

# Argumentative and hierarchical dimensions of a broadcast debate sequence : a micro analysis

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MARCEL BURGER\*

## ARGUMENTATIVE AND HIERARCHICAL DIMENSIONS OF A BROADCAST DEBATE SEQUENCE: A MICRO ANALYSIS

Within the theoretical framework of social interactionism, this paper discusses the argumentative and hierarchical properties of a broadcast debate sequence in order to account for the participants strategies used to create a high polemic atmosphere. The data taken under analysis is that of a french broadcast debate involving the well-known right wing political leader Jean-Marie Le Pen. The topic of the debate is absolutely sensitive : “should the politicians and the media debate with right wing organisations, and therefore give media exposure to morally condemned ideologies?” (Tf1 channel, october 1989). Amongst the numerous and various researches and theoretical perspectives dealing with argumentation, this paper focuses on the recent development of the discourse analytical model of Geneva. Allowing a global consideration of “debates” as a discursive genre organized by argumentative and /or polemic sentences, this model also calls for a micro-analysis of discursive strategies in combining a semantic theory of argumentation with pragmatic aspects of argumentation and /or polemic issued from conversation and dialogue analysis. One of the key points is the hypothesis of a hierarchical organization of discourse. In the excerpt under analysis, the paper pays attention to the local and global functioning of verbal markers of argumentation and/or polemic. The hierarchical structure of the excerpt manifests then how the dialogue is organized in order to promote hierarchically salient positive self-images of the current speaker and at the same time negative self-images of the other debater.

*Keywords:* media debates, social stakes, discursive argumentation, self-images, hierarchical dimension of discourse.

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## 1. Introduction

### *1.1. Theoretical framework*

I would like to discuss the argumentative and hierarchical dimensions of the opening of a broadcast political debate. I adopt the theoretical framework of social discourse analysis or social interactionism as termed by Van Dijk (1997: 8), Bronckart (1997: 2) and Roulet (2001: 27). In a broad sense, such a perspective assumes the dialogical, that is the negotiated nature of human practices, and focuses on the role of discourse in the construction of social reality. In this sense, social discourse analysis is properly a communicative approach as it takes into account the real stakes of discourse in the real world.

In this perspective, a media debate is not only an interactive and polemic discursive genre. A media debate also implies a constant concern of the absent audience which represents the actual addressee. A media political debate is then organized by different professional and institutional practices (the media and politics) whose stakes constrain the argumentative dimension of the interaction (Burger in press, Fairclough 1998). I will address these issues in proposing a micro-analysis of a single debate sequence.

### *1.2. Data and problem*

The data used for this analysis is that of a debate broadcast on the French television, channel TF1 in 1989. The topic is : what immigration policy should the french government develop ? In spite of the date of broadcast, which is quite ancient, the debate is of interest because such an issue classically leads to a violent opposition between right-wing and left-wing opinions, and raises a still relevant question : should one debate with right-wing organisations, and therefore give media exposure to morally condemned ideologies ? This particular context is explicitly addressed by the host of the debate because only one politician, Bernard Tapie, has accepted to confront with the leader of the right-wing opposition, Jean-Marie LePen.

- Who are the debaters ?

Bernard Tapie is a well-known business man who is a beginner in politics. He is media conscious as he often appears on the tv screens. As a debater, he speaks in favour of the left-wing government's policy.

Jean-Marie LePen is the leader of the right-wing party Front National. He is regularly criticized and even condemned for xenophobic and anti-semitic talking. But LePen is a telegenic and dreaded debater who attracts a large audience. In the debate, he speaks against the government's policy.

- Who is the Host ?

As for the host of the debate, Patrick Poivre D'Arvor, he is the most popular French Tv newscasters, and he is very experienced in hosting important debates.

- What about the particular context ?

A few days before, LePen did intervene publicly very violently against a socialist minister, Lionel Stoléru, and that's the actual reason pleaded by politicians for not debating with LePen.

- What about the excerpt ?

I will focus on the very beginning of the debate, more precisely the first exchange between the debaters after a media presentation by the host.

