elections, which the incumbent president had surprisingly lost, it was assumed that the electoral committees of the above-mentioned parties could be expected to behave as follows: PO – protection of the “good” it had, i.e. getting the number of votes enabling PO to create a coalition government for a third time, PiS – acquisition, or getting support allowing the party to return to power after eight years in opposition, PSL – prevention, or securing electoral support that would ensure its presence in the parliament, despite unfavorable polls. The goal of the committees of *Kukiz'15* and *.Nowoczesna* was to acquire the desired “good” of parliamentary representation since these two parties were participating in an election for the first time. Both of them wanted to obtain a sufficient number of seats to make them potential and/or necessary allies of the most serious players – PO (in the case of *.Nowoczesna*) and PiS (in the case of *Kukiz'15*). In the context of the two kinds of rhetoric discussed above, PO and PSL could have been expected to use conservative rhetoric, while the remaining committees – PiS, *Kukiz'15* and *.Nowoczesna* – progressive rhetoric.

The electoral committees had different advertising strategies resulting from their respective political, financial and organizational conditions. The main antagonists in the 2015 parliamentary elections in Poland were PO and PiS, and the messages of these committees referred mainly to the main rival. The remaining participants of the campaign were practically absent from the party election broadcasts of the two main committees, with the exception of *.Nowoczesna*, whose growing support in the polls forced the management of PO to refer to this potential competition. All electoral committees, except for PSL, consistently criticized PO and spared its coalition member – PSL, potentially helping it to prevent electoral catastrophe and build its position as a potential ally of the future winner, regardless of who that was.

The most affluent committees of PO and PiS could pride themselves on the greatest inventiveness and diversity in creating party election broadcasts, although they were not particularly varied in terms of their form and content. The poorer committees relied

³ These issues are regulated by the Law of January 5, 2011 – Election Code, which stipulates in Art. 117 that “electoral committees whose candidates have been registered shall have [...] the right to broadcast election programs free of charge on public radio and television channels at the expense of broadcasters.” See Dz. U. [OJ] 2011, No. 21, item 112.

more on the most intensive display of their limited number of party election broadcasts. Therefore, the reconstruction of variables allowing the type of rhetoric used by individual committees to be defined (Table 2) is based on the broadcasts they had prepared in different numbers. The majority of all messages analyzed were negative and carried limited references to their respective manifestos.

PO was perceived by other electoral committees as the main driving force behind what had been happening in Poland in 2007–2015. In its party election broadcasts, PO emphasized its pride with the achievements of the past eight years, while indicating that the process of modernization of Poland and the pursuit of a living standard comparable to that in the countries of Western Europe had not finished (See e.g.: *Chcemy zmieniać Polskę dalej*, 2015). By this token, PO encouraged voters to support its program again, which assumed the protection of what had been achieved, further development and increased spending on social and economic activation programs (See e.g.: *Wyższe płace Polaków*, 2015; *Wybór należy do Ciebie*, 2015). PO created positive messages in relation to its own achievements and negative ones when it talked about the future in the case of the victory of PiS. These features make it possible to define the rhetoric of this committee as conservative, using the techniques of intensification of its own achievements and of threats, when voters give power to less responsible parties.

Table 2

Conservative and progressive rhetoric in the party election broadcasts of electoral committees in the 2015 parliamentary elections

Criteria	PO	PiS	PSL	Kukiz'15	.Modern
1	2	3	4	5	6
Ideals, goals	protection, stabilization, further development	liberation from corrupt, inefficient, and unbelievable authorities	another change	winning the state for citizens, liberation from participation	progress, improvement, fixing Poland
Emotions, feelings	satisfaction with achievements, fear of the consequences of others coming to power	frustration due to inept governance, hopes associated with "a good change"	satisfaction with achievements so far	frustration, anger, powerlessness, hope for change, pride	desire for progress, hopes for improvement
Key threat	loss of power, squandering of successes so far	stagnation, continuous deterioration of living conditions	squandering of opportunities for further improvement	continuous ignoring of the needs of ordinary citizens	poor management
"Golden age"	the years the PO-PSL coalition ruled	future; the past as in the times of PiS government and the presidency of Lech Kaczyński	the years the PO-PSL coalition ruled	future	future
Key verbs	to maintain, to support, to be proud of achievements	to change, to limit, to fight	to keep changing, to defend, to keep word	to dream, to re-fute, to wake up	to do better, to reform
Typical slogans	I love Poland; strong economy, higher wages	Work, not promises	Close to human matters	You can, Poland	Let's fix Poland

