Multi-Modal Discourse-Historical Approach to Analyzing Negative Political Advertising

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In the spring of 2013, the Conservative Party of Canada launched a series of televised attack ads targeting Justin Trudeau, the newly elected leader of the Liberal Party. Focusing on the themes of ‘judgement’ and ‘experience,’ the ads minimize Trudeau’s professional credentials while foregrounding his ostensibly effete mannerisms and roots in Quebec. A minor backlash against the ads also tapped into public perception that the ads were latently homophobic, or at least called Trudeau’s masculinity into question (Ditchburn 2013). Nonetheless, their overall effectiveness is undeterminable given the potential for longer-term subconscious impacts on voters (Fridkin Kahn & Kenney 1999; Geer & Geer 2003). With such politically volatile terrain exhibited by the reaction to the ads and their sensationalist composition, I ask (1) How do the ads navigate variable hegemonic norms among their differing target audiences in Francophone and Anglophone television markets?; and (2) How do linguistic and other auditory-visual resources interact in the argumentation process to advance a message that is politically meaningful? Using an innovative adaptation of Baldry & Thibault’s (2006) multimodal text analysis and Reisigl & Wodak’s (2009) discourse-historical approach to critical discourse analysis, both English and French versions of the ads are analyzed, placing their underlying messages about leadership and nationhood within the context of competing discourses on masculinity in Canada. Findings demonstrate how the integration of semiotic resources expressed in multiple modalities contributes to an argumentation strategy to construct contrasting models of masculine leadership so as to connect with a social cleavage based on the rejection of a racialized post-modern masculinity, allowing visual and non-verbal stimuli to advance topoi that would be politically damaging to articulate expressly. The methods employed in the study provide a new avenue for analyzing negative political advertising that goes beyond the question of general effectiveness, providing a replicable framework for deconstructing the meaning-making processes of political advertising.

References: