A FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF GHANAIAN PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

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Abstract

Scholars of the functional theory of campaign discourse have explored the nature of political campaign discourse, particularly presidential campaign discourse. This paper adds to the exploration and the data by analysing Ghanaian presidential debates using Benoit's functional theory. The analysis reveals that the presidential candidates acclaimed more than they attacked and defended. Two additional functional categories – appeal and recommendation – are identified. Contrary to the assumptions of the functional theory that incumbents acclaim more than challengers, the paper finds that challengers acclaimed more than the incumbent, and that the candidates discussed more future plans/deliberative rhetoric. The study concludes that even though most of the assumptions of the theory were confirmed, there are additional persuasive strategies of presidential candidates in Ghanaian political debates such as appeal and recommendation. Thus, the study recommends that further studies extend the theory to accommodate the discourse strategies in multi-candidate campaigns since the theory emerged from several studies of two-candidate campaigns in the United States.

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Introduction

Presidential debates have become a constant practice in the electioneering process of most countries. For that reason, discourse analysts have sought to investigate the use of language and the functions that presidential debates perform. The debates enable the audience to assess the candidates based on the latter's policies and reactions to some thought-provoking questions concerning the economy and the welfare of a country. Also, with presidential debates, voters get to observe the demeanour of the candidates in addition to the verbal responses to issues (Hughes, 2015). There are, however, contrasting findings on the impact of debates on voting behaviour. Whereas McKinney and Warner (2013) find that there is no or little influence of debates on vote choice since most voters choose their preferred candidates even before the debates, Holbrook (1999) and Maier and Jansen (2017) observe that presidential debates influence public opinion and voting behaviour.

Despite the established relevance of presidential debates in democratic dispensations (Holbrook, 1999; Hughes, 2015; Maier & Jansen, 2017), analysis of Ghanaian political discourse is mainly on political manifestos (Afful& Gyasi, 2020; Nartey &Yankson, 2014), campaign blogs (Fordjour, 2015) and other political speeches (Mensah, Sarfo-Adu&Afful, 2018; Sarfo-Kantankah, 2019). The few studies on Ghanaian presidential debates (Botchway, 2018; van Gyampo, 2009) are conceptual and overlook the analysis of the discourse and/or communicative functions of these debates.

Two lacunas can be derived from the existing literature on presidential debates. First, studies on presidential debates globally mainly focus on political party candidates and overlook the discourse of independent/no-party candidates. For instance, most of the studies conducted in the US focused on Democrat-Republican debates because, except for the 1992 Clinton-Bush-Perot debates, only the candidates of the two main parties have participated in presidential debates (Hughes, 2015). Similarly, in Finland, priority is given to candidates of the National Coalition Party and the Finnish Social Democratic Party (Isotalus, 2011; Paatelainen, 2016). There is, however, an increasing number of independent candidates in most multi-party democracies whose discourses remain understudied. Second, there is a dearth of literature on

discourse analysis of presidential debates in Ghana. Our search in libraries, on Google Scholar, Research Gate and other major search engines revealed the paucity of studies on discourse of Ghanaian presidential debates.

These intellectual gaps need to be filled for a number of reasons. Presidential debates have become an integral electioneering process and an important platform for communicating campaign messages. Botchway (2018) highlights this further as he indicates that presidential debate is a popular and far-reaching event in Ghana especially during election years. Again, by analysing presidential debates in Ghana and juxtaposing the findings with those of other countries, one can reveal whether the socio-political contexts of the debates influence the discourse. It is also worth noting that the discourse of independent candidates is equally important if one seeks to analyse the discourse of political actors. First, it may reveal whether the functions performed by candidates are influenced by ideologies of political parties. Second, including the discourse of independent candidates in such a study can inform assumptions contained in previous studies that focused only on political party candidates.

Employing the functional theory of political campaign discourse in analysing presidential debates in Ghana, the study examines the functions (acclaims, attacks, defences) performed by the candidates in the presidential debates and the topics (policy, character) on which these functions occur. There have been earlier claims that the functional theory is not applicable to political debates outside the United States (Isotalus, 2011). Even though some studies have successfully used the theory in some countries like France (Choi & Benoit, 2013), Korea (Lee & Benoit, 2005) and Ukraine (Benoit & Klyukovski, 2006), the debate concerning the applicability of the theory remains inconclusive. In Ghana, the functional theory has been used to analyse political Facebook messages (Fordjour, 2015) and campaign speeches (Mensah et al., 2018) but not presidential debates. Thus, the study is underpinned by two questions: (1) what discourse functions are performed by candidates in the 2012 and 2016 Ghanaian presidential debates? (2) What is the distribution of policy and character themes in the 2012 and 2016 Ghanaian presidential debates?

Theoretical approach: the functional theory of political campaign discourse

Benoit's (1999, 2007) Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse underpins this study. Following several studies on US political campaign discourse, the functional theory was developed by William Benoit. Even though it was mainly applied to US campaign discourse, the theory has been widely used to analyse Finnish presidential debates (Paatelainen *et al*., 2016), French presidential debates (Choi & Benoit, 2013), British Prime Minister debates (Benoit & Benoit-Bryan, 2013), Korean Television Spots (Lee & Benoit, 2004), Ghanaian campaign speeches (Mensah et al., 2018), among others. Benoit *et al.* (2003) identify five foundational principles of the theory, namely:

    (i)   voting is a comparative act where a candidate must be seen as a preferable choice.

    (ii)   a candidate must be distinguished from opponents to be considered preferable.

    (iii)   campaign messages are means through which a candidate can be distinguished.

    (iv)   campaign discourse creates prefer ability through three functions: acclaims, attacks and defences.

    (v)   candidates set themselves apart from opponents by emphasising differences in their character (image) and policy (issues). Candidates may choose to acclaim or attack on character, policy or both topics.

These principles serve as the basis of the functional theory which posits that political candidates perform three functions (acclaim, attack or defence)to distinguish themselves from their opponents. The theory further adds that these functions occur on two topics: policy and character.

    *Acclaim*is a positive remark or self-praise which aims to enhance a candidate's credentials as a desirable leader. It is a positive self-presentation or any utterance that enhances the reputation of a speaker (Benoit, 1997). In political communication, candidates laud their success stories (accomplishments) as proof of their competency to occupy an office. Candidates acclaim for a number of reasons: social approval, identity development, self-esteem, etc. (Benoit, 1997). The theory stipulates that acclaims are the most frequent functions because they

have no drawbacks. Schlenker (2003) avers that a candidate tends to ensure positive self-representation (positive campaigning) by controlling the impressions people have about him/her as a strategy to persuade the electorate. Schlenker's (2003) concept of positive self-representation is based on the idea that, logically, good comments about a person generate approval, acceptance, and support.

In this study, *Attack* refers to a message that seeks to downgrade the credentials of the opponent, making him/her an undesirable officeholder (Benoit, 2017). Benoit holds that this strategy is a persuasive attack since the communicative intention of attacks in political campaign is persuasion. Even though there exist a lot of studies that reveal the demobilization consequences/negative impact of attack/negative campaigning (Ansolabehere *et al*., 1994; Haselmayer *et al*., 2019; Lau, Sigelman & Rovner, 2007), there is available literature to the effect that attacks are important in political campaigning (see Geer, 2006; Martin, 2004; Mayer, 1996). Mayer (1996), for instance, argues that negative campaigning is a revelation of the faults of an opponent: flaws in policy and/or character, mistakes made and possible future flaws. He further adds that when candidates emphasize these faults of opponents, voters are enlightened and well-informed to make a better choice.

Defence is used by candidates who are attacked to minimise or eliminate the damage caused by the attack. Thus, defence is necessitated by an earlier attack. Benoit (1995) argues that a timely defence is necessary for image repair. He proposes a typology of five image repair strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification. He further elucidates that candidates may use a denial strategy when they seek to either challenge the existence of a supposed negative quality/act (simple denial) or by providing a different target for the attack (shifting blame). Candidates may also decide to evade responsibility by limiting their responsibility for a failure. There are four variants of this strategy: accident, provocation, defeasibility, and intentions. Reducing offensiveness also entails candidates minimize the effect of their negative act through six sub strategies: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one's accuser, and compensation. With corrective action, the candidate promises to address the root cause of the negative act by either rectifying the damage caused or preventing future occurrences. Mortification is defined as the act of admitting the negative act, showing resentment and asking

for forgiveness. In the Ghanaian political space, some political actors tend to use defensive strategies such as: playing the victim, accusation, bolstering, and the God's will factor (Sarfo-Kantankah, 2019). Defence is the least frequent function for three reasons: it normally takes a candidate off-message; a candidate may appear more reactive rather than being proactive; and finally, since attacks are normally on a person's flaws, a defending candidate may remind voters of a potential weakness.

The assumption that acclaims always dominate attacks, and that defence is the least frequent function has been contested by some studies conducted in different socio-cultural contexts other than the US (see Drăgan, 2016; Isotalus, 2011). These studies have revealed that acclaims may not always dominate attacks and defences in political campaigns. Other variables that may influence the nature of campaigning include political profile, that is, incumbency and opposition. Also, some political analysts (Mensah *et al*., 2018) have criticised the claim by the functional theory that acclaims have no drawbacks as they argue that excessive acclaiming may be perceived to be boasting.

The functional theory was employed for this study because it extends the classification of campaign topics by providing three subdivisions for policy (past deeds, future plans, and general goals) and character topics (personal qualities, leadership qualities, and ideals). Also, unlike other campaign theories which emphasize two campaign discourses–positive and negative (Kaid & Johnston, 1991), the functional theory, in addition to acclaims (positive) and attacks (negative), recognizes the existence of image-repair mechanisms in political campaigns, which is germane to this study.

Methodology

Before detailing the specific methods used for data collection and analysis, this section presents a brief discussion on the research context for an understanding of the language and political ramifications that have shaped political campaigns and presidential debates in Ghana over the years.

As a beacon of democracy in Africa, Ghana practices a multiparty system and over the decades, various political parties have been formed on ideological, regional and religious basis (Ninson, 2006). Some of these parties have survived till now while those formed along regional

basis have been banned since the Nkrumah era. The democratic journey of independent Ghana commenced in the 1960s when the republic organized its first post-independent presidential elections in April 1960, which was won by the Convention People's Party candidate and Prime Minister, Kwame Nkrumah, making him the first president of the country. From the Nkrumah administration to the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) era (1960-1992), power alternated between democratically elected governments and military regimes. Thus, Ghana has had a chequered political history (Sarfo-Adu, 2018) prior to the current republic which has witnessed an uninterrupted democratic governance since the commencement of the fourth attempt at constitutional rule in the early 1990's (Yobo & Van Gyampo, 2015). As at May 1992 when a ban on political parties was lifted, 13 political parties were in existence. Some like the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC) had metamorphosed from the People's Party (PP) and the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) respectively. The likes of Every Ghanaian Living Everywhere Party (EGLEP) and National Salvation Party (NSP) were newly established and survived only for a short term before joining forces with the well-endowed-with-funds and competitive parties (Ninson, 2006). The 1992 and 1996 presidential elections were won by the NDC candidate, Jerry John Rawlings, who, having led the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council to overthrow the People National Party government in 1981 (Sarfo-Adu, 2018; Yobo & Gyampo, 2015), restored democratic principles in 1992 after ruling for a decade.