1	2	3	4	5	6
Self-perception	defenders of achievements, guarantors of further improvement	defenders of the weak and the excluded, defenders of Polishness, traditional system of values, faith and sovereignty	defenders of the country, Polish land and tradition	defenders of citizens, defenders of power and glory	modern, pro-reformers, defenders of entrepreneurship and liberal freedoms
In the eyes of opponents	corrupt, lazy, with low moral qualifications, conceited, arrogant	irresponsible, malcontents with insincere intentions, a threat to democracy	greedy, nepotistic, conservative	irresponsible, naïve, incompetent, frustrated	detached from the lives of ordinary Poles, irresponsible
Presentation of power	anniversaries, election conventions	anniversaries, election conventions	anniversaries, election conventions	election conventions, concerts	election conventions
In general	times are still difficult, but good, the country is enjoying peace and prosperity	the situation in the country is bad – poverty, difficulties, scandals, exclusion	there have been good changes in the country, but Polish interests still have to be defended	bad time for the country – exclusion, depression, frustration, lack of perspectives	the state needs improvement, better management and entrepreneurship
Rhetoric	conservative	progressive	conservative	progressive	progressive

Source: Own study.

In the party election broadcasts analyzed, PiS focused on the principled criticism of the last eight years, diminishing the achievements of PO-PSL, often misleading recipients and not refraining from making personal references (See e.g.: *Wszyscy ludzie Ewy Kopacz*, 2015; *Ewa & przyjaciele*, 2015; *Powiedzmy to sobie szczerze*, 2015) on the one hand; on the other, PiS presented the main programmatic assumptions (See e.g.: *Beata Szydło – Program Prawa i Sprawiedliwości. Uszczelnienie systemu podatkowego*, 2015; *Beata Szydło – Program Prawa i Sprawiedliwości. Podatek od sklepów wielkopowierzchniowych*, 2015), following the principle that they should not be too detailed and they should be emotional (Dimond and Bates, 1988). Opposing its main competitor – PO – PiS cast itself in the role of the defender of numerous social groups, which, in PiS's view, had not benefited from the changes that had taken place in Poland after 1989. In addition, the party claimed to be the repository of traditional Polish and Christian values that are not negotiable, but which had been relativized by PO and its leaders. The programmatic solutions proposed by PiS were a continuation of the election promises made in the victorious presidential campaign of Andrzej Duda. PiS pointed out that, in order to fulfill these promises, the party that supported the newly elected president, and whose electoral committee was headed by the candidate for Prime Minister, had to win the elections. The main election slogan – “Work, not promises” – implied that the PO-PSL coalition government marked a period of sham activities, rather than reliable, hard work, to build a fair and moral social order, the message which was concordant with the theory of implicature.

The party election broadcasts of PSL were addressed practically at one group of voters – farmers – both in terms of their visual and verbal content (See e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sph6sAXKWZc&index=>, 2015; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-CKJ4g,XHg&list=>, 2015). The rhetoric of these broadcasts is most difficult

to be unambiguously assigned to one of the two types discussed. The use of phrases such as: we defended, we will continue to change, we have kept our word, implied that the party had exercised power and wanted to maintain this state of affairs. At the same time, PSL distanced itself from its coalition partner and articulated numerous, mainly social postulates, which could be interpreted as criticizing government policies so far, which is typical of a group aspiring to power. This rhetorical ambiguity probably stemmed from the situation of the party, for whom support oscillated around the electoral threshold in pre-election polls. Therefore, PSL distanced itself from the achievements of its coalition partner that was being extensively criticized by political opponents, for whom public support did not bode electoral victory. On the other hand, PSL pointed to these achievements and articulated postulates that should be welcomed by rural voters. PSL broadcasts were formally correct, but not very influential; they were conservative and, in principle, did not refer to political competitors, focusing on self-presentation instead, which distinguished them among the party election broadcasts of other participants in the election battle.

