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The multimodal construction of *political personae* through the strategic management of semiotic resources of emotion expression

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analytical framework for analyzing how multimodal resources of emotion expression are semiotically materialized in discursive interactions specific to political discourse. Interested in how *political personae* are emotionally constructed through multimodal meaning-making practices, our analysis model assumes an interdisciplinary perspective, which integrates *facial expression analysis* – using FaceReader™ software –, the *theory of emotional arcs* and bodily actions (*hand gestures*) analysis that express emotions, in the analytical framework of *multimodality*. The results show how the multimodal choices that political actors make during discursive interactions allow them to build their *political brand* and make connections with the audience on an emotional level.

KEYWORDS

Multimodality; facial expression analysis; emotional arcs; political narratives; political semiotics

1. Introduction

Marcel Danesi illustrates the “innate tendency in all human beings to search for, and to make, meaning in the world”, starting from an imaginary scene with two prototypical characters, Cheryl and Ted, carefully observed by the third character, Martha, the author’s imaginary research assistant (Danesi [1999] 2018).

In her discreet work, Martha captures two aspects that are particularly useful for our research. The first refers to the *multimodal nature* of human communication (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Iedema 2003; Norris 2004; Van Leeuwen 2005; Kress 2010). Recording the actions and conversations of the characters we were talking about, Martha is interested in how the different semiotic modes, from verbal speech to facial expressions, body language and other behaviors, contribute to meaning-making processes (Danesi [1999] 2018, 1).

Martha also records the facial expressions of the characters, which practically represent the primary semiotic mode of expressing emotions. In addition, Martha would be sensitive to the fact that emotional expressions are semiotically materialized in face-to-face interactions through various multimodal resources, not just facial expressions, which would be of particular interest to us. The multimodal extension of emotional expression

allows the integration of the two aspects that Danesi's imaginary research assistant captures for us. Basically, Martha's effort foreshadows the discussion about the emotional basis of (multimodal) semiosis, which we (re)open in our article.

This paper presents an analytical framework for analyzing how multimodal resources of emotion expression are semiotically materialized in the narratives of political discourse. We are particularly interested in how *political personae* are emotionally constructed through multimodal meaning-making practices. For this purpose, our analysis model assumes an interdisciplinary perspective, which integrates *facial expression analysis* – using FaceReader™ software – (Ekman, Friesen, and Hager 2002), *theory of emotional arcs* (Dodds et al. 2011; Reagan et al. 2016) and bodily actions (*hand gestures*) analysis that express emotions (D'Errico and Poggi 2012; Mittelberg 2013), in the analytical framework of *multimodality*.

In the next section of this paper (2), we briefly discuss some key concepts related to multimodal meaning-making, focusing primarily on multimodal solutions for emotional mediation of meaning-making practices in discursive interactions. In section 3, we detail our research methodology and discuss the results obtained. Finally, in section 4, we present our conclusions.

2. The emotional basis of (multimodal) semiosis

Earlier, Marcel Danesi's imaginary research assistant, Martha, opened a window for us to understand multimodality as the reality of human communication in everyday life and the emotional basis of (multimodal) semiosis. On its way to the foreshadowing of meanings, the words we utter are inseparable from gestures that perform certain functions, the gaze that elaborates, facial expressions that can communicate emotions, or other marginal semiotic modes.

2.1. The multimodal construction of the “political personae”

The fact that “language cannot be isolated from other kinds of semiotic modelling” (Cobley 2016, 27) foreshadows multimodality as the new reality of human communication (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Norris 2004; Kress 2010). Recognition of the multimodal nature of meaning-making processes has become a key premise of the sociosemiotic theory of multimodality (Bezemer and Jewitt 2018). Kress (2010, 1) points out that multimodality is “the normal state of human communication”. In this way, it brings sociosemiotics closer to cognition and allows, through multimodality, the integration of semiotic and cognitive perspectives on meaning-making practices. Iedema (2003, 39) also emphasized the “multimodal nature of all human meaning-making”. All our social interactions with otherness are multimodal (Norris 2004). All these observations will soon be supported by research coming from cognitive sciences and psycholinguistics. For example, Holler and Levinson (2019) show that our natural predisposition to engage in social interactions has allowed human language to evolve as a multimodal phenomenon. The cognitive effect was that the human mind seems to process multimodal messages (speech plus gestures) faster than unimodal ones, such as verbal speech alone (Holler, Kendrick, and Levinson 2018; Holler and Levinson 2019).

People build and express meanings by making *choices* between modes and the semiotic resources available to them in a particular social situation and moment in time (Jewitt 2009; Jewitt and Henriksen 2016; Kull 2019). *Semiotic modes*, such as language, images, gestures, music, gaze, facial expression, and more, are understood as “a socially organized set of semiotic resources for making meaning” (Jewitt, Bezemer, and O’Halloran 2016, 71). The term *semiotic resources* refers to “a community’s means for making meaning” and is the result of the “social meaning-making practices (the semiotic work) of members of a community over time, always as meeting the requirements of that community” (Jewitt, Bezemer, and O’Halloran 2016, 71). In face-to-face political interactions, for example, are involved “not only the words and argumentation employed by politicians, but their voice quality, prosody, intonation, their gestures, gaze and facial expressions, posture, head and body movements” (D’Errico, Poggi, and Vincze 2013, 2). Hartmut Stöckl (2004, 16) argues that modes can be distinguished from one another by “semiotic properties, cognitive orientation, and semantic potential”. Due to these particularities, the different semiotic modes “tend to interact” (Mittelberg 2007, 241). Understanding how different modes and semiotic resources interact is at the heart of social semiotics and multimodal analysis (Jewitt 2009; O’Halloran 2011; Siefkes 2015).

In order to fulfill certain functions or to “making a specific message about a particular issue for a particular audience” (Kress 2010, 28), multimodal choices can be manipulated or strategically designed. According to Gunther Kress (2010, 28), the effect of such a “series of choices made in the design of a message” can be described in the form of *style*, a personalized way of designing actions and making choices between various semiotic modes. Professional politicians are particularly interested in the possibility of making strategic multimodal choices in their efforts to build and project a coherent and consistent political image, an authentic and credible *political personae*.