In the 2000 presidential elections, which went down in the political history of Ghana as the first time a democratically elected government handed over power to another, there was a remarkable pre-election activity which was the maiden presidential debate organized by the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA). The debate which was moderated by a CNN reporter (IEA, 2016) involved all participants save the candidate of the ruling NDC, John Evans Atta Mills (JEAM), who subsequently lost the elections to his main opponent from the NPP, John Agyekum Kufuor. In the 2004 elections, the incumbent, Kufuor, declined to participate in the presidential debates yet won the election to serve his second and final tenure. The 2008 elections were for the third time preceded by a presidential debate which saw the candidates of the two major parties (NPP and NDC), together with candidates from parties like the Convention People's Party (CPP) and the People's National Convention (PNC), go face to face

in a presidential debate. There was no incumbent candidate since Kufuor of the NPP had served the constitutionally mandated eight (8) years in office. The election which ended in a runoff was won by the NDC who subsequently retained their seat in the 2012 election.

The 2012 and 2016 IEA debates were purposely sampled for the study based on two criteria – the debate should include incumbent and challenger(s), and the debate should include a non-partisan candidate. The first criterion was relevant for screening the data because several studies which used the functional theory (Benoit, 1999; Sarfo-Adu, 2018) discussed the difference in rhetorical strategies between incumbents and challengers so we sought to test this finding using Ghanaian presidential debates. With the second criterion, we sought to fill the gap in knowledge on the analysis of non-partisan politicians since one major niche for this study is the dearth of literature on no-party or independent candidates in presidential debates.

The 2012 presidential debate was remarkable; for the first time in the history of presidential debates in Ghana, the incumbent, President Mahama, took part in the debate. Hagerty (as cited in Schroeder, 2000) has argued that incumbents are likely not to engage in such debates because their policies are exposed for attacks since they have been in government. The presidential debate had earlier been boycotted by Kufuor in 2004. For this reason, John Mahama (J. Mahama), who subsequently won the 2012 election, was commended by some Ghanaians for his decision to partake in the 2012 debate. The three challengers in the 2012 debates were the NPP's flag bearer, Nana Akufo-Addo, Dr. Abu Sakara from the CPP and Mr. Hassan Ayariga from the PNC.

The 2016 presidential debate and election were the first after a Supreme Court petition by the NPP that challenged the 2012 election results. Even though the argument by the petitioners could not overturn the Electoral Commission's declaration of Mahama as the winner, there were a lot of anticipation and attention going into the 2016 election year. Three candidates (all challengers) participated in that year's presidential debate: The PNC was now represented by Dr. Edward Nasigri Mahama (N. Mahama), the PPP was led by Dr. Kwesi Nduom and the last person to make an appearance was a non-partisan or independent candidate, Joseph Osei Yeboah.

As can be seen in the narrative above, presidential debates are highly regarded in Ghana's democratic governance; the country prides itself as the only West African country to

have held four presidential debates as at 2015 (Mensa, 2015). This study uses the debates of 2012 and 2016 as data. We retrieved video recordings of the 2012 presidential debate held in Tamale, the capital of the Northern Region, and the 2016 debate held in Accra, the capital city of Ghana, from YouTube.Com and transcribed.[3]

Methods of analysis: content analysis

The study employs a qualitative content analytical method. Qualitative content analysis is useful for coding and categorizing data into themes. It is also effective for examining trends and patterns in a particular data (Stemler, 2001). Krippendorff (2004) defines content analysis as a technique in research which allows analysts to make inferences from texts based on context. Elo and Kyngas (2007) identify three phases of content analysis: preparation, organizing and reporting phases. The preparation phase involves selecting the unit of analysis. This study uses themes as units of analysis: any set of linguistic elements that addresses a common issue or a coherent idea constitutes one theme or category. At the organization phase, a categorization matrix is developed or adopted from the theoretical framework. The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse stipulates three categories for the coding of political discourse: acclaim, attack and defence. Since the study adopted an unconstrained matrix, new categories (appeal and recommendation) were discovered. At the reporting phase of the study, we ensured validity by engaging the services of inter-raters before presenting the detailed findings. Two raters independently coded the data to indicate an agreement in the coding of data.

Analysis and discussion

Discourse functions of candidates in Ghanaian presidential debates

By applying the principles of the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse, we identified the following discourse functions in the presidential debates: acclaim, attack, defence appeal, and recommendation. Tables 1 and 2 show the frequency of occurrence of these functions in the 2012 and 2016 presidential debates respectively. The tables also detail the political profile of each candidate: incumbent and challenger.

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[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxxwrW1ef7E (2012 IEA Presidential Debate in Tamale, Northern Region, Ghana).
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN4wrktrgrs (2016 IEA Presidential Debate in Accra, Ghana).