For obvious reasons, Kukiz'15 and .Nowoczesna, should be expected to have used progressive rhetoric during the campaign, since both parties were running for parliament for the first time. The analysis of the party election broadcasts of these committees confirms this expectation. Both groups were highly critical about the eight-year rule of the PO-PSL coalition and postulated that changes were needed, although both their criticism and the changes proposed were rooted in different premises.

The rhetoric of Kukiz'15 can be described as totally progressive, because this party criticized the key systemic solutions that were apparently the source of all the pathologies, participacy and inaction that had put ordinary citizens at risk (See e.g.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgLbG63o3pY&index=>, 2015; *Nie zginie Polska*, 2015). Their spots talked about "the only such opportunity," called for radical changes in the constitutional order aimed at empowering citizens and reviving Poland's pride and dignity. Against this background, the criticism of the government in .Nowoczesna's broadcasts seemed moderate, because it concerned the incompetence and inability to use existing mechanisms, rather than the need for a systemic change (See e.g.: *Zagłosuj na Nowoczesną*, 2015; *Głosuj, bo jest Nowoczesna*, 2015). In the event of obtaining the social mandate this party declared improvements, implementation of better solutions, more effective management of existing resources, and modernity, although modernity was never actually defined in the broadcasts. Although .Nowoczesna did not resort to the dramatic concepts that were present in the messages of Kukiz'15, the future was clearly presented as a golden time, a time of hope and desired change. Comparing the rhetoric of both parties aspiring for parliament for the first time, one can notice that their progressiveness resulted from the aspirations of different electorates. In the case of Kukiz'15, the prevailing emotions involved profound frustration, a sense of helplessness, anger and the conviction that the elections were really the last opportunity to make a change, which had to be radical, because only then could people's dignity be restored. In the narrative of .Nowoczesna, other emotions could be seen: impatience, aversion to the current style of politics, the desire to accelerate changes, and live a better, more colorful, more modern life. These emotions determined the fundamental differences in the image of Polish reality presented in the election broadcasts of both parties, though constructed using progressive rhetoric.

One of the basic functions of advertising is motivating people to take specific actions resulting from the desire to gain a specific benefit. In the case of party election broadcasts, this is achieved by employing such rhetoric that mobilizes people who are satisfied with the current situation, or those who are not content with the *status quo*; this allows specific political entities to achieve the goal of their actions during the election campaign. In fact, elections are not about the future, but are a form of evaluation of the past. Those who are in power, and want to continue, will glorify the past and postulate the necessity of correction, rather than radical change. Those who aspire to power which they do not have will evaluate the past negatively, promising another future which is supposed to be better. This universal regularity is also confirmed by the rhetoric of Polish political parties, which was employed not only in party election broadcasts, but also in other forms of political discourse. Their rhetoric reveals the current position of politicians and political parties in the process of exercising true influence on making the most important decisions in the state, and is the premise for determining the motives of political actors.

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Postępowa i konserwatywna retoryka w reklamie politycznej

Streszczenie

Punktem wyjścia badania referowanego w niniejszym artykule jest koncepcja retoryki progresywnej i konserwatywnej Hugh Ranka. Stosowane w reklamie, typy te są pochodną stosunku podmiotu działającego do określonej korzyści i charakteryzują się pewnymi stałymi cechami. Celem badania było zweryfikowanie założenia, że w oparciu o analizę komunikatów reklamowych konkretnych podmiotów politycznych uprawnione jest wnioskowanie, czy ubiegają się one o reelekcję, czy też aspirują do władzy, której aktualnie nie mają. Przedmiotem badań były treści reklamowe sponsorowane przez komitety wyborcze, emitowane podczas polskiej kampanii parlamentarnej w 2015 r. w ramach bloków audycji wyborczych przez TVP, którą do nieodpłatnej emisji reklam obliguje ustawodawca. Analiza ma charakter jakościowy i dokonana została w oparciu o spoty wyborcze komitetów, których kampania zakończyła się sukcesem, tzn. które zdobyły reprezentację parlamentarną.

Słowa kluczowe: reklama polityczna, retoryka progresywna i konserwatywna, wybory parlamentarne