

Discrediting moves in political debates

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Abstract. The paper analyzes the move of discrediting the opponent as a means to persuasion in political debates. After analysis of a corpus of political debates, a typology of discrediting strategies is outlined, distinguished in terms of three criteria: the target – the feature of the opponent specifically attacked (dominance, competence, benevolence); the route through which it is attacked – topic, mode or directly the person; and the type of communicative act that conveys the attack (insult, criticism, correction...). The relevance of body signals in discrediting moves is highlighted.

Keywords: persuasion, fallacies, discrediting strategies, multimodality

1 Discrediting the opponent as a persuasive move

In persuasion an Agent A wants to convince an Agent B to pursue some goal GA by convincing B that GA is a subgoal to achieve a goal GB that B has [1]: the politician A may assure he will reduce taxes to convince B that voting A is a subgoal to his goal of paying lower taxes. But in persuading B, not only A's good reasons are of use: also the very person of A him/herself convinces B. In Aristotle's words, the audience is persuaded not only by *logos* and *pathos*, i.e., by rational argumentation and the appeal to emotions, but also by *ethos*, the character of the Persuader. In fact, we are not only persuaded by what people say, but what people *are*.

This is why the persuader not only has to induce positive evaluations of the goal s/he proposes to pursue, but also a positive evaluation of him/herself. Symmetrically to this, when argumentation takes place with an opponent C, like in a discussion or a debate, the persuader must also induce negative evaluation not only of the goals and arguments proposed by C, but also of the opponent C him/herself: in other words, convincing B to pursue the goal proposed by A may imply to discredit C.

This strategy has been called "*ad hominem* fallacy" in classical rhetoric and in argumentation theory. It is a "technique of argument used to attack someone's argument by raising questions about that person's character or personal situation" [2; p.140], and it "has the form: "My opponent here is a bad person, therefore you (the audience) should not accept his argument"" [3]. The Pragma-dialectic perspective [4], considers *ad hominem* as fallacious since it violates the "freedom rule", according to which participants in a discussion must be free to provide arguments without fearing of being attacked. In this attack, both Walton [2; 3] and van Eemeren [4] include issues of morality as well as expertise: [2] talks of "cutting down one's opponent by casting doubt on his [one's opponent's] expertise, intelligence, character, or good faith" (p.111), by portraying him "as stupid, unreliable, inconsistent, or biased" (p. 110). Walton [2] mainly speaks of "bad character for veracity, or bad moral character generally" (p. 140), but observes that "bad character" in political arguments does not

necessarily imply a “moral” judgement; it may entail deficiency in some other qualities needed for the best candidate [3; p.115], like, for example, being a strong leader. Real debates are full of this sort of “arguments”, through which a participant may discredit the opponent. In this paper we define the notion of “discrediting move” during a debate, we analyze some cases of discrediting moves in Italian, Swiss and French political debates, and outline a first typology of them according to a model of social evaluation in terms of goals and beliefs.

2 Attacking the other’s face

We define discredit as the spoiling of another person’s image. According to a goal and belief view of mind and social action [5], a person’s *image* is the set of evaluative and non-evaluative beliefs that a person A conceives of person B. An *evaluation* is a belief about whether and how much some object, event, person have or give you the power to achieve some goal [6]. Persons are evaluated positively or negatively against several criteria (several goals) – ugly or handsome, selfish or altruistic, just or unjust, stupid or intelligent, honest or unethical – and to have a positive image (to be evaluated well against a number of criteria) becomes a permanent goal for people, since the image others have of you determines the type of relationships others want to entertain with you. Further, there are two kinds of negative evaluations: one of inadequacy, if you lack the power necessary for some goals; and one of noxiousness, if you are endowed with power, but a negative power that risks of thwarting someone’s goals. So an elector may not vote for leader C because, despite his honesty and moral integrity, he is not very smart in his political strategy (evaluation of lack of power); or else he may not vote for A because, though being very smart, he is not honest or abuses of his power (negative evaluation of noxiousness). But these two kinds of evaluation are both necessary for trust: to trust a person, I must assume 1. that s/he has a benevolent attitude toward me – s/he is willing to act for my good, she does not want to hurt me, and in her attempts to persuade me, she is not trying to cheat – and 2. that s/he is a competent person, one who has the necessary skills and knowledge to plan and to predict outcomes of actions, who has updated knowledge about the topics to decide upon, and so forth.

Now, while looking competent and benevolent may be sufficient conditions in everyday persuasion, in political discourse the orator, besides exhibiting benevolence and competence, must also show dominance. If a candidate tries to persuade me to vote for him, I will check not only his benevolence (towards my category of electors) nor only his competence in politics or economy, but also take into account how strong and effective he looks in carrying out his goals. Thus, the image a politician should project – at least for some types of electors – is also one of a dominant person: he must be totally devoid of features of lack of power.