Table 1: Discourse functions of candidates in the 2012 presidential debate

Candidate/Political Profile	Acclaim	Attack	Defence	Recommendation
J. Mahama/Incumbent	35 (25%)	7 (13%)	8 (67%)	
Akufo-Addo/Challenger	30 (22%)	21 (39%)	4 (33%)	
Sakara/Challenger	35 (25%)	13 (24%)		1 (100%)
Ayariga/Challenger	38 (28%)	13 (24%)		
Total (205)	**138** (100%)	**54** (100%)	**12** (100%)	**1** (100%)

Table 2: Discourse functions of candidates in the 2016 presidential debate

Candidate/Political Profile	Acclaim	Attack	Defence	Appeal	Recommendation
N. Mahama/Challenger	24 (32%)	6 (21%)			
Nduom/Challenger	29 (38%)	14 (50%)	1 (100%)	1 (20%)	1 (33%)
Yeboah/Challenger (NP)	23 (30%)	8 (29%)		4 (80%)	2 (67%)
Total (113)	**76** (100%)	**28** (100%)	**1** (100%)	**5** (100%)	**3** (100%)

NB: NP means non-partisan/no party

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, acclaims have the highest frequency in the two debates: in both debates, acclaims occupy more than half of the total number of themes. In all the 205 themes identified in the 2012 debate, 138 themes discussed acclaims, an indication that the debate was predominantly positive. All the candidates prioritised positive campaigning as both the incumbent, President John Mahama, and the challengers acclaimed more than they attacked or defended. However, contrary to previous findings that incumbents acclaim more than challengers (Benoit et al., 2007; Fordjour, 2015), the study found that, in the 2012 debate, Hassan Ayariga, the candidate of the People's National Convention (PNC) and one of the three challengers, acclaimed the most (28%), followed by the incumbent (25%) who recorded the same number of acclaims as Dr. Sakara, another challenger, while the third challenger and

candidate of the New Patriotic Party (NPP), Nana Akufo-Addo, acclaimed the least (22%). Table 2 shows that, in the 2016 presidential debate, 76 out of the total of 113 themes were acclaims. Thus, just like the 2012 debate, the candidates emphasised positive campaigning. As illustrated in Table 2, Nduom used more positive messages (38%) compared to the other challengers – Nasigri Mahama (32%) and Yeboah, the independent candidate (30%).

The findings in the 2012 debate contradict conclusions drawn by earlier researchers (Benoit & Airne, 2005; Benoit et al., 2007) that incumbents, since they have been in office, acclaim more than challengers. Candidates may not necessarily need experience or past successes in the office sought before they can engage in positive campaigning since there are other means of persuasion: campaign promises, personal qualities, ideals, etc.

The second most common function in the two debates was attack, with quite a huge margin between acclaim and attack. For instance, in the 2012 debate, just about a quarter (54), representing 26% of the campaign messages was devoted to attack messages, compared to the 138 acclaims (see Table 1). Most of the attack messages (39%) came from the main challenger and candidate of the opposition NPP, Akufo-Addo. The incumbent candidate, President Mahama, on the other hand, used the least attack messages (13%), confirming the assumption that challengers often attack more than incumbents (Benoit & Sheafer, 2006; Trammell, 2006).

Table 2 also shows that, in the 2016 debate, attack messages were the second most frequent themes: 28 themes from the 113 were negative messages. Nduom discussed half the total number of attack themes (50%) while Nasigri Mahama recorded the least attacks (21%), and the independent candidate having two more attack messages than Mahama (29%).

Tables 1 and 2 show that defence was the least common of the three functions. The 2012 presidential debate recorded only 12 defences and these refutations came from the incumbent, President Mahama, and the main challenger, Akufo-Addo. Of the two candidates, the former defended the most (67%) because he was the target of most attacks. In the 2016 presidential debate, only one defence theme was recorded, which came from Nduom. Thus, acclaims were found to be the most preferred messages, followed by attacks and defences.

The findings, as tabulated above, corroborate previous studies on political campaign and presidential debates conducted in and outside the US (cf. Benoit & Klyukovski, 2006; Lee &

Benoit, 2005) that most political debates are positive as candidates mostly use acclaims, followed by attacks and less defences.

There are quite a number of studies which have argued that the functional theory is not applicable to non-US contexts. Some of these studies report that using the theory to analyse campaign discourse means a lot of the text will be "non-functional" since they cannot be classified under any of the three functions – acclaim, attack and defence (Hrbková & Zagrapan, 2014; Isotalus, 2011; Paatelainen, 2016; Paatelainen, *et al.*, 2016). Since we adopted an unconstrained matrix in this study, in addition to the three functions presented above, Tables 1 and 2 also show new functional categories, appeal and recommendation, were identified in the analysis. Out of the two categories, recommendation was found in both debates whereas all five appeals were made in the 2016 debate. As shown in Table 2, the five (5) appeals in the 2016 debate were made by Yeboah (4) and Nduom (1). On the other hand, the study found four (4) recommendation themes in all, one (1) in the 2012 debate and three (3) in the 2016 debate. Sakara was the only candidate in the 2012 election to make a recommendation whereas, in the 2016 debate, Yeboah (2) and Nduom (1) made recommendations.

Acclaiming in Ghanaian presidential debates

As noted above, the most common discourse function was acclaim, in which candidates discussed their positive qualities, plans and achievements. The predominance of positive messages in the two campaign discourses supports previous studies which have found that acclaims are the most discussed of the three functions (Benoit & Harthcock, 1999; Brazeal & Benoit, 2001). Brazeal and Benoit (2001), for instance, reported that American political debates prioritised positive campaigning. In the two presidential debates, the seven candidates sought to persuade the electorate mainly through acclaims. Candidates engaged in positive self-representation, as shown in Extracts 1 and 2.

> **Extract 1** (Ayariga, 2012)
> I want to outline to Ghanaians that I believe in the politics of love, tolerance and unity. As the presidential candidate who believe [*sic*] that Ghana must unite and we must all come together as one nation irrespective of our political affiliations to rule this country. I believe in the politics of tolerance, transparency, togetherness and unity.

Extract 2 (Akufo-Addo, 2012)
The NPP's vision is very different: I lead a team of committed, dedicated men and women who are ready to take on the challenge of transforming the economy of our country and setting Ghana on the road to prosperity. I am passionate about education. I am passionate about education because I know what it has done for me in my life and in the life of many others.