As is well-known, *political personae* are constructed entities. The epistemological perspectives and approaches of such a construct are extremely varied. *Political personae* are not such a new invention. The ancient Greeks were inspired to “bring” the politician into the agora and sometimes into the theater, in dialogue with the citizen. In such spaces of dialogue and debate – the agora, the theater, and later the Roman forum – it was possible to realistically transform the dreams and aspirations of citizens into reality. Following in the footsteps of Hellenic and later Stoic models, Quintus Tullius Cicero ([64 B.C.] 2012) will suggest to his older brother, Marcus Tullius Cicero, that it is not enough to have learned the art of speaking well (*ars bene dicendi*) and to have a good character (*vir bonus*) to become a good political candidate (*bonus petitor*). Later, Machiavelli ([1513] 2014, 187) also noted with lucidity that “men in general judge more by their eyes than by their hands”. In the subtle game between appearance and reality of politics, the emphasis is on the individual characteristics of the candidate, on the image. The image and reputation build upon and rely on a “genuine” system of illusions, an entire constellation of signs that make up the *political personae*. Machiavelli’s “prince” will become today’s politician, meanwhile transformed into a “political actor”. With the Florentine secretary, politics will begin to be thought of as a spectacle, and political actors will have to give the impression of an authentic performance in front of the public – a phenomenon that will be (re)known later as the *theatricalization* of political life (i.e. Castells 2009, 202; Lempert and Silverstein 2012; Teodorescu and Drăgan 2020, 20). Following Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective, Lichterman and Cefai (2006, 403) argue that “dramatic

conventions shape political communication. On stage in politics as in theater, actors play roles and follow scripts as a cast of characters, perform frontstage and backstage actions". Therefore, *political personae* is a construct negotiated through interactional rituals, in a permanent dramaturgy (i.e. van Waarden and Kohlrausch 2022, 6).

The theatrical aspect of *political persona* construction has become tempting for political marketing studies. *Political personae* become a mediated entity, directly related to the concept of political brand. For example, in the opinion of O'Shaughnessy (1990, 5), a marketable political candidate is selected "on the basis of his brand name, his ability to trigger an emotional response from the electors, his skill in using mass media, and his ability to 'project'" a specific political image. To become political actors through multimodal meaning-making practices, politicians offer particular representations of reality and a specific "moral order, with offenders, victims, heroes, witnesses, and experts" to the public (Lichterman and Cefai 2006, 403). These things may explain the preference of political actors for describing social reality in the form of narrative structures. The ability of political actors to tell stories that resonate with the political message is closely linked to their political success (Silverstein 2011). Thus, the political messages are intentionally dramatized, in the sense of constructing a certain moral profile of the candidate. Lempert and Silverstein (2012, 100) argue that the political message becomes a personal brand, a "biographical aura constructed for a candidate", and "inhabiting that biographical aura as a live character is absolutely essential". The modern voter is not only interested in a certain political product, namely the policies and image of a candidate/political party. He also buys the "experience of an election campaign" (Lilleker and Jackson 2011, 166). That is why political actors are always looking to structure their political and electoral experiences in the form of simple narratives with an emotional content that can determine the electorate's support.

As we saw at the beginning of this discussion, *political personae* is a multimodal semiotic construct, designed through strategic semiotic choices, whose features can be adequately analyzed in the analytical framework of multimodality. In this article, we look at how *political personae* are emotionally constructed through multimodal meaning-making practices. In the next subchapter (2.2.) we provide a critical summary of published research literature relevant to this topic, respectively on how emotions mediate the multimodal meaning-making practice. The main contributions we make through this article relate to:

- (1) theoretical contributions that support and contribute to a better understanding of emotional mediation of semiosis in general and the fact that multimodal meaning-making practices have an emotional basis; and
- (2) the presentation of an analytical framework for analyzing how multimodal resources of emotion expression are semiotically materialized in the narratives of political discourse. Our model of analysis captures, for the first time in studies of this kind, the way in which certain semiotic modes interact from the perspective of emotions expressed in their dynamics. On the one hand, it shows how the multimodal choices of politicians can be assessed through variables that capture the way in which emotions are semiotically materialized, and on the other hand that these practices of multimodal construction of *political personae* are managed strategically, in a way that can be operationalized with the help of an analytical research framework.

2.2. The multimodal resources of emotion expression in political communication

A variety of approaches covers the emotion-politics nexus, whether we are talking about the role of emotions in political campaigns and political marketing (Schweiger and Adami 1999; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Engelken-Jorge, Güell, and del Río 2011; Scammell 2014; Grüning and Schubert 2022), the political sociology of emotion (Demertzis 2020), the convergence between political cognition and emotion (Westen 2007; Lakoff 2008; Castells 2009; Lakoff [1996] 2016), the emotional and moral basis of politics (Haidt 2012), how emotions sustain certain ideologies (Breeze 2019; D’Arcens and Waldek 2021; Verbalyte, Bonansinga, and Exadaktylos 2022), or the politics of emotions in international relations (Gustafsson and Hall 2021). Therefore, political cognition is “emotionally shaped” (Castells 2009, 146). In political communication, emotion and cognition are complementary mechanisms in meaning-making processes (Redlawsk 2006; Haidt 2012).

If we refer to the understanding of the place and role of emotions and the way in which they are communicated in meaning-making practices, the Peircean tradition seems to be the most consistent. Emotions are present in every act of interpretation, the rational construction of meanings, or the way we act in the world. The fact that Peirce introduces the *emotional interpretant* quite late (CP 5.475–476 1907; MS 318: 35–37), as the first semiotic effect (feeling) that the sign produces when meeting an interpreting mind (Santaella 2016), should not surprise us. The emotional interpretant was implicit in his earlier writings (Chevalier 2015). Peirce captures the fluidity of the concept of emotion quite often in his reflections, whether he speaks of emotion as a *sign* (e.g. CP 5.292 c.1893), as a *hypothetical inference* (e.g. CP 2.643 c.1877), or of his *cognitive* aspect (e.g. CP 1.376 c.1885). Therefore, semiosis needs emotion just as (moral) judgment needs passions in the processes of meaning-making (Haidt 2012, 58). The way we experience reality, produce and interpret signs is emotionally mediated (Nöth 2016; Santaella 2016; Petrilli and Ji 2022).

Regarding the analytical framework of sociosemiotics, Feng and O’Halloran (2013, 84) note that despite the fact that emotions “are almost always expressed by multimodal signs”, the multimodal accounts of emotion are still sparsely covered in research. Evidence of this kind is even rarer in political communication or associated political phenomena.

2.2.1. Politicians’ facial expressions as semiotic mode for communicating emotions

Following the direction of research mentioned earlier, D’Errico et al. (2022) investigate the persuasive effects of positive communication strategies, such as a “humble stance” on sensitive political issues with moral content, by assessing the facial emotional expressions of politicians. The authors point out that such strategies are not without risks but can be persuasive if they are perceived as consistent with past personal experiences and the current power position of a politician. A politician who performs a humble stance in a persuasive manner, for whom “the persuasive impact of the negative emotions on the face [...] is seen as a signal of authenticity”, is perceived as “one of us’ from a power status point of view” (D’Errico et al. 2022, 112). They thus connect humility with “political authenticity” and the “affective side of trust”, ingredients necessary for political success.