From this it stems our hypothesis that, to lower the likeliness for electors to vote one’s opponent, one should attack the opponent not only on the image of benevolence and competence, but also on that of dominance.

Of course an aspect linked to dominance is how charismatic the opponent is; in the classical definition by Weber the charismatic leader “is treated as endowed with

supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers and qualities” [7]; so charisma is a more complex construct which includes also the so called dimension “emotional identification” [8] of the followers with the leader. Moreover, recently Williams and colleagues [9] emphasized the role, in the emerging of charismatic leader, of contextual variables, like the perception of economic or political crisis, or the status of the candidate as the “incumbent” or the “challenger” within an electoral contest.

3. How to discredit others

When A wants to discredit C s/he casts doubts on C’s characteristics, or definitely expresses negative evaluations about them. The negative evaluations may be both ones of noxiousness or of lack of power, according to what is the image of C that A wants to convey to the addressee(s). Discredit may be expressed verbally, or simply by body signals, or by a combination of the two. Moreover, it can be expressed in an indirect way, that is, not through the meanings of explicit signals, but through the inferences that may be implied by them. To find out cases of “casting discredit” on the opponent in political debates, we ran an exploratory study.

3.1 Method

To find examples of discrediting moves we analyzed fourteen video-recorded political debates, among which one in the presidential campaign of 2007 in France and the others during Italian election campaigns in 2008 and 2011, for a total of 150 minutes of debate. After an overview of these debates, 46 fragments were selected in which a debater discredits another. The fragments were transcribed, analyzed and classified by two expert independent coders. For some fragments only the verbal communication was transcribed, while for those in which the discrediting move was mainly performed through body signals, communication in all relevant modalities was annotated. An annotation scheme was constructed to the purpose according to the principles of the “musical score of multimodal communication” [18].

Compared to other schemes like Allwood et al. [10], Kendon, [11] McNeill [12], Kipp [13] and Ekman & Friesen [14], our scheme, beside describing each signal in terms of its physical features (say, handshape, location, orientation and movement of a gesture) aims at classifying it through attributing it a specific meaning. Speech and its parallel body signals are described in terms of their parameters (for gestures, handshape, location, orientation and movement, and the expressivity parameters of temporal extent, spatial extent, fluidity, power and repetition; for gaze, direction of the eyes, eyebrows and eyelids position and movements; for mouth, position of chin and lip corners...). Then, based on the assumption that any signal, by definition, conveys a meaning that can be translated in words, and beside its literal meaning, may imply a further (indirect) meaning, to be understood by the Addressee through inference, each verbal or body signal is attributed a literal and possibly an indirect meaning, expressed through a verbal paraphrase. Based on these meanings, a typology of

discrediting moves was built up. Let us provide an example of annotation (Table 1). In this fragment Marco Travaglio, a left wing journalist, is talking of the numerous indictments of the right wing premier Berlusconi, and Elisabetta Casellati, an under-secretary of Berlusconi's government, trying to demonstrate that the leader of her party is not alone in having pending indictments in many trials, alludes to trials (for defamation) in which Travaglio has been condemned.

Table 1. An annotation scheme of discrediting acts

1. Time stamp Sender	2. Speech	3. Meaning	4. Body signals	5. Meaning	6. Indirect meaning	7. Discrediting Strategy
1. Travaglio 7.35	<i>(I miei processi) non riguardano</i>	(My own trials) do not concern	Prosody: <i>raising intonation</i>	I am going to explain precisely		
2. Travaglio 7.38	<i>prostituzione minorile,</i>	child prostitution,	Prosody: <i>Stress on ri and na</i> Gaze: <i>Eyes open wide and eyebrows raised</i> Gesture: <i>Right thumb up</i>	I am scanning words → I emphasize these words Number one of a list	I am explaining very clearly → you are stupid Berlusconi's indictments are more serious than mine I count them → They are numerous	Negative evaluation: stupid
3. Travaglio 8.00	<i>riguardano degli articoli scritti su un giornale</i>	they concern some articles written on a newspaper	Prosody: <i>singsong intonation</i> Gesture: <i>Right hand palm to Hearer, thumb and index in precision pick, moves to right as if writing</i>	I remind this as a poem to learn by heart I iconically depict what "written" means	You should learn this once for all → you are like a pupil I explain very clearly → you are stupid	Negative evaluation: stupid

- (1) Travaglio replies: “...*Facciamo una puntata sui miei processi, che non riguardano [...] prostituzione minorile, corruzione di testimòne, concussione della questura, frode fiscale per centinaia di milioni di èuro [...] riguardano degli articoli scritti sul giornale che non sono piaciuti a qualcùno, soprattutto perché ho criticato qualcùno*”.

“Let us have a talk show about my trials, that do not concern child prostitution, witness corruption, police bribery, tax fiddle for hundreds of millions euros [...]; they concern some articles written on a newspaper that someone did not like, mainly because I have criticized someone”.