Extracts 1 and 2 are illustrations of how two candidates, Hassan Ayariga and Akufo-Addo, carried out acclaims. In Extract 1, Mr Ayariga outlined and associated himself with a number of positive beliefs and qualities – politics of love, tolerance, transparency and togetherness. These qualities are admirable characteristics that the electorate would want to see in a president so by associating himself to these good qualities, Ayariga attempts to convince the electorate that he should be the preferred candidate. Similarly, Akufo-Addo, in Extract 2, lauds the competency and commitment of his team. Here, the candidate paints a picture of himself as a team player while stressing the notion that governance is a collective effort and a lot depends on the quality of human resource that a political party can assemble. Thus, even before he acclaims on his passion for education, patriotism as an individual and his willingness to do the needful, Akufo-Addo praises the quality of the men and women he plans to work with. Also, he appears ready for the task as he supposes that he already has at his disposal dedicated people he is willing to lead into office. Such good comments made by the two candidates have high tendencies to evoke approval and support from the audience (Schlenker, 2003).

One important feature of acclaim campaign is that candidates emphasise the "self" and not the "other". Thus, there is a self-other binary in debate discourse and positive campaigning emphasises the former. This is further illustrated in Extract 3 from President Mahama.

Extract 3 (J. Mahama, 2012)
We'll continue to invest in health care to increase its access for all our people and to ensure that they have quality health delivery. We will continue to invest to ensure that our mothers don't die when they are carrying out their biological function of giving birth to us. We will continue to invest to ensure that our children survive beyond the age of five and even much further than that…

In Extract 3, the candidate sets himself apart from his opponents as he places much emphasis on the first-person pronoun (inclusive) "we". The analysis suggests that acclaims mostly involve the use of the first-person pronouns "I" and "We" (the pronoun "I" refers to the candidate and the inclusive "we" is mostly used in the debates to represent the party/government). In Extract

3, for instance, John Mahama makes use of three successive statements beginning with "we will continue to invest". These utterances constitute commissive acts (cf. Searle, 1969) whose illocutionary force is that the candidate promises to perform a future action – investing in healthcare – to the benefit of Ghanaians. The candidate demonstrates his capabilities and those of his government to accomplish what has been promised. The predominant use of the inclusive "we" in the two extracts demonstrates a sense of rapport between the candidate and his team. As an economy device, the pronoun "we" replaces such noun phrases as "the NDC-led government" (cf. Biber et. *al.*, 1999).

Another significant feature of acclaims as found in the two presidential debates is the frequent expression of modalities about willingness, ability and necessity. The use of modal auxiliary verbs like "will" and "must" to acclaim corroborates Nartey and Yankson's (2014) finding that modal auxiliary verbs in Ghanaian political discourse carry such discourse functions as promise and necessity for persuasive purposes. They found the modal verb "will" to be the most frequent, an attestation of a political party's willingness and/or promise to offer a service or a product.

Attacking in Ghanaian Presidential Debates

The second most common discourse function of the three functional types was attack. Attack messages are themes which emphasise weaknesses and failures in the policies and characters of opponents. They contribute to the overall communicative intent of the campaign discourse – persuasion. By criticising an opponent, candidates simultaneously persuade the electorate to approve their candidature since they do not share in the failure or weakness of the opponent. All seven candidates from the two debates engaged in attack campaigning, albeit less frequently. Extracts 4 and 5 demonstrate attack messages from Akufo-Addo and Nduom in the 2012 and 2016 presidential debates respectively.

> **Extract 4** (Akufo-Addo, 2012)
> Madam Professor, in 2008, the NDC promised in their manifesto that they were going to bring unemployment down to the barest possible minimum. The experience of the last 4 years is that this is yet another promise that hasn't been fulfilled. Far from it. One in three Ghanaians today don't have work. One in six have given up looking for it. We are told that the 1.7 million ghost jobs which have turned out to be exactly that: ghost jobs.

Extract 5 (Nduom, 2016)

I must state my disappointment that the man who over these past eight years has supervised the mismanagement of our economy is not here.

In Extracts 4 and 5, the candidates discussed single-themed attacks though with varying textual space. Benoit (1999) contends that themes may vary from a single phrase to several sentences. Thus, while Nduom managed to carry out an attack in a single complex clause (Extract 5), Akufo-Addo discusses a similar attack theme using several sentences to establish his point.

In Extract 5, Nduom launches a direct attack on the incumbent candidate. The theme discusses two separate but linked detestable qualities of a leader: incompetence and lack of accountability. First, Nduom emphasises that the incumbent has failed in the management of the economy and, under his watch, the economy is being mismanaged. Second, he manages to portray the incumbent as one who will rather shield himself from public scrutiny than to ensure accountability. This persuasive attack dents the credentials of the president as his ability as a leader is questioned and also marred by his boycott of the debate, a democratic practice where candidates are assessed based on their past and future plans. By this attack, Nduom creates a certain image of the incumbent as a leader who boycotts a debate because of his failures and lack of accountability. Through this persuasive attack, Nduom is seen to possess the principles of public accountability and transparency since, unlike the incumbent, he availed himself to interact with the people he hopes to lead, which positions him as preferable candidate.

Whereas the attack message by Nduom targets the image of the incumbent candidate, Akufo-Addo (Extract 4) attacks the failures of the NDC government, led by the incumbent candidate, President Mahama. The challenger reminds the electorate of some failed campaign promises that were made by the ruling government in the build-up to the 2008 presidential elections. Since voters do not favour candidates who renege on their campaign promises (Cruz *et al.*, 2018), Akufo-Addo emphasises this breach of trust and tries to incite the electorate against the incumbent. A campaign promise is perceived as a political contract between the candidate who promises a future act and the voters who endorse the candidate to perform the promised act. When the candidate fails to implement the promise, in this particular instance reducing unemployment, it constitutes a breach of the contract and the candidate, should he seek re-election, may suffer disapproval from the voters. From the extracts above, negative

campaigning is seen to be characterised by an explicit critique of an opponent (Hansen & Pedersen, 2008).