Boussalis et al. (2021) used a set of computational methods to analyze voter reactions to how politicians manage specific semiotic modes in electoral debates by candidate gender. The corpus of research is based on four German federal election debates from 2005 to 2017, focusing on Angela Merkel, the first female chancellor of Germany who recently retired from politics. In each electoral debate, she faces four men in succession, namely Gerhard Schröder in 2005, Frank-Walter Steinmeier in 2009, Peer Steinbrück in 2013, and Martin Schulz in 2017. To evaluate the *emotional expression of a face* in an image, the authors use the coding technique based on the *Facial Action Coding System* (Ekman, Friesen, and Hager 2002; Ekman and Friesen 2003) together with a Face API interface that helps them identify the faces in each frame and to extract emotive display from each face. Regarding the emotional content of vocal characteristics (*voice*), the authors evaluate the vocal pitch, as a measure of vocal emotional intensity, with the help of PRAAT software. The third semiotic mode that the authors consider to assess how emotions are semiotically materialized in electoral debates is the *speech* delivered. To determine the emotional content of the speech, the authors use an automatic algorithm for analyzing the spoken words, respectively a sentiment analysis with “a dictionary approach by relying on the German translation of the Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary, which has been validated extensively for political speech” (Boussalis et al. 2021, 1248). To make correlations between dependent variables – operationalized by indicators specific to the three semiotic modes taken into account – and explanatory binary variables (female/male political candidate), the authors use a linear regression model. The results are compared with the voter response, assessed using a Likert scale, to the multimodal behavior of the candidates. The female candidate, Angela Merkel in our case, seems to have been a bit more sensitive in terms of multimodal behavior compared to male candidates. She expressed negative emotions (e.g. anger) to a lesser extent than her male political opponents and was more generous with the general expression of emotions, especially positive ones (e.g. happiness).

In another study, after collecting 611 facial responses to five video clips from the third presidential debate during the 2012 presidential election campaign in the USA, McDuff et al. (2013) developed a method for predicting voter's candidate preference from emotional responses to these videos. Their computational model, also based on the Facial Action Coding System (FACS), predicts candidate preferences from the facial valence information (hedonic valence) of self-reported independent voters with an average accuracy of over 73%. *Emotional valence, or hedonic valence*, is understood as a measure of the pleasant or unpleasant nature of a person's experience exposed to an emotional stimulus, usually expressed in dichotomous terms of the positive–negative, good–bad type (McDuff et al. 2013; Shuman, Sander, and Scherer 2013; Kauschke et al. 2019).

Each of the mentioned studies discusses the particular way in which various political actors manage political image from the perspective of facial expressions as a semiotic mode for communicating emotions. Politicians understand that the effort to build an authentic and credible *political persona*, as well as the mode of action and perception of political reality is emotionally shaped (Hochschild 1983, 2016; Crivelli and Fridlund 2018). Therefore, if they want to be convincing in front of voters, they must strategically manage the “emotional capital” with which they enter into multimodal interactions (Heaney 2019). Such an approach is challenging for the *universality thesis* on which

basic emotions theory (BET) is built, or its variant, the *neurocultural theory of emotion* (Ekman 1972), according to which there is a fairly reliable relationship between certain facial expressions and our emotional states, and their recognition is pancultural and phylogenetic. On the one hand, if we look at it from the perspective of political actors, the challenge comes from the possibility of using various methods of strategic modeling of facial expressions, depending on the context of multimodal interactions and personal emotions management skills. In this way, their work of strategic management of emotional capital is rather close to the *sociality hypothesis* that prefigures the *behavioral ecology view of facial displays* (BECV) (Crivelli and Fridlund 2018), or the *theory of affective pragmatics* (TAP) (Scarantino 2017). While the first approach refers to the fact that our facial expressions of emotion are “social tools that serve as lead signs to contingent action in social negotiation” (Crivelli and Fridlund 2018, 388), the second states that emotional expressions “do much more than simply expressing emotions”, they can perform certain communicative moves that are similar to those of verbal language (Scarantino 2017, 165). On the other hand, from a voter perspective, there is a tendency for people to make inferences about someone else’s emotional state based on facial emotional expressions, which can influence their evaluations and decisions, behavior that is familiar with the specific assumptions of *basic emotions theory* (BET) and convenient for political actors. By modeling the subtle game between face and mask, visage or image (Leone 2021), they can propose to the public a certain *political persona* that resonates emotionally with the audience’s expectations.

Thus, the way in which political actors manage emotional capital and construct emotional experiences in multimodal interactions is a good opportunity to revitalize the debate about the universal reading (decoding) of emotional states from expressions on faces (Ekman and Keltner 1997; Barrett et al. 2019; Viola 2021) and openness to new perspectives on understanding how we communicate emotions through facial expressions. The face is more than a “matrix of signs” that defines our identity (Leone 2021, 580). Multimodality takes into account the “multifunctional” aspect of emotional expressions (Scherer 1988, 80) and understands facial expressions as a semiotic mode for communicating emotions (Van Leeuwen 2005; D’Errico, Poggi, and Vincze 2013; Jewitt, Bezemer, and O’Halloran 2016). Following in the footsteps of Wierzbicka (1996, 1999), Elliott and Jacobs (2013, 1) argue that facial expressions are “semiotic units (form-meaning pairings)” that can be analyzed in combination with other meaningful movements, such as hand gestures. Multimodality is the appropriate analytical framework for characterizing and analyzing such communication situations. The way in which political actors strategically manage emotional capital by integrating various semiotic resources to propose to the public a certain credible political persona can be deciphered using multimodal analysis models. In the next subchapter, we look at how politicians strategically communicate emotions using another type of semiotic resources, namely through gestures, with special reference to hand gestures.

2.2.2. *Emotions and gestures*

How emotions are materialized semiotically through gestures is a topic of great interest for multimodal semiotic inquiry. According to Mittelberg and Hinnell (2022, 8), gestures

provide “valuable insights into the physical grounding, emotional dimensions, and socio-cultural situatedness of the semiotic processes humans rely on for thinking, imagination, and communication”. The authors place bodily communication at “the centre of studying multimodal processes of semiosis” (Mittelberg and Hinnell 2022, 1). They are interested in how mental imagery and internalized structures and practices are externalized, or *ex-bodied*, through communicative gestures. For this purpose, Mittelberg (2008, 148; 2013, 779) proposes the concept of *exbodiment* to explain how “structures of embodied multi-sensory experience, such as image schemata and force gestalts, may visibly manifest themselves, at least to certain degrees, in the form of dynamic ephemeral gestural and corporeal signs produced with speech”. From this perspective, gestures are “a means to express, reify and show to interlocutors both imagined and sensed dimensions of mental imagery” Mittelberg (2013, 756).

In Flusser’s phenomenology of gestures (2014, 164), they are described from a similar perspective as “a movement through which a freedom is expressed, a freedom to hide from or reveal to others the one who gesticulates”. Therefore, we can say that such practices of expressing subjectivity, or externalizing the mind – *ex-bodied* mind – such as communicative gestures, are emotionally mediated. For example, gestures can give clues about our “‘inner’ emotional life” (Streeck 2009, 158) or provide us with information about the emotions communicated by interlocutors (Poggi 2002; Calbris 2011).