2. Excerpt : debate from 8.12.1989, Tfl private channel<sup>1</sup>

- 1 HOST                   there is a question all our guests will agree and you as well television viewers (.) it is (.) today (.) the heated discussion the burning question within our frontiers (.) it is the debate on immigration and social integration (.) <....> that is why we spoke to all the parties which are represented in Parliament and we got a chain of refusals <....> but we said that we wanted a debate even so, and we've found some men who will debate (.) it is the first time that they will confront themselves (.) Jean-Marie LePen who said yes (.) and Bernard Tapie who said yes (.) so you're a deputy counting on the socialist support (.) tell us why did you say yes (.) you
- 5
- 11 DEBATER T       Yes I count on the presidential majority (.) before explaining why I said yes it must be said why the other say no (.) <....> on the content

<sup>1</sup> See the Appendix for the French original text. I use the following transcription notations: (.) (..) indicate appropriately timed pauses; underlining indicates overlapping talk; <....> indicate that a fragment of text has been cut; and material in [square brackets] indicates transcriber's commentary regarding non-verbal events. The numbers in the margin indicate each line of the transcribed text, and informations like "host" or "debater" refer to the current speaker's identity.

- I think that a debate has to be accepted and that one needs actually to come across all those who support conflicting ideas (.) but (.) after then (.) there is the form (.) it is very questionable (.) it is very questionable because in general (.) and I am not the one who licks the politicians' boots (.) even so they are people who are well-mannered (.) they are people who restrain themselves and facing a debater like Jean-Marie LePen who is incredibly talented to make it believe that the moon is made of green cheese it is true that (.) from time to time they are floored and I have a recent example (.) and I tell him to his face calmly (..) Me if I am Stoleru Jew who has suffered in his family then I read him the Riot Act the night when he said what he said I forget all the political consequences and my image
- 17 DEBATER LP what did I say Mister Tapie can you tell me
- DEBATER T you have asked what nationality he was
- 22 DEBATER LP no mister Tapie (.) you did not see the program (.) you are like the politicians you have been hooked
- DEBATER T I did see it (.) someone gave it to me (.) you said (...) are you a double nationality
- DEBATER LP yes
- 32 DEBATER T implying are you jewish and french
- DEBATER LP no
- DEBATER T implying it is a nationality
- DEBATER LP no no it is mister Bouret who asked that
- DEBATER T but if I am Stoleru (.) and Stoleru I know him very well he was left speechless (..) then there is no more debate
- 37 DEBATER LP it is not the first time mister Tapie that you might strike someone in a debate (.) we know it (.) one could have seen you at the Olympique Marseille
- HOST I leave you the floor in two minutes
- DEBATER T from then on the content they are wrong (.) on the form one cannot (.) one cannot and he still gives evidence you allowed a speech time to both of us he is already encroaching on mine (.) the difference is that if he exceeds the limits that I have fixed to myself (.) me I won't become like Stoleru <...> so this is why I have accepted (.) I have accepted because it is thanks to him that I am in politics
- 43
- 47

### 3. Media debates as a social practice

#### 3.1. *The contextual properties of media debates.*

A media debate constitutes a “multiple activity” (as termed by Jacobs 1999: 22), because it involves at the same time two different interactional frames with distinct participants and distinct goals, as shown on figure 1:

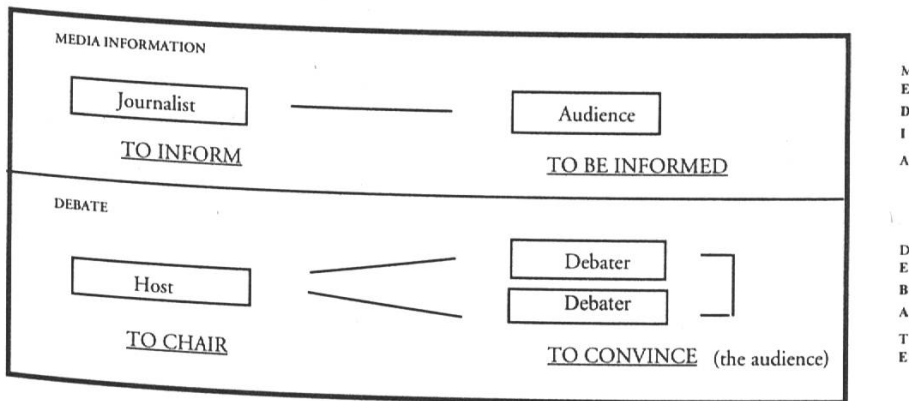


Figure 1: *the complexity of media debates*

We can identify a “talk with”<sup>2</sup> relation, meant by the double-arrow line, between a participant which I term “host” and at least two participants which I term “debaters”. The latter are engaged in an activity aimed at the convincing of an audience, when the former is engaged in the chairing of the interaction. But concurrently, a media debate obviously engages a one-way relation, meant by the single-arrow line, between a participant which I term “journalist” and his collective audience with the aim of informing about relevant facts and opinions of public interest.

One cannot detail the properties of each interactional frame (see Burger 2004). Nevertheless an appropriate analysis of our debate sequence calls for a brief description of the social stakes whose frames manifest.