Travaglio at time 7.35 (Col.1) says “*che non riguardano*” ([my trials] that do not concern) (col.2 -3), with a raising intonation (4) meaning his sentence is not finished, and he is going to explain more (5). Then – 7.38 – he says “*prostituzione minorile*” (child prostitution) by stressing the tonic vowel of the adjective “*minorile*”. This is the first item of a list of four (Berlusconi’s) indictments, and to stress it Travaglio, in correspondence with this item (and later with each of the next three items), opens eyes wide and raises his eyebrows, while counting on fingers (here raising his thumb, col. 4) to convey he is making a list (5). The indirect meaning conveyed (col.6) is that Berlusconi’s indictments are more and more serious than his own. After finishing the list of Berlusconi’s misdeeds, Travaglio says: *riguardano degli articoli scritti su un giornale* ([my trials] concern some articles written on a newspaper), and while uttering this he moves his hand, palm to Interlocutor, with joint thumb and index, rightward (col.4), iconically depicting the action of writing (5). But the very fact of using a very clear representation, even, an iconic one that might be addressed to small children, indirectly implies his interlocutor (Casellati) is stupid (col.6). The multimodal communication (speech and other signals) analyzed in columns 2 – 6 is finally classified in col.7 in terms of the typology of discrediting moves described in Section 4. In Table 1, the multimodal communication of both lines 1-2 and line 3 is classified (col. 7, lines 2 and 3) as a discrediting move that points at the opponent’s lack of competence.

3.2 Results. Types of discrediting moves

A qualitative analysis of our data allowed us to distinguish various types of discrediting moves in terms of various criteria. A first criterion is whether the Sender directly attacks the other person, or more indirectly attacks the person through criticizing what s/he did or said, or the way s/he is presently behaving. Another criterion is the target of the attack, i.e., the characteristic of the person that is subject to negative evaluation. A third criterion is the type of speech act (or, considering nonverbal signals, the type of communicative act) specifically used to discredit – an insult, a trick question, an ironic statement, an allusion, an insinuation – which might be an open list. In what follows we illustrate some types of discrediting moves in terms of the former two criteria.

3.2.1 The person, the topic, the mode. The final goal of any discrediting move is to spoil the image of the opponent; yet, this can be done in a direct way by attacking the

person herself (Person), but also indirectly. For instance, you can express a very negative evaluation of what that person is saying (Topic), either by denying that what she says is true, or providing correction, clarification, or more precise information. Or finally, you can attack the way in which the opponent is conducting her argumentation during the debate (Mode).

A. The person. Insulting is a clear way to convey discredit by directly attacking a person. Being generally caused by a personal or moral attack, the insult tends to be considered an emotional reaction of anger, a “loss of control” (which conveys a negative evaluation of the insulter). Of course, the insult is a hard blow, since the insulter has the goal not only to communicate to others how bad or dangerous that person is, but also to communicate to the person him/herself one’s intention of offending him, that is, to publicly spoil his/her image [15]. But this can be a strategic move to persuade by damaging the opponent’s image, hence, as Schopenhauer puts it, a last weapon in a contest. Here is an example.

- (2) Alessandro Sallusti, a right wing journalist, is discussing with Massimo D’Alema, a left wing leader, about the right wing minister Claudio Scajola, who has received an expensive house paid by a building company to corrupt him. Sallusti compares Scajola to D’Alema, saying that he too is a “privileged” politician because he lived for a long time in a popular apartment paying a very cheap rent. D’Alema tries to demonstrate that the comparison with the minister under investigation is wrong, and when Sallusti goes on provoking he replies: *Ma vada a farsi fottere. Lei è un bugiardo e un mascalzone* (Get screwed! You are a liar and a scoundrel!) with very high vocal intensity, tilting head forward and staring at the opponent with eyebrows raised.

A more indirect way to attack a person is to attack someone close to him/her (according to the principle that “bad company corrupts”). In an example from our corpus, Travaglio, who is politically close to the party of a former judge, Antonio Di Pietro, is debating with Daniele Capezzone, one of the spokesmen of Berlusconi. They both skip the contents of the debate and start accusing each other by trying to demonstrate that the reciprocal political referents are immoral or unfair; in this case Travaglio accuses Capezzone of being at the service of a politician who takes advantage of his legislative power to escape from court trials.

- (3) Travaglio, to Capezzone: *Stai al servizio di uno che si fa le leggi per farsi assolvere!* (You are at the service of one who makes laws in order to be discharged)

In this sentence, Travaglio emphasizes the *relation* between Capezzone and Berlusconi: the former is “at the service” of the latter: a slave of a cheater. Such discrediting communicative act entails a triple attack: (1) Capezzone has a relation of slave-master with his leader, (2) Capezzone is a slave, and (3) his master is a cheater.