D’Errico and Poggi (2012) present an experimental study in which they analyze the effects of multimodal communication strategies such as “discrediting moves” used by politicians in a political debate held during Italian election campaigns in 2008 and 2011 on potential voters. Such communication strategies refer to “the communicative acts aimed to spoil the opponent’s image that is performed in words or other modalities (facial expression, gesture, gaze, posture) that directly or indirectly convey negative evaluations about the opponent”. The authors looked at the extent to which variables such as argumentative and emotional elements, or voting behavior, were significant predictors for evaluating the politician’s image in political debates on competence, benevolence, and dominance criteria. The results suggest that

discredit on the other’s competence is more effective when accompanied by gestures, while discrediting on dominance has better effect without body signals, probably because the exaggerated activation displayed by gestures makes the discrediter look too aggressive and incorrect and hence backfires causing a boomerang effect on the discrediter. (D’Errico and Poggi 2012, 475)

In any case, communication strategies such as discrediting moves are effective only through balanced management of argumentative and emotional elements, in which personality factors play an essential role in the interaction with the audience.

Thus, gestures, understood as “interaction phenomena” (Streeck 2009, 13), establish certain semantic relationships with other semiotic modes such as speech (i.e. Colletta et al. 2009, 62–63), and can influence the image capital of the *political personae* (Lempert 2011, 243). Through gestures, humans “share emotions, experiences, and activities with others [...], invite others to share interest and attention” (Tomasello et al. 2005, 686). In summary, we note that emotions are materialized semiotically including through gestures, in a complementary way to other semiotic modes.

2.2.3. *Emotions and speech: the emotional content of speech*

To better understand the multimodal reality of language, it is time to discuss how our emotional experiences are reflected in the word and implicitly in speech. Each word is accompanied by a subjective experiential reality, its own history (Coşeriu 1977). For Coşeriu (1977, 100), “the joy, sadness, pain and fear of man, his way of considering the world and his attitude towards it, all this is reflected in the word, in the act of linguistic creation”. We believe that a short sequence from a TV interview with the Romanian actor Tudor Gheorghe, in which he recounts a friendly meeting with the philosopher Emil Cioran in Paris, is relevant to what was discussed earlier:

Tudor Gheorghe: [...] I sang to Cioran and he was fascinated. And I asked him – “Mr Cioran! I was told that you don’t speak much Romanian”. And he said to me – “Honey when I left Răşinari and arrived in Paris, I swore to be the best French-speaking stylist”. Which he did. He told me that for that he had to forget the Romanian language. And he no longer spoke Romanian. And I say – “Well, yes, you still speak Romanian with me now. Why don’t you always speak Romanian?” He says to me – “Honey, for me, the words are heavy; they make sense. My words do not fly; they are true. For me, every word in Romanian hurts. If I say the word wheel, I only think it is a wheel. It is a wheel that turns, whether it is a truck or a train, and all the wheels go on a road, and all these roads take me to Răşinari; I go home. Every word in Romanian takes me home”. (Antena 1, Oct 22, 2021)

Speaking a word is not without risks for Cioran. The word for him updates a past experiential reality, a complex history. The emotional interpretant, predicated in the form of the phrase “every word in Romanian hurts”, is the one who shapes the meanings. We understand Cioran’s attitude of not speaking in his mother tongue just by appealing to the mediating role of the emotional interpretant.

We have seen earlier that researchers have developed various computational methods to measure the emotional content of words (see subchapter 2.2.1.). Relevant to our paper is the *theory of emotional arcs*, which captures the emotional experience of the main character of a story as the audience perceives it. The dynamics of the emotional content of these narratives can be analyzed using real-time digital algorithms. For Reagan et al. (2016, 1), “our ability to communicate relies in part upon a shared emotional experience, with stories often following distinct emotional trajectories and forming patterns that are meaningful to us”. The idea of “shapes of a story”, later known as “emotional arcs”, belonged to the American writer Kurt Vonnegut, well known to the public for his works that combine satire, black humor and science fiction. In Vonnegut’s opinion, stories “have shapes which can be drawn on graph paper” (Vonnegut 1981, 244). An emotional arc was imagined like the graph of a function of a real variable “x” – which designates the time interval of the story (beginning-end) – in a two-dimensional Cartesian coordinate system. The dependent variable (y) can take values in the range “Ill Fortune–Great Fortune” and designates certain emotional states of the main character/characters along the narrative thread of the story.

A group of students from the Computational Story Lab at the University of Vermont noticed a substantial research potential in the simplicity of Vonnegut’s idea. They discover that all narratives follow the profile of some *emotional arcs* (Dodds et al. 2011; Reagan et al. 2016). For Reagan et al. (2016) the emotional arcs of a narrative capture the emotional experience that is evoked in the reader. The procedure for generating emotional arcs is based on a sentiment-type analysis of narratives using a “happiness

index” called *Hedonometer*.¹ The procedure for evaluating the *emotional score* or the *happiness of texts* are two key components – (1) human evaluations of the happiness of a set of individual words and (2) a digital algorithm for scaling up from individual words to texts – and it is detailed in several studies (Dodds et al. 2011; hedonometer.org 2020).

It is noteworthy that after applying this analysis tool to a corpus of selected stories from the Project Gutenberg Corpus (a collection of 1,327 books), the researchers showed that the audience’s favorite stories – with higher median downloads – follow six basic patterns:

- (1) “Rags to riches” (rise)/Madame Bovary, The Divine Comedy – coded as SV1;
- (2) “Tragedy”, or “Riches to rags” (fall) – coded as -SV1;
- (3) “Man in a hole” (fall-rise) – coded as SV2;
- (4) “Icarus”/Romeo and Juliet (rise-fall) – coded as -SV2;
- (5) “Cinderella” (rise-fall-rise) – coded as SV3;
- (6) “Oedipus” (fall-rise-fall)/Frankenstein – coded as -SV3.

Of these distributions, according to the authors of the study to which we refer, some (e.g. module 3 or SV3) exhibited a higher average number of downloads and more variance than the others (Reagan et al. 2016, 8). The audience is sensitive to the dynamics of the characters’ emotional experiences. The distribution of the emotional score of narrative texts, expressed in the form of the six patterns of emotional arcs, functioned as an *index* of the public’s interest in narratives of this type.

3. Research methodology

In previous papers, we have tested the theory of emotional arches in the situation of political discourse narratives (Drăgan 2020, 2021). Basically, we proposed a model for evaluating the emotional content of political discourse, taking into account both the emotional score of speech and the emotional components of other types of semiotic resources, such as hand gestures. This time, we propose an analytical framework for analyzing how the *political personae* are emotionally constructed through multimodal meaning-making practices, by integrating three semiotic modes, namely facial expressions, speech, and hand gestures.