Concerning the target of the attacks, all but one of the 28 attack messages in the 2016 debate criticised the incumbent NDC government and the candidate. Once again, the only exception was an attack message from the non-partisan candidate who criticised the NPP government's Single Spine Salary Structure, which was implemented by Nduom in his capacity as Minister for Public Sector Reform (2005-2008), as being one of the causes of fiscal indiscipline in the country. Thus, the analysis revealed that policy attacks do not only occur on current leaders and policy initiatives, but even decade old initiatives by previous leaders, whose party is contesting the current election. This can be considered as a "cross-attack", which means a challenger attacking another challenger who (or whose party) has been in government before.

In the 2012 debate, there were two targets of the attack messages: the incumbent (NDC) candidate/government and the NPP candidate/government. The three challengers used attacks more than the incumbent. Akufo-Addo attacked the most (39%), followed by Sakara and Ayariga (24% each), with the least attacks coming from the incumbent (13%). All the three challengers directed their attack messages to the incumbent. This confirms Trammell's (2006) finding that challengers attack more than incumbents.

All the seven (7) attacks made by the incumbent in the 2012 debate were targeted at the NPP candidate and the government of 2001-2008. The incumbent perceived Akufo-Addo as the main contender for the seat. Thus, while all the other challengers attacked incumbent's image and policies, the incumbent only attacked the main competitor. This is congruent with the conclusion by Skaperdas and Grofman (1995) that candidates do not attack weaker opponents; they rather attack front runners. In this election, just like previous elections, the NPP and NDC were the front runners: since 1992, seven elections have been held: the NDC has won four (1992, 1996, 2008, and 2012), the NPP has won the other three (2000, 2004, and 2016), and two of the elections were decided in a run-off election (2000 and 2008).

Defending in Ghanaian presidential debates

In the 2012 and 2016 Ghanaian presidential debates, some candidates challenged and refuted the allegations that sought to discredit their personality and policies. Defences are responses to

negative campaigning as they are necessitated by previous attacks. Thus, there can only be as many defences as attacks: since not all candidates are accused and even those who are attacked may choose not to dignify attacks with defences. Defence is the least frequent of the three discourse functions (cf. Benoit *et al.*, 2011). This was confirmed in the two debates as few defence themes (13) were discussed as against acclaims (214) and attacks (81).

Three possible reasons have been suggested as to why defence was the least function: defences normally take a candidate off-message; a candidate may appear more reactive rather than being proactive and, finally, since attacks are normally on a person's flaws, a defending candidate may remind voters of a potential weakness (Benoit *et al.*, 2007). Candidates who use defence themes may do so to reduce or eliminate the harm caused by an attack (Benoit, 1995).

The study observed 12 defence themes in the 2012 presidential debate: eight (8) from the incumbent, President Mahama, and four (4) from the main challenger, Akufo-Addo. The only defence in the 2016 debate was given by Nduom who defended an attack on the Single Spine Salary Structure which was introduced by his ministry under the Kufuor administration (2001-2008). From the analysis, the incumbent candidate used more defence themes compared to the challengers as earlier suggested by previous studies (Benoit *et al.*, 1998). Three main defensive strategies were identified in the data: denial, evasion of responsibility and reducing offensiveness (Benoit, 1995).

Denial

One defensive strategy available to candidates who seek to repair their image is to deny the attack levelled against them (Benoit, 1995). Benoit contends that denial has two sub-strategies: simple denial and shifting blame. With the former, a candidate can clearly say that an alleged weakness or failure does not exist or, even if it does, he is not responsible for it. The latter, shifting blame, involves putting the blame on someone else, thereby directing the anger or ill feeling that might have arisen in the audience to the new perpetrator of an act. While some candidates used only one of the sub-strategies, some defence themes combined simple denial and shifting blame. Out of the 13 defence themes, four (4) were denials–two from each variant. Mahama used three denial strategies (two simple denial and one shifting blame) and Akufo-

Addo used shifting the blame strategy. Extract 6 shows how the incumbent utilised the denial strategy.

> **Extract 6** (J. Mahama, 2012)
>
> I am reluctant to use this rebuttal, but I need to set the records straight. The cost of training one child under the Cuban programme is 5,000 dollars far lower than the cost of training in our medical school here and so we had to take that opportunity.

Here, the incumbent is defensive about a prior attack by Akufo-Addo as the latter criticised the government for investing huge amounts of money in training Doctors in Cuba while there were less costly options available in the country. In his defence, Mahama denies the allegation that 105,000 cedis, the equivalent of which was 52,000 dollars, would be used to train one medical doctor under the Cuban initiative and that the government was paying 5,000 dollars (approximately 10,000 cedis in 2012) which was less costly compared to the 30,000 cedis charged by the Ghana Medical Association. By "setting the record straight", Mahama denies the allegation using the simple denial strategy. The president however does so reluctantly (*I am reluctant to use this rebuttal*) probably because he did not want to appear reactive or to dignify the attack which was based on *falsified* information.

Evasion of responsibility

The second defensive strategy used in the two debates was evasion of responsibility. A candidate who may not be able to dissociate himself/herself entirely from an alleged weakness or deny responsibility for a failure can evade responsibility using four different sub-strategies: provocation, defeasibility, accident and good intention. In carrying out their defence, three of the candidates evaded responsibility by using accident (1) and good intentions (2) as their specific strategies. The former entails that a candidate informs the audience that a particular failure was caused by an accident and with the latter, the candidate informs that he had good intentions of performing the act. Extracts 7 and 8 demonstrate how these two sub-strategies were used to defend.