B. The topic. A way to indirectly attack the person is to judge his or her action. Here is a case of this strategy.

- (4) Giuliano Pisapia and Letizia Moratti are running for being elected mayor of Milan. A few days before the vote Letizia Moratti launches an accusation to Pisapia of having

been charged, 20 years before, of stealing a car, and then discharged under an amnesty. She does that at the very end of the debate, when Pisapia has no time to reply.

Moratti with her sentence casts a very negative evaluation over Pisapia through mentioning a past action of him.

C. The mode. A somewhat indirect way to discredit the opponent is to highlight his blameworthy behavior during the debate.

- (5) In example (4), Moratti's accusation to Pisapia is a calumny, because Pisapia in that case actually had given up the amnesty, he had chosen to be put on trial and had been acquitted. Thus Pisapia, while Moratti is still speaking, just before the debate is over, only has the time to say: "*E' calunnia, questa*" (this is calumny).

Here Pisapia retorts the negative evaluation over the opponent by remarking Moratti's unfair behaviour during the debate. In other less serious cases the Speaker remarks the opponent's unfair floor management, in order to describe him as more generally unfair. During a harsh debate between Marco Travaglio and Daniele Capezzone, the discussion is not focused on what they are talking about but on the way they discuss: Travaglio in fact by teasing the opponent wants to demonstrate that being a right wing politician means not to let the other express his opinion, by continuously interrupting and overlapping on his discourse:

- (6) Travaglio, addressing Capezzone, says: *Ora mi metto a fare come te, guarda, mi iscrivo al partito liberale e ti parlo sopra*; ("Now I start doing like you, I join the liberal party and speak over you"). And when Lilli Gruber, the Moderator, tells him that this way nobody can understand, he adds: "lo so che non capisce niente nessuno! Per questo loro fanno cosi" (I do know that no one can understand anything: this is why they do so!). While saying he will join the liberal party, Travaglio performs an *asymmetrical* (then simulated) *smile*, he *puts his right arm on his hip* and *sways bust* as if provoking and defying the opponent, in an amused pose that unmasks his ironic intent.

3.2.2. Ends and means of discrediting moves: attacked features and communicative acts. Attacks to the person during a political debate can be distinguished in terms of two criteria: the *target feature*, i.e., the characteristic of the opponent subject to negative evaluation, and the *speech act* (or if not only verbal, the *communicative act*) through which the negative feature is highlighted; in fact, the same target may be pointed out by different verbal or nonverbal acts. Here we only incidentally take note of the specific communicative acts performed (written in small capitals), while we mainly focus on the types of target features.

The feature that is subject to attack may concern all three aspects of the opponent's image: Competence, Dominance, and Benevolence, with the former two being subject to negative evaluations of lack of power, and the third to ones of noxiousness. On the *Competence* side, one may cast doubts on the opponent being *ignorant* or *stupid*, on the *Dominance* side, concerning his/her being *helpless*, *ridiculous* or *inconsequential*, and on the *Benevolence* side, concerning his being *immoral*, *dishonest* or *cheating*. As shown in the following examples, various communicative acts may be exploited to point at these features.

A.1. Competence – Ignorant

- (7) Travaglio is criticizing the premier Silvio Berlusconi, and Elisabetta Casellati, an under-secretary of his government, to cast doubts on what Travaglio is saying, reminds that he has been condemned twice for defamation. He then replies: “*Se la sottosegretaria conoscesse la differenza che c’è fra il reato di opinione e lo scrivere il falso...*” (“if the under-secretary knew the difference between a thought crime and writing the false...”).

Here Travaglio implies that Casellati does not even know the difference between thought crime and defamation, thus performing an INSINUATION about her ignorance on legal issues.

One more example. During a debate before the president election in 2007, Ségolène Royal aims at showing that Nicholas Sarkozy does not have precise and updated knowledge concerning nuclear energy, and to do so adopts, in both verbal and body behavior, a didactic attitude while talking to him.

- (8) Nicolas Sarkozy: *Vous confirmez l'EPR?*
Ségolène Royal: *Non. Je suspends l'EPR dès que je suis élue.*
S: *C'est-à-dire vous suspendez les nouvelles centrales et vous prolongez les vieilles.*
R: *Mais l'EPR n'est pas une nouvelle, n'est pas une centrale* (she frowns, as if meaning « I am annoyed by the silly things you say »).
S: *Si. Bien sûr.*
R: *Vous mélangez tout. L'EPR c'est un prototype* (she frowns, and tilts her head back, expressing superiority and thus remarking her correction)
S: *Non madame.*
R: *L'EPR est un prototype de quelle génération?* (she leans across the table towards Sarkozy and points at him with her index finger, as a teacher asking the pupil a question)
S: *Ce n'est pas un prototype. C'est la quatrième génération.*
R: *Non, c'est la troisième génération.*
- Nicolas Sarkozy: *Do you confirm the EPR¹?*
Ségolène Royal: *No, I intend to suspend the EPR as soon as I am elected.*
S: *That is to say that you suspend the new (nuclear) centrals and you prolong the old ones.*
R: *But the EPR is not a new, not a nuclear plant* (she frowns, as if meaning « I am annoyed by the silly things you say »).
S: *Yes, of course.*
R: *You are mixing everything up. The EPR is a prototype* (she frowns, and tilts her head back, expressing superiority and thus remarking her correction)
S: *No, madame.*
R: *The EPR is a prototype of which generation?* (she leans across the table towards Sarkozy and points at him with her index finger, as a teacher asking the pupil a question)
S: *It is not a prototype, it's the fourth generation.*
R: *No, it is the third generation.*

¹ EPR (European Pressurised Reactor)

In this example Royal highlights Sarkozy's ignorance about nuclear plants, first by a speech act of CORRECTION (« EPR is not a new, not a nuclear plant »), then REMARKING what his error is (« You are mixing everything up »). Then she puts a TRICK QUESTION (« EPR is a prototype of which generation ? ») displaying a body behavior typical of a teacher with her pupil, to unmask Sarkozy's ignorance, and finally REMARKS his wrong answer (« No, it's third generation »).

A.2. Competence – Stupid. Sometimes, a Speaker implies that the opponent is not so smart as to understand some subtle but important differences. A typical way to imply an image of stupidity is a *didactic attitude*, that is well exemplified by example (1) above, in which, to reply to Casellati, Travaglio says: “Let us have a talk show about my trials, that do not concern child prostitution, witness corruption, police bribery, tax fiddle for hundreds of millions euros [...]; they concern some articles written on a newspaper that someone did not like, mainly because I have criticized someone”.

He says so while using a singsong intonation, and stressing the last tonic syllable of each item of the list, both with a higher pitch and by raising his eyebrows and opening his eyes wide, much like when talking to small children or teaching pupils. While listing Berlusconi's pending indictments, he numbers them with gestures (one, two, three). Finally when saying that his own trials concerned “articles written on the newspapers”, with his right hand, thumb and index touching, palm to interlocutor, he draws circles in the air moving from left to right: the iconic gesture for “writing”.

In this passage, by his words, Travaglio attacks Casellati on the content of what she said – the trials undergone by him as concerning only his “thought crimes”, not the much more serious misdeeds charged to Berlusconi. But by the very way he says so – his recurrent stress and recurrent intonation, his iconic gesture, all concurring to the general form of a very clear and didactic explanation – he implies that Casellati needs such an explanation since she cannot see the difference between Travaglio's and Berlusconi's trials. In other words, he is treating her as a stupid person, thus discrediting her image in an indirect way (I am didactic → you are stupid) and only through his body behavior.

B.1. Dominance – Helplessness. A negative image that a Speaker in a debate may cast on the opponent regarding aspects of dominance is an image of helplessness.

- (9) La Russa often takes the floor by interrupting Di Pietro, his opponent, also despite the intervention of the Moderator, Bianca Berlinguer. When La Russa interrupts once more, Berlinguer says: *Però adesso lo faccia finire*. (But now let him finish), and La Russa says *Ma sì...* (but suuure...), with *raised eyebrows* and *closed eyelids*. Both the way he says *sì (suuure)* and his gaze expression convey haughtiness, and indulgence, thus implying that Di Pietro is a poor thing who cannot intimidate anybody.
- (10) In another passage in which Berlinguer defends Di Pietro from his interruptions, La Russa says: *Ma povero, poverino* (Oh poor, poor thing!), with a voice quality typical of one who pulls a long face of disappointment.
- (11) The Moderator is interviewing Margherita Hack, a famous old Italian scholar in astrophysics, who is talking against Berlusconi and the “ad personam” laws that he

made to save himself from trials. Roberto Formigoni, a politician on Berlusconi's side, while looking at her, shows an *asymmetrical smile*, with *left lip corner raised*, and *oblique eyebrows*, expressing ironic compassion.

La Russa and Formigoni discredit the other's image of dominance implying his or her helplessness, and do so by showing ironic compassion, in (9) by prosody and gaze, in (10) by words and voice, in (11) by gaze and smile.

B.2. Dominance – Ridicule. In some cases, finally, a dramatic lack of power is attributed to the opponent through ridicule. *Ridiculization* is the act of remarking a negative evaluation of lack of power in someone who, unlike one who deserves compassion, has a pretence of superiority; the contrast between pretended superiority and actual inferiority results in a violated expectation that is, though, not threatening [16; 17]. Thus the person made fun of is abased, not even being credited with the power of being feared. Here is a case of ridiculization.