3.1. Corpus

For the corpus of analysis, we focused on two communication sequences selected from the final presidential debates in Romania, from December 2004 and 2009, respectively. These are two memorable moments in the short history of our presidential debates.

Traian Băsescu, one of the protagonists of the final presidential debate in 2004, seems to have said, “I need the silver bullet”, according to the journalist Cristian Tudor Popescu, the moderator of the debate at that time (Voinea Oct. 2014). Such moments became known as the “silver bullet” moments. A moment of grace, built strategically, that “would lead to the putting out of an opponent, generally through a devastating revelation that would cause the dislocation of a significant number of votes, enough to lose the election” (Teodorescu and Drăgan 2020, 9). Some analysts consider that such moments tipped the scales in favor of one or another of the candidates – for example,

journalists Cristian Tudor Popescu and Robert Turcescu, who were the moderators of the two debates (Voinea Oct. 2014). Others consider that they are “irrelevant exceptions from the perspective of the whole phenomenon of electoral communication”, a kind of “white whale of those working in electoral marketing” (Teodorescu and Drăgan 2020, 11). In any case, the way social actors manage the “nodal” episodes of the debate, the emotional dimension that prevails over the rational decision for these moments, can focus the undecided or easily influence the audience’s preferences (Corbu and Boțan 2011).

Both discursive sequences are constructed in narrative forms (Iețcu-Fairclough 2007) that allow the connection to the audience on an emotional level. Such discursive choices foreshadow the discursive style of the political actor and are associated with his political personality, an essential dimension of the political brand strategy (Scammell 2014; Smith and French 2009). The first of the two sequences, known as the moment of “confession”, “mirror sequence”, or the “two communists” episode is taken from the final presidential debate hosted by the national channel TVR1 on 8 December 2004. The protagonists of the debate were Adrian Năstase, the candidate of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), former Prime Minister in the previous government, and Traian Băsescu, the candidate of the Alliance for Justice and Truth (“Alliance DA”, i.e. the National-Liberal and the Democratic Party), who was the winner of that presidential election.

The second sequence, selected from the final presidential debate on 3 December 2009, refers to (1) the moment of the night visit of Mircea Geoană, the left-wing political candidate (PSD + PC) and one of the protagonists of the debate, to the controversial businessman Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, the main shareholder of the RealitateaTV news station at the time, on the night before the debate, and, (2) to the capture in Indonesia of Nicolae Popa, the partner of the aforementioned businessman, who was sentenced *in absentia* to 15 years in jail in the FNI case (the National Investment Fund), a Ponzi scheme that tricked some 300,000 Romanians who invested in it. The second protagonist of the debate was Traian Băsescu, the right-wing political candidate (PDL), and the incumbent president of Romania at that time.

We analyze the following aspects:

1. With the help of *FaceReader*TM software from *Noldus*, we perform an automatic analysis of the facial expressions of one political actor involved in the selected narrative sequences. We will note the dynamics of the distribution of basic emotions respectively the dynamics of emotional valence for each sequence.
2. We evaluate the *emotional content* of the verbal discourse for the political actor in question – or “emotional temperature” – for each of the two discursive sequences. In order to evaluate the emotional content of the verbal discourse for each of the protagonists in the selected communication sequences we used a “happiness index” called *Hedonometer* and the SPSS analytical tool (see subsection 2.2.3.).
3. We note the *hand gestures* performed by the political actor, how they are synchronized with the speech and with the facial expressions from the perspective of the expressed emotions.
4. The way in which the political actor constructs and projects his *political persona* through the strategic semiotic choices he makes in constructing messages from an emotional perspective is analyzed by the *correlations* between the variables that capture the way emotions are expressed through the variety of semiotic modes

considered. For this, we export the data obtained in points 1 and 2 in the SPSS software program and analyze the correlations between the variables emotional valence and the emotional score of speech.

5. Finally, we analyze the correlations obtained and construct interpretation scenarios. Basically, our multimodal analysis model captures how various semiotic modes work together in meaning-making practices from the perspective of the emotional dimension that each semiotic mode brings to specific communication contexts.

3.2. Results

The video recordings with the two communication sequences selected from the final presidential debates in Romania, from 2009 and 2004, respectively, were analyzed with *FaceReader*TM software from *Noldus*, which provided us with a trial version for 14 days. The first communication sequence, selected from the TV debate on 3 December 2009, has a duration of 1 min and 44 s, while the second communication sequence selected from the TV debate on 8 December 2004, has a duration of 1 min and 5 s. We selected a representative video frame for each of the two communication sequences, which capture the dynamics of the measured variables, respectively, the six basic emotions plus the neutral state and the emotional valence (see [Figure 1](#)).

FaceReader algorithm follows three steps in classifying facial expressions of emotion (Noldus 2016b, 7):

- (1) *Face finding* – refers to identifying and tracking faces in a video stream using a deep learning-based face finding algorithm, which searches for areas in the image having the appearance of a face. Basically, through this module are identified and selected those fundamental features of a complex image (video) that approximates a human face in general by which it is distinguished from other objects present there.
- (2) *Face modeling* – Using a facial modeling technique based on deep neural networks, this second module synthesizes an artificial face model, structured in the form of a network of almost 500 key points in the face. The relative movements of these feature points approximate Action Units (AUs), which are external representations produced by the individual activation of facial muscles. They can be described as a type of perceptual judgment that encode (numerically) an anatomical reality, predicated by short expressions that express the relationship between a specific movement (action) of the face and the associated facial muscle that is activated.
- (3) *Facial expression classification* – recognition and classification of patterns in the relative movements of key points compared to positions of feature points in the neutral expression (no expression) state. Algorithms based on artificial neural networks – Convolutional Neural Networks – are trained to classify how Action Units (AUs) are grouped in the six basic or universal emotions: happy, sad, angry, surprised, scared, disgusted and a neutral state (Ekman 1992; Ekman and Keltner 1997; Ekman, Friesen, and Hager 2002). Other attributes, such as emotional valence, are calculated as “the intensity of ‘Happy’ minus the intensity of the negative emotion with the highest intensity” (Noldus 2016b, 150).