> **Extract 7** (J. Mahama, 2012)
> …What we are going through currently is a load management or load shedding if you prefer to call it that, created by an act of God: a ship's anchor broke the West African Gas pipeline and knocked out 320 megawatts of our generation …

> **Extract 8** (Nduom, 2016)

Let me bring in the element of what everybody now calls *Single Spine*. Single spine didn't just come to be on its own; it was part of a comprehensive pay reform system. And one was, yes, to equalize and make sure that you get equal pay for work of equal value; but there were some other components. It was a phase one, phase two, phase three, and at the end of phase four, we were going to eliminate the need to give cars and petrol and water and so on and so forth for government officials….

There is a striking difference between the defence strategies used in Extracts 7 and 8, even though both strategies enable the candidates to evade responsibility. In Extract 7, Mahama defended his government when he was asked by the moderators to indicate what he would do to ensure reliable electricity supply. Mahama responds to this question by first of all evading responsibility for the unreliable power supply, saying that it was an accident, act of God. With this defence given, the candidate may not suffer the disapproval of the voters since people are not held responsible for actions they could not control (Benoit, 1995). By indicating that it was an act of God, Mahama appeals to Ghanaians' religious beliefs. Even though a secular state, Ghana has a majority of religiously inclined citizens, hence religion has been considered as a means of pulling the country together (Quashigah, 1999). Christianity as well as most other religions teaches its followers not to question the actions of God. Thus, Mahama's use of the "act of God" enables him to dispel the criticism that may come from the public since criticising him after this defence will mean challenging the act of God. This confirms Sarfo-Kantanka's (2019) study which also found that Mahama, during his Unity Walk after 2016 defeat, exploited the God factor to persuade party members.

In Extract 8, Nduom uses a different sub-strategy of evasion of responsibility: indicating that an action was performed based on good intentions. Nduom responds to an attack made by the non-partisan candidate on the NPP government's Single Spine Salary Structure. Nduom states that the initiative was conducted with good intentions–to bring reforms to the public sector. It must be noted that even though the attack on the policy targeted the NPP administration (2001-2008), there was an implied criticism towards Nduom who had served as public reforms minister in the Kufuor administration. In fact, the initiative was proposed by the ministry headed by Nduom, hence he felt equally responsible and targeted by the attack. He evades responsibility by emphasising all the good plans for which the policy was initiated. This image repair succeeds on the basis that if this act was done with good intentions, there is no point blaming its failure on the persons who initiated it.

Reducing offensiveness

This strategy ensures that the candidate limits the offensiveness of the act. Although there are six variants of this strategy, only three – minimisation, differentiation, transcendence – were used in the two debates. Minimisation strategy enables the candidate to convince the audience that an act is not as bad as it seems (Benoit, 1995). Differentiation involves a candidate comparing an act to a more offensive act to make the former appear less offensive. Transcendence allows the candidates to place an act in a different, often moral context, to justify it. On two different occasions, the incumbent, Mahama, used minimisation strategy in the 2012 presidential debate to reduce the offensiveness of some alleged failures. Also, differentiation was used on two occasions (Mahama) whereas transcendence was used on four different occasions by Akufo-Addo (3) and Mahama (1). Candidates could combine a number of these strategies in a single defence theme. Extract 9 illustrates how Mahama combined the three variants of reducing offensiveness.

> **Extract 9** (Mahama, 2012)
> Well, the use of debt-financing or to finance infrastructure is one strategy that has been used by all countries that have achieved middle income status and that aspire to achieve developed nation's status. You do not at any one time have all the resources present that you can use to roll out infrastructure, to roll out social services for your people and so countries take on debts even developed countries take on debt in order to finance their expenditure programmes. The important thing is not about the quantum of debt in terms of nominal terms but the important thing is about your debt sustainability and we have continued to monitor our debt sustainability to ensure that we keep it within the levels that are manageable. Ghana's public debt total, domestic and foreign, comes to 14 billion dollars. And as a percentage of our GDP, it currently amounts to 44% of GDP. The recommended level of debt to GDP ratio is 60%. If you look at some of the countries that are in trouble in the EU currently, their debt to GDP ratio went as high as 145% of GDP. Greece has managed to bring that down to about 120% of GDP because of the various bailouts it has got and it's hoping to bring that down further. Ghana's debt level is within proportion.

As shown in the extract, the candidate seeks not to deny or evade responsibility for the debt burden of the country. He rather seeks to normalise the problem in a different context. He indicates that debt financing of development projects is a common strategy for all middle-income countries, including Ghana. Thus, debt financing is an acceptable approach to managing the economy (transcendence). The candidate further minimises the criticism by indicating that debt is not as bad as it seems especially when it can be sustained: Ghana's debt, he informs, is

below the recommended debt to GDP ratio (minimisation). Using differentiation, Mahama then presents instances of worst scenarios in some European Union countries, as in the case of Greece, so that the current problem in the country will no longer appear worrying. By doing so, he demonstrates that the debt financing situation of Ghana is far from worst: if Greece, a European country, has a worse debt to GDP ratio then Ghana's situation is normal.

As has been discussed so far, the study found only three (denial, evasion of responsibility and reducing offensiveness) of the five main image repair strategies proposed by Benoit (1995) in the Ghanaian presidential debates. Corrective action and mortification strategies were not used by any of the candidates. The former comprises a vow to correct a failure while the latter entails that a candidate shows remorse and apologises. These two may not be so effective in campaign discourse and for that matter presidential debates since any admission of past failure would be a strong basis for one's opponent to persistently damage a candidate's reputation. Thus, the analysis confirms previous findings that some image repair strategies (e.g., mortification) may not be suitable for Ghanaian political campaigning (Sarfo-Kantankah, 2019).

Other discourse functions

Two additional discourse functions were identified in the two Ghanaian presidential debates. These are appeal and recommendation. In all, the study found five (5) appeals in the 2016 debate only and four (4) recommendations in both debates.

Appeal

An appeal is explained as a request or a call on an individual, a group or a government to perform a particular action. In some instances, as was the case in the five appeals found in the 2016 debate, the candidates neither acclaimed, attacked nor defended anything; they made nationalistic appeals (cf. Sarfo-Adu, 2018). Extract 10 illustrates how candidates made appeals.

> **Extract 10** (Yeboah, 2016)
> …with regards to the debts already piled up, I think as a nation we need a deliberate policy. Because as at now it will be very difficult for us to say that we really want to have a means of recouping that.... What I think we need to do is, again, for the government to ensure that all the debts that they owe VRA, they pay VRA so that VRA will become more autonomous and be able to invest in it.

As shown in the extract above, Yeboah's discourse was characterised by an appeal (that is, an urgent call or request) to the government to settle the VRA debt in order to make the Volta River Authority (VRA) financially stable. Prior to this request, he had attacked the government's policy of subsidising energy as a major cause of debt at VRA. The communicative purpose of that theme differs significantly from that of Extract 10 because in the latter, the candidate is no longer playing blame games to score political points but rather, as a patriotic individual, helping to bring financial stability to the VRA – which he does by calling on the government of the day to settle the debts. By using the phrase, *we need to*, Yeboah emphasises the need for all stakeholders to come on board to help make Ghana better.

Recommendation

Recommendation is another function that was observed in the debates. The communicative intention of this theme is to propose or suggest a solution to a problem to a third party without openly indicating that one intends to carry it out. In the two presidential debates, some candidates recommended solutions to the incumbent government. The non-partisan candidate, Yeboah, used this strategy twice; Nduom also made a recommendation in the 2016 debate and the fourth recommendation was made by Sakara in the 2012 debate. Extracts 11 and 12 show how the candidates utilised the strategy.

> **Extract 11** (Nduom, 2016)
> …the first thing that you can do and perhaps the only thing you can do in the very short term is to reduce the tax element. If you reduce the tax element, the cost will go down for them. The second thing that you can do is to give them tax incentives, so they can go to solar and other off-grid solutions.

> **Extract 12** (Sakara, 2012)
> …If you want to bring the informal sector into the tax net, you have to do it in smaller amount and use local-based people who know the people they are collecting the tax from. Use associations and peer pressure to collect the small revenues of tax…. Enforce the use of the market.

As illustrated by Extracts 11 and 12, Nduom and Sakara highlighted some interventions that would help solve problems concerning high energy cost and evasion of tax respectively. The candidates, however, distance themselves from the proposed solutions with the use of the pronoun "you". The pronoun "you" can be used as a referential or generic term. As a reference term, it refers to the second person or the addressee. Since the audience or the moderator could

not be the target of these recommendations, the use of "you" in these cases (as well as the other recommendation themes) can be interpreted as generic or indefinite. It can mean that should the candidate win power that is how he would handle the situation; but this is implied, and the audience will have to decode the implicature to better appreciate the intention of the candidate. This corroborates Håkansson's (2012) study which found that the referent of the indefinite or generic "you" is always unclear or ambiguous. It is against this background that these themes are classified as recommendations and not acclaims as the candidates do not clearly suggest that they plan to implement what they have suggested.

Conclusion

This study set out to test the applicability of Benoit's (1999, 2007) functional theory of political campaign discourse in analysing Ghanaian presidential debates. This is because the discourses on the theory's applicability in non-US settings were contradictory and inconclusive. Applying the theory to the 2012 and 2016 Ghanaian presidential debates, the study found that acclaims were dominant, followed by attacks and defences. The predominant use of acclaim messages constitutes positive campaigning. All the seven candidates in the two debates prioritised positive campaign as each of them discussed more positive themes compared to negative and defence themes. This upholds the functional theory which intimates that acclaims are the most frequent function in political campaign messages (Benoit, 1999). However, the claim that incumbents acclaim more than challengers (Benoit et al., 2007) was not confirmed in this study as a challenger used the most acclaims in the 2012 presidential debate, a debate which featured the incumbent candidate. This finding also contradicts Fordjour's (2015) finding that incumbents acclaim more than challengers in Ghanaian political campaign blogs. The study also found that the non-partisan candidate used the least number of acclaim themes in the 2016 presidential debate. This finding has implications for theory as it may contribute to an extension of the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse which has mainly been used to analyse the discourse of political party candidates. Attacks and defences followed acclaims respectively in terms of dominance. The highest number of attacks came from the main challenger in the 2012 debate, followed by the other challengers whereas the incumbent candidate, who was the target of most of the attacks, used the least number of attacks. This also

upholds the position of the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse that challengers attack more than incumbents (Benoit & Sheafer, 2006). As stipulated in the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse, the incumbent used the most defence since he was the most attacked.

Following Benoit's (1995) typology of image repair strategies, the study identified three defensive strategies – denial, evasion of responsibility and reducing offensiveness – that were used by the candidates. Each of the three strategies has variants and the candidates strategically employed the variant that could fit the context: the incumbent demonstrated image repair capabilities as he combined a number of these strategies in a single-themed defence. Since we employed an unconstrained matrix, in accordance with some previous studies that used the functional theory outside the US (Hrbková & Zagrapan, 2014; Paatelainen et al., 2016), two additional discourse functions–appeal and recommendation– were found in the two debates.

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