- (12) Travaglio has previously ironically called Berlusconi's spokesmen *trumpeters*, and later has reported that, as Berlusconi himself declared, he had "payed" 45.000 euros to a girl to save her from prostitution. Casellati has shown disappointment by his using a "rude" language, and Travaglio has replied by reminding her of some very dirty jokes publicly told by Berlusconi. Later, while talking of Berlusconi's justification for his donation of 45.000 euros to a supposed prostitute, he says:

Prendiamo atto che il Presidente del Consiglio è il redentore di queste ragazze e quindi le pagava per toglierle dalla strada, per toglierle dal marciapiede, per fargli aprire [...] un centro estetico con una macchina costosissima per la depilazione, mi scuso per la parola depilazione, ma l'ha usata lui.

"We take note that the Prime Minister is the redeemer of these girls and therefore he used to pay them to save her from prostitution, to let them open [...] a beauty center with a very expensive machine for hair removal, *I apologize for the term "hair removal"*, but it was him who used it".

Travaglio's *IRONIC APOLOGY* for his using the term "hair removal" remarks how ridicule (and hypocritical) Casellati's prudishness is, since she was shocked for a mild ironic word ("trumpeters") previously used by Travaglio, while her chief violates all the rules of linguistic politeness.

B.3. Dominance – Inconsequential. An even worse image of lack of power is one of an inconsequential person, one who only elicits indifference. A typical move to imply a such image in the opponent is to *diminish the other*, for instance by addressing her not by her institutional allocation, "*sottosegretaria*" (under-secretary) but as a simple woman, "*signora*" ("madam"); or by pretending not to remember the opponent's name and mispronouncing it ostentatiously. Another move is to disregard the opponent's individuality, like Travaglio does when he refers to his opponent Capezzone as yet another spokesmen of Berlusconi, by saying: "*Un altro replicante. Li sfornano a raffica, li sfornano a raffica*" ("One more replicant. They churn them out at full blast"). Or finally, you can ostentatiously ignore the other.

C.1. Benevolence – Immoral. In Aristotle's speculation, benevolence is "rendering a service to one in need, not in return for something or benefit for the subject, but in order to benefit the other person." Extending this definition to political area and persuasion, a benevolent politician is one full of civil values, taking care of "the other" as opposed to selfish interests. In this sense a discrediting move focused on a benevolence target will tend to show how that politician doesn't care about the citizens' interests by reminding for example his immoral or unfair past, or his malevolent wrongs certified by judicial decisions or by public stigmatization.

- (13) The left wing politician Massimo D'Alema is talking of the right wing minister Scajola, who had to resign for corruption: he received a house facing Colosseum as a gift from a building company. To counter attack, Sallusti, the director of a pro-government newspaper, remarks that also a left wing politician like D'Alema is not flawless from a moral point of view, since he lived for long time in a popular apartment paying a very cheap rent.

Sallusti: *L'onorevole d'Alema credo che possa darci lezione a noi e al paese, lo dico sinceramente, su tanti temi ma non sulla casa. Il moralismo del Presidente D'Alema sulla casa [...] è inaccettabile. Lei non si era accorto che pagava un decimo del valore di mercato. Tant'è vero che se n'è andato, presidente. Sulle case lei non può... Da un punto di vista etico-morale. Gli operai pagavano tre volte di quello che pagava lei. Lei è un privilegiato. Lei si era accorto che pagava poco rispetto al mercato? [...]*

D'Alema: *Io non pagavo troppo poco. Io pagavo quello che era previsto dalla legge.*

Sallusti: *E allora perché se n'è andato, scusi? Da un punto di vista etico-morale lei ha approfittato della sua posizione!*

Sallusti: *MP D'Alema I think can lecture us and the Country, I say this sincerely, on a lot of topics, but not on houses. President D'Alema's moralism on houses [...] is unacceptable. You did not realize you were paying one tenth of the commercial value. In fact you left, president. Concerning houses you cannot... From the ethical-moral point of view. Workers used to pay three times as much as what you paid. You are a privileged person. Had you realized that you paid a low price with respect to the commercial value? [...]*

D'Alema: *I did not pay too low a price, I paid the price stated by the law.*

Sallusti: *Then, I beg your pardon, why did you leave? From an ethical-moral point of view you took advantage of your position!*

Sallusti's head movements play a complementary role to words while accusing D'Alema. He reinforces his message by repeated *nods of emphasis* (and by a slow speech rhythm), but at the same time, since he is probably aware this is a serious attack to an influential politician, he performs some unexpected signals of submission, like a *head canting* and *head down looking downward*. Finally while saying "you can lecture... but not on houses" he *shakes his head* reinforcing what is creeping into words. Sallusti's move is a case of "*tu quoque*" [4]: a fallacy (very frequently used in our corpus) through which, to weaken the impact of moral criticism or accusation, one retorts the accusation of immorality on the critic.

C.2. Benevolence – Dishonest. In the same debate D'Alema provides an example of attack to the benevolence side of the opponent, casting an image of (at least intellectual) dishonesty over Sallusti.