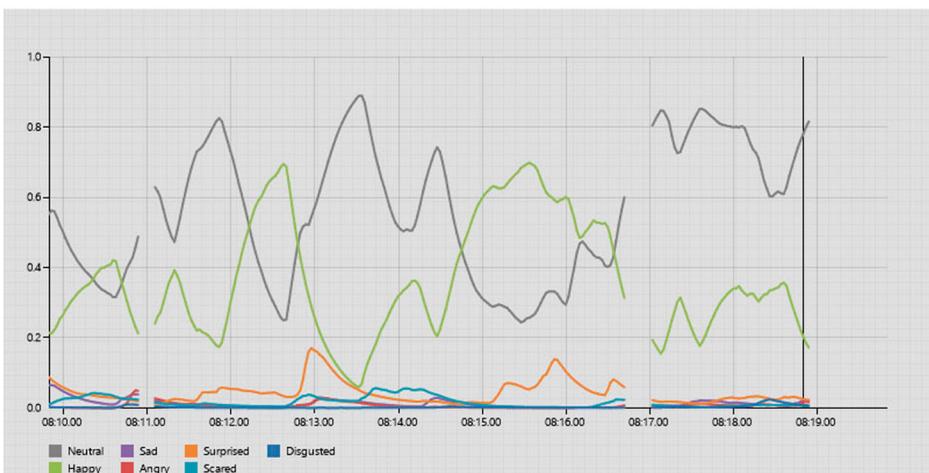


Figure 1. Video frames with real-time analysis of facial expressions expressed by Traian Băsescu in two key moments during the presidential debates in 2009 (a), respectively in 2004 (b), made with FaceReader™ software. In (c) and (d), we have represented the dynamic distribution for the six basic or universal expressions (Expressions Line Chart): happy, sad, angry, surprised, scared, and disgusted, to which is added the 'neutral' state recognized by FaceReader, for each of the two moments analyzed for Traian Basescu (in 2009 and 2004 respectively). The dynamics of emotional valence (Valence Line Chart) are represented in (e), for the 2009 sequence, respectively in (f) for the 2004 sequence.

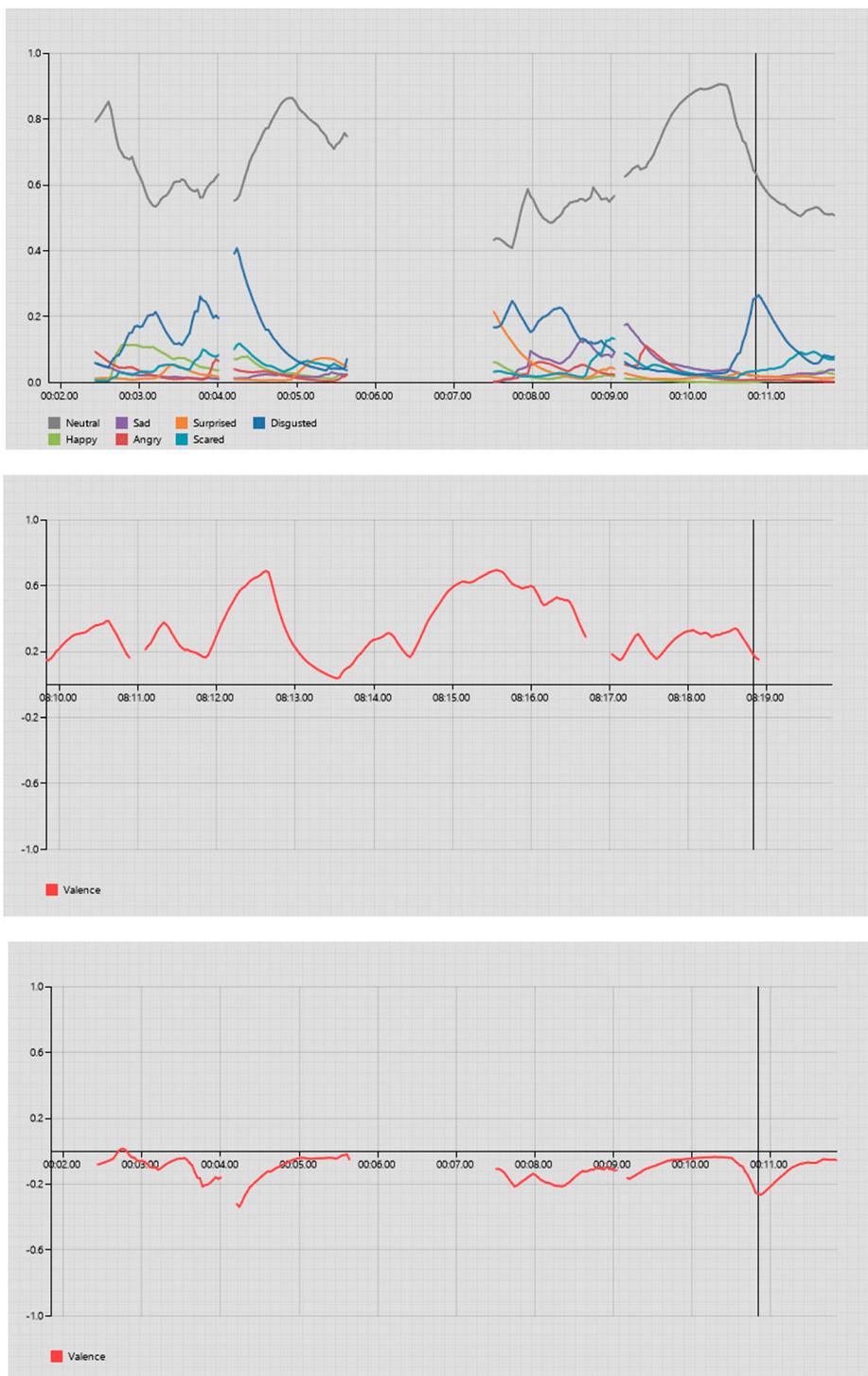


Figure 1 *Continued*

The video frames shown in Figure 1(a,c), respectively 1(e), capture the final part of a statement that the incumbent candidate Traian Băsescu, makes during the communication sequence from December 2009: “I am waiting for your apologies, that in a presidential confrontation you lied. But not to me the apologies, but to the Romanians”. The distribution of emotional valence during the incumbent’s statements (1 min and 2 s out of 1 min and 44 s) is represented in Figure 2(a).

Similarly, the video frames shown in Figure 1(b,d), respectively 1(f), capture the final part of a statement that the candidate Traian Băsescu makes during the communication sequence from December 2004: “What kind of curse is there on this nation that in the end, it comes to a choice between two former communists? Between Adrian Năstase and Băsescu”. The dynamics of the emotional valence for this communication sequence (approximately 1 min) is represented in Figure 2(b).

Correspondingly, Figure 2(c) represents the dynamics of the emotional score for the speech delivered by the political character Traian Băsescu during the communication sequence from December 2009, and Figure 2(d) shows the sequence of December 2004, as they resulted from the data we entered in the quantitative analysis program SPSS.

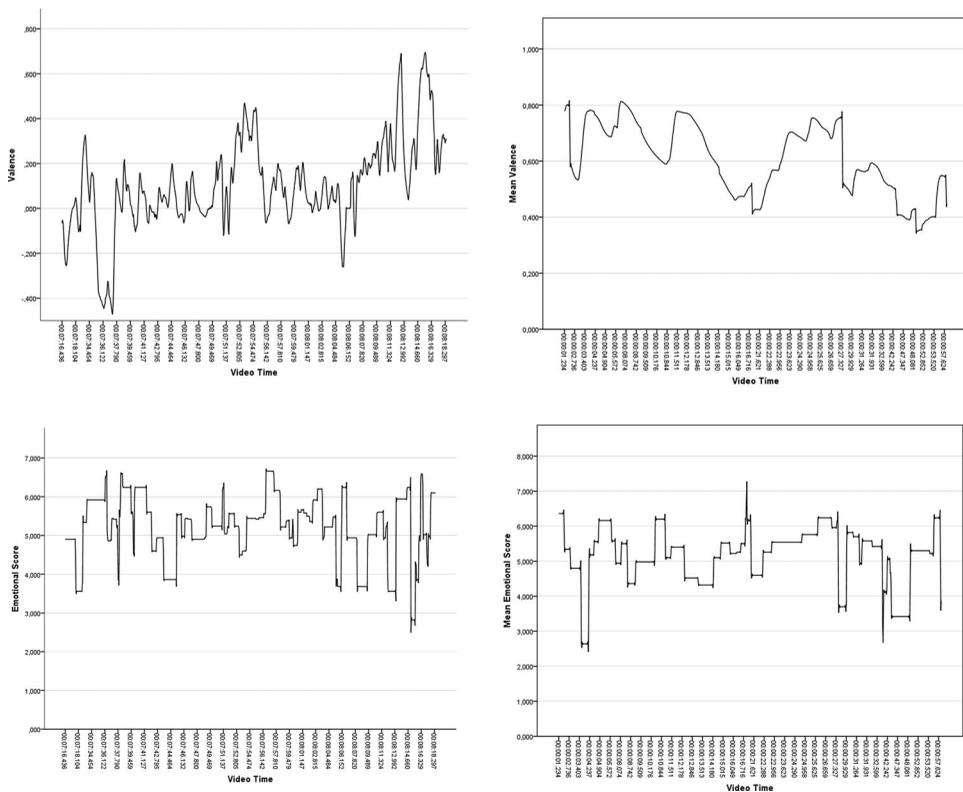


Figure 2. SPSS window with the distribution of emotional valence (a and b) – corresponding to the dynamics of facial emotional expressions – respectively of the emotional score (c and d) – corresponding to verbal speech – for both narrative sequences analyzed for Traian Băsescu.

The next step was to note the gestures performed by our *political personae*. Immediately after that, we sought to establish the statistical link between independent variables that capture how emotions are materialized semiotically by the two semiotic modes considered, facial expressions and speech. For this purpose, we performed a regression and correlation analysis between the variables emotional valence and emotional score for each of the two situations analyzed, from 2009, respectively, from 2004.

The results of the bivariate correlation between the two variables were exported directly from the SPSS program and are presented in [Table 1](#), for the discursive sequence from 2009, respectively in [Table 2](#) for the discursive sequence from 2004.

The dependence between the variables $y = y(x)$ is usually evaluated by statistical regression techniques, practically by determining the analytical function, called the polynomial regression function, which best approximates the experimental data. In our situation, the cubic model for the regression curve best models the distribution of the experimental data. For example, the form of this function for our variables, corresponding to the discursive sequence taken into account for the December 2009 debate, is: Y_1 (2009) = $-0,165 + 0,001*x - 1,491*x^2 + 7,626*x^3$, for emotional valence; and Y_2 (2009) = $5,054 + 0,002*x - 2,339*x^2 + 8,011*x^3$ for emotional score.

3.3. Discussions

FaceReader™ software allows observing the distribution of facial emotional expressions in a dynamic way, throughout the analyzed discursive sequence. Basically, we have a dynamic picture of how a political figure communicates various emotions during the speech. We can see how certain facial expressions are associated with verbal speech, which of the six basic emotions are activated when a certain verbal expression is predicted by our *political personae*.

For example, while the statement mentioned above, part of the discursive sequence selected from the December 2009 debate, is being uttered by Traian Băsescu, the emotion with the most pronounced amplitude and dynamics is “Happy”, the only positive emotion, followed by “Surprised”, which it is considered a positive or negative emotion only in relation to the referent, with the discursive context that disambiguates the meaning. The rest of the facial expressions have marginal amplitudes throughout the statement ([Figure 1\(c\)](#)). The inferential meaning proposed by the incumbent through the conclusive statement, in which the challenger is exposed as a “liar”, is communicated to the public “dressed” in a positive emotional context. The pleasant emotional

Table 1. The results of the bivariate correlation between the variables emotional valence respectively emotional content for the political actor Traian Băsescu during the presidential debates in 2009.

		Correlations	
		Valence	Emotional Score
Valence	Pearson correlation	1	-,205**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1405	1405
Emotional Score	Pearson correlation	-,205**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1405	1405

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2. The results of the bivariate correlation between the variables emotional valence, respectively emotional content for the political actor Traian Băsescu during the presidential debates in 2004.

		Correlations	
		Valence	Emotional score
Valence	Pearson correlation	1	,203**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	746	746
Emotional score	Pearson correlation	,203**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	746	746

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

experience that the incumbent communicates to the audience is also surprised by the valence line chart, with a dynamic in the area of positive values for hedonic valence (Figure 1(e)). The logical interpretant, predicated, as we saw earlier, in the form of a conclusive statement – “you lied in a presidential confrontation” – is emotionally constructed starting from an immediate experiential referent. It is about the visit that his opponent, Mircea Geoană, makes at home to the controversial businessman Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, the main shareholder of the RealitateaTV news station at the time on the night before the presidential debate. On the same day, Nicolae Popa, the partner of the businessman mentioned above, was arrested in Indonesia. By connecting the two events, our political character, Traian Băsescu, skillfully builds an interpretive framework, which allows him to index his political opponent under the “umbrella” of guilt. Mircea Geoană appeared as a part of a conspiracy scenario under the sign of corruption, an extremely sensitive issue in the election campaign of that time. The joy of surprising a political opponent in an uncomfortable position, from which he cannot escape reasonably, seems a good communication strategy for the one who puts it on stage and exciting for the audience, thus fueling the political spectacle.

The fact that there is a correlation of medium intensity (approximately) between the variables that capture the way in which emotions are expressed in a variety of semiotic modes ($r = -0.205$, $p < .01$, $N = 1405$), indicates a certain coherence in the way the speech is performed. Here, coherence is understood in the sense that our political character acts consistently, with certain predictability throughout the narrative sequence analyzed (i.e. Fisher 1987). Therefore, the correlations between the variables *emotional valence* and *emotional score of speech* are a measure of the coherence and consistency of the multimodal discursive behavior of a political character. In other words, how credible is the narrative proposed by the political actor, and by extension the overall credibility of the *political personae*. We also note that the shape of the regression curves for both variables analyzed shows a remarkable similarity: $Y_i(2009) = a_i * x^3 - b_i * x^2 + c_i * x \pm d_i$, $i = 1, 2$ (1 for emotional valence, 2 corresponds to emotional score). Even the terms (numerical constants) that are part of the regression equation have the same order of magnitude, suggesting a similar variation (dynamic) of the regression curve. This kind of similarity, in terms of the dynamics of each of the variables considered, supports the idea of coherence and predictability in discursive behavior, and is also an index of the discursive style of our political character (i.e. Drăgan 2022).