(14) D'Alema: *Io capisco che la pagano per venire qui e fare il difensore d'ufficio del governo. Io capisco, lo capisco, capisco che si deve guadagnare lo stipendio a proposito di etica ma dicendo mascalzionate non si guadagna lo stipendio Lei è pagato dal giornale della famiglia Berlusconi, le daranno un premio. Io capisco che deve guadagnarsi il pane ma questo modo è vergognoso.*

D'Alema: I can understand that you are paid to come here to be the public defender of the government. I understand it, I understand it, I understand that you have to earn your salary concerning ethics, but by saying knaveries one does not earn one's salary. You are paid by the newspaper of Berlusconi family, you will be rewarded. I understand that you have to earn your bread, but this way is shameful.

C.3. Benevolence – Cheater. A last very important negative evaluation concerning the benevolence side is an accusation of cheating, that often debaters launch to each other. Only two examples.

(15) Casellati: [Travaglio] *racconta sempre, ha un'attitudine a raccontare sempre delle cose che non corrispondono a verità.*
 Casellati: “[Travaglio] always tells stories, he has an attitude of always telling things not corresponding to truth”.

Casellati uses very polite and euphemistic words (“*tell things not corresponding to truth*”, instead of uttering the word *lies* or definitely calling Travaglio a *liar*), but by uttering the word *sempre* (always) twice she implies a steady attitude of her opponent to tell the false.

(16) Travaglio (to Capezzone): *Tu hai un padrone che ogni sera ti manda in televisione a raccontare balle!*
 Travaglio. You have a boss who every night sends you on TV to tell lies!

Here the accusation of cheating is not only to the actual opponent, but also to his boss.

4 Quantitative analysis of discrediting strategies

Once we distinguished various discrediting strategies, we can now see their quantitative distribution. We first calculated the inter-judge agreement between two independent judges in classifying discredit cases in terms of their *route* (mode, topic and person): K Cohen is 0.63 ($p < 0.000$). Table 2 shows their distribution in the debate. Overall, attacks are most often directly to the person (67%), sometimes to the topic (26%) and only in a few cases to the mode (7%).

	n.	%
Person	31	67
Topic	12	26
Mode	3	7
TOT.	46	100

Table 2. Discrediting moves attacking Person, Topic, Mode

A chi-square test aimed at differentiating the most frequently exploited route by rightwing vs. leftwing politicians [$\chi^2(46)=9.616$; $p<0.05$] reveals that those from the right tend to discredit more by a person route (87,5%) and less by topic (12,5%), while the leftists adopt a more complex pattern of discrediting moves, referring mainly to the person (56,50%) and the topic (33,50%) but sometimes also to the mode (10%) (Fig. 1).

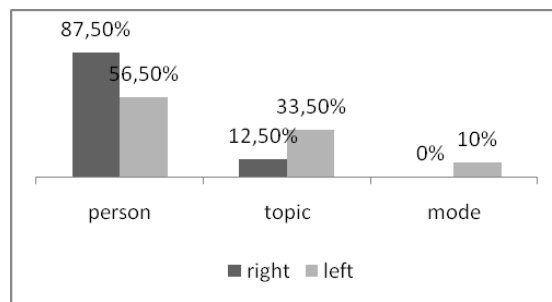


Figure 1 Political orientation* route

For the *target* feature, K Cohen was of 0.82 ($p<0.000$). Fig. 2. shows the distribution across target features.

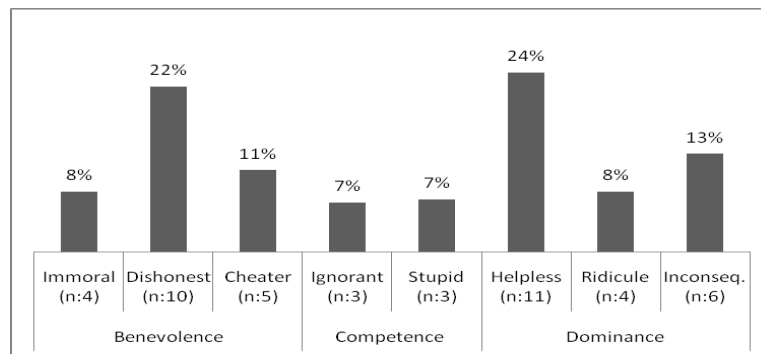


Figure 2 Discrediting moves across target features

Negative evaluations concerning the opponent's dominance features are generally the most frequent (45%), followed by benevolence (41%), while competence is more rarely addressed (14%). But let us describe results taking into account the controlling variables *political orientation* and *gender* of the politicians analyzed.

As to political orientation the videos analyzed are not balanced (30 discredits from the left vs 16 from the right). Rightwing politicians seem to choose more aggressive moves targeted on the benevolence side than the leftist ones (60% vs 32%); on the other hand, the prevailing strategy of the leftists is to discredit the opponent's

dominance, for example casting ridicule on him/her or relativizing his/her power (55% vs 33%) (Figure 3).

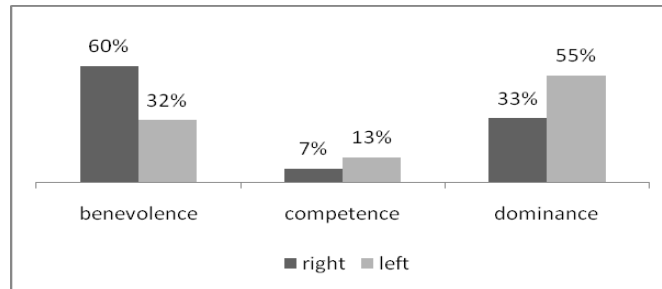


Figure 3 Political orientation*target feature

By analyzing in detail the types of discredits (Table 5), we can see that a historical theme of Italian Left parties – the so-called "moral issue", according to which the leftist should be more sensitive to ethical issues – is not confirmed at all by our data. It seems that it is more typical of right-wing politicians to highlight the other's "dishonest" and "cheater" behaviors (27% for both).

On the other hand, the left-wing politicians' discrediting moves tend to characterize the opponent mainly as ridicule (16%), helpless (19%) and inconsequential (17%): leftists do not seem to value the arguments of right-wing politicians so much, thus focusing on one type of discredit that neutralizes the opponent's dominance rather than attacking his/her image from an ethical or competencies point of view.

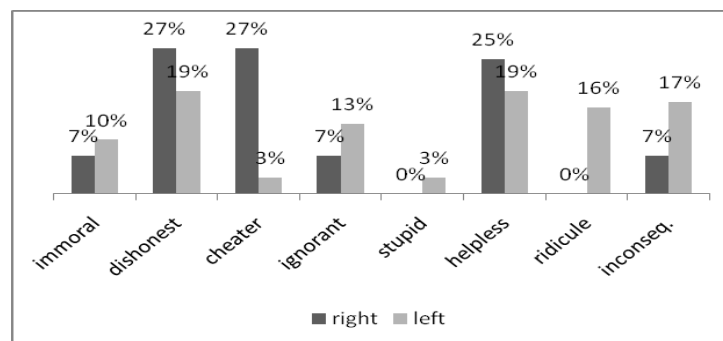


Figure 4. Political orientation*target feature in detail

Looking at the gender variable, discrediting moves based on dominance rather than benevolence seem to be a male strategy (55% vs 31%), while women look more "moralistic": they focus more on discrediting the other's benevolence (61%). In particular, as shown in Figure 5, a chi-square analysis [$\chi^2(46)=17,22$; $p<0.015$] highlights the significant differences in the strategies used by women, who typically focus on ethical negative evaluations like "cheater"(38%) and "dishonest" (23%).

Discrediting through the dimension of dominance, in particular the prevalence of "helplessness"(24%) and "ridicule"(15%) seems to be more a male strategy.

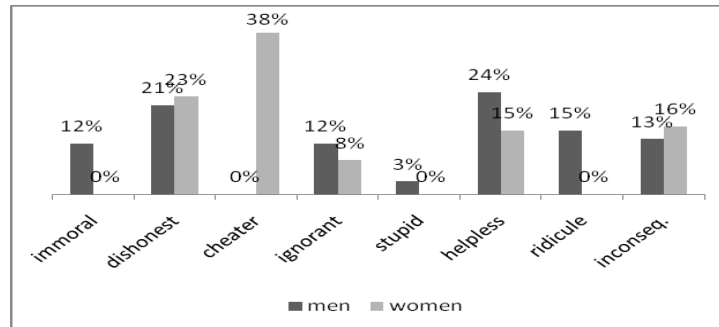


Figure 5. Gender*target features

5 Conclusion

In this work we have analyzed a move often used to persuade the audience during debates: discrediting the opponent. We have outlined a typology of discrediting strategies, distinguished in terms of three criteria: the target feature – the aspect of the opponent that is specifically attacked (dominance, competence, benevolence); the route through which it is attacked – topic, mode or directly the person; and the type of communicative act that conveys the attack (insult, criticism, correction...). From our exploratory study it resulted that in political debates the person is most often directly discredited, and mainly its features of strength and power are an object of evaluation, even more than morality. Yet, the choice of the route and the feature differ from male to females, and from right to left politicians. Many intriguing questions remain open, if only, the role of irony in discrediting, that we did not tackle here. Again, we might wonder what is the relation between frequency of a discrediting move and its seriousness: for a politician is it worse to be marked as stupid or evil, as to dishonesty or impotence? Further, are there particular words, specific syntactic or argumentative structures, or particular (combinations of) body signals that are typically used in discrediting the opponent? An overview of debates in different countries would also allow assess if there are cultural differences in the preferred discrediting strategies.

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