Moreover, when he utters the last part of the sentence in question, our political actor performs a certain hand gesture, part of the family of *pointing gestures* or *gestures of*

orientation (McNeill 1992). Gestures of this type are “indexical practices” (Streeck 2009, 59), which mediate the relationship between the speaker who performs the gesture and the communication context (Kita 2003; Goodwin 2003). For Mittelberg and Hinnell (2022, 11), “pointing gestures similarly depend more fully on the linguistic and extralinguistic context and cause the attendee’s attention to shift from the hand itself to the entity pointed at”. In our case, the performed gesture that accompanies the sentence towards its end indicates an abstract reference, which is not present in the representation space, predicated by the expression “Romanians”. “But not to me the apologies, but to the Romanians”, says the incumbent Traian Băsescu. In other words, the challenger’s lie is projected collectively to the referent. It becomes public, collectively reprehensible. During this time, the incumbent seems to withdraw from the reality of the utterance and becomes “one of us”, among the Romanians, part of the abstract collective referent. We have exemplified this type of strategy in subchapter 2.2.1. (e.g. D’Errico et al. 2022). The pointing gesture is provocative; it invites people to join and participate in an emotional way on the performance stage. It appeals to them; it gives them the illusion that they are important and can join the represented actors. It is a profoundly relational gesture, a manifestation of *Secondness*. The cultural history of this type of gesture gives consistency to its indexical function (Szurmiński et al. 2022). It redirects the viewer’s attention in the direction desired by the gesture performer, in the direction of the reference established by him. Through such a gesture, the incumbent manages to shape the connection with the general public in the sense he proposes through the spoken speech (*Thirdness*).

In the case of the second statement, which our political figure uttered during the final presidential debate on 8 December 2004, negative emotions have a slightly more pronounced dynamic, among which “Disgust” has a greater amplitude, followed by “Angry”, “Sad”, and “Scared”. The sequence of communication analyzed is known under various names, from the “mirror scene” to the “moment of sincerity”, or from the moment of “confession”, to the episode of the “two communists”. This time, our political character proposes a confessional discursive scenario, interpreted in a way that seems to be of a hopeful, bewildering sincerity for the public. Such a discursive strategy brings the performer closer to the audience watching him. It puts him in a “one of us” position, which we discussed earlier. One cannot be lenient, one cannot do an exercise in empathy with the confessor. In this way, it becomes the most likely electoral option in the presidential competition, the “lesser of two evils” to which electoral preferences can be directed. Such a performance can only be staged through multimodal meaning-making practices. The communicated emotions, which we mentioned earlier, acquire an aura of authenticity through the semiotic materialization of various semiotic modes. The ability of our political figure to persuasively integrate semiotic modes such as speech, facial expressions, or gestures will ultimately make a difference in the preferences of the electorate.

Similar to the sequence discussed earlier, we note the correlation between emotional valence and the emotional score of speech ($r = 0.203$, $p < .01$, $N = 746$). Things are similar in terms of the shape of the regression curve for both variables, considered separately. Both aspects of the variables that capture the way in which emotions are expressed in a variety of semiotic modes function as an index of the coherence and predictability of our political character’s messages.

Regarding co-speech gestures, it should be noted that Traian Băsescu performs the “ring” gesture (from *R-family gestures*) repeatedly for 22 s while uttering the phrase in question. In a previous article, we discussed the persuasive effect of such co-speech gestures exhaustively (Drăgan 2022). The relationship established between hand gestures and the emotional dimension of messages or the emotional valence of the message was also discussed in another paper (Drăgan 2018).

4. Conclusions

In this article, we aimed to present an analytical framework to study how *political personae* are emotionally constructed through multimodal meaning-making practices. Our analytical model opens a window for understanding how emotions are semiotically materialized and communicated in the narratives of political discourse. In their efforts to build and project a coherent and consistent political image, an authentic and credible *political personae*, politicians tend to mediate the meanings of messages emotionally. On the other hand, we saw that voters evaluated the discourse and image of political candidates in a multimodal way (Holler, Kendrick, and Levinson 2018; Holler and Levinson 2019). Most of the time, their decisions are emotionally mediated (Damasio 1994; Castells 2009; Breeze 2019). Therefore, understanding the personalized manner in which politicians strategically manage various semiotic modes in meaning-making practices from the perspective of expressed and communicated emotions is of great importance for political marketing and political semiotics.

In essence, we have shown that multimodal meaning-making practices have an emotional basis. Our research emphasizes the premise of emotional mediation of semiosis in political discourse through two hypotheses: (1) *political personae* strategically make multimodal choices that are emotionally mediated, and (2) these multimodal choices can be assessed through variables that capture the way in which emotions are thus semiotically materialized.

The hypothesis of strategic choices in multimodal practices of meaning-making specific to political discourse is supported by a detailed analysis of the multimodal behavior of our political character in two memorable communication sequences, selected from the final presidential debates in Romania, from December 2004 and 2009 respectively. In both cases, our political character made those multimodal choices that allowed him to connect emotionally with the audience in an authentic way. Each time, his multimodal discursive strategy was to position himself close to the public from the perspective of power relations, a “one of us” type strategy. Such multimodal elections, emotionally mediated by highly skilled performances, allowed him to implement indexing strategies of his political opponents under the “umbrella” of guilt, either as part of a conspiracy scenario under the sign of corruption, as in 2009, or by placing himself in a “lesser of two evils” interplay like in 2004.

Regarding the second hypothesis, of the correlations that are established between the variables that capture how emotions are expressed in a variety of semiotic modes, we showed that this type of correlation has a measure of the coherence, consistency, and predictability of the multimodal discursive behavior of a political character. It shows us how credible the messages proposed by the political actor are, functioning by extension as an index of the overall credibility of the political persona. On the other hand, this type of

correlation can be considered an analytical tool for assessing the consistency of the discursive style of a political figure (i.e. Drăgan 2022).

We believe that our study opens the opportunity to understand in an analytical, applied manner how the *political persona* is constructed and connects with the audience at the emotional level through multimodal meaning-making practices. Moreover, it is a way of operationalizing the more general idea that the way we experience reality, produce and interpret signs is emotionally mediated (Nöth 2016; Santaella 2016; Petrilli and Ji 2022).

Note

1. Hedonometer or “happiness index”. Detailed information about this analysis tool can be found here: http://hedonometer.org/timeseries/en_all/.

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