- The stakes of media information

It is commonly assumed that media information is a social practice under paradoxical constraints<sup>3</sup>. On the one hand, media information has a civic

<sup>2</sup> For a relevant description of the classical distinction “talk with” versus “talk for”, see Jucker (1995).

<sup>3</sup> See Livingstone & Lunt (1994) and Charaudeau (1997).

function consisting in informing about the ongoing of the public sphere. Therefore the media address an audience of citizens and the stake is to participate in the constructing of the public opinion. On the other hand, the media are more or less important enterprises doing business in selling information. In this view, media information is directed as a priority to buyers and the stake is to win the loyalty of customers.

One can observe that the practice of media information is manifested in the opening of the excerpt. On the one hand, the host explicitly underlines a civic function of the media, namely to give a voice to all relevant parties engaged in the public sphere, to report the confronting of opinions, and to addressing an audience of citizens. On the other hand, in referring to an extraordinary situation, the host emphasizes the importance of the debate, and manifests therefore an economic concern: to sell a show to an audience of customers.

- The stakes of debates

A debate consists fundamentally in the confronting of opinions representing different ways of thinking in the public sphere. As the aim of a debate is to convince an audience, it is always concerned with giving evidence of a social problem. Therefore, the process of debating implies a multiplicity of voices arguing against each other and expressing a certain degree of discursive expertise. That's why a debate also requires a chairman. In this view, debating symbolizes the negotiation of opinions that constitutes the very core of citizenship and democracy, and that is the reason why a debate process achieves best the civic function of the media. But the properties of debating also serve the economic function of the media. Indeed, a debate in itself is a verbal confrontation that leads very often to a polemic, and constitutes therefore a spectacular event. In organizing debates, the media become then the creator of the broadcasting of an interactive and virtually entertaining show.

Our debate manifests both the civic and the commercial dimension. The media consciousness of the two invited debaters as well as the sensitive topic of the debate constitute typical clues of such a mixed concern. In our excerpt, the debaters perform a strategy of negative other-presentation and positive self-presentation and define themselves as individuals to give evidence of the social problem at the core of the debate.

Thus, schematically said, the practice of media information and the practice of debate are distinguishable social practices constituting the



contextual features which constrain the discourse, and explain the guideline followed by the participants.

### 3.2. *The structural properties of media debates*

Our excerpt shows typical structural properties of what I term a “media debate sequence” (see Burger 2004). One can identify three delimited phases organizing the interaction : a phase of “requesting an opinion” (I), followed by a phase of “direct confrontation” (II) and concluded by a phase of “stabilization of the opinion” (III).

#### PHASE I : REQUESTING AN OPINION

HOST <...>the burning question within our frontiers (.) it is the debate on immigration and social integration (.) <...> Jean-Marie LePen who said yes (.) and Bernard Tapie who said yes (.) so you're a deputy counting on the socialist support (.) tell us why did you say yes (.) you

DEBATER T <...>on the content I think that a debate has to be accepted and that one needs actually to come across all those who support conflicting ideas (.) but (.) after then (.) there is the form (.) it is very questionable (.) facing a debater like Jean-Marie LePen Me <...> but I read him the Riot Act the night when he said what he said I forget all the political consequences and my image

#### PHASE II : DIRECT CONFRONTATION OF OPINIONS

DEBATER LP what did I say Mister Tapie can you tell me

DEBATER T you have asked what nationality he was

DEBATER LP no mister Tapie (.) you did not see the program

<...>

DEBATER T I did see it (.) you said (...) are you a double nationality

DEBATER LP yes

DEBATER T implying are you jewish and french

DEBATER LP no <...>

HOST I leave you the floor in two minutes



### PHASE III : STABILIZING OF THE OPINION

DEBATER T if he exceeds the limits that I have fixed to myself (.) me  
 I won't become like Stoleru <...> so this is why I have  
 accepted (.) I have accepted because it is thanks to him  
 that I am in politics

*Figure 2 : the three phases of a debate sequence*

- The first phase engages together the host and one of the debaters. The host exposes a social issue to discuss and requests the opinion of a debater. Such a phase comprises typical discursive clues. For instance, markers that select a debater and encourage to talk (see line 9): *“tell us why did you say yes”*.
- The second phase of direct confrontation of the opinions engages two debaters together. More precisely, the first debater is interrupted by another one, which leads to a highly polemic exchange often to the detriment of the reasoning. Such a second phase of a debate sequence comprises another set of discursive clues. For example, the markers of an opposition at the very beginning of each turn taking: *“no” “yes” “no no”* (lines 27 to 35); and of course, the overlapping talk which is a sign of an interactive conflict (see lines 25 to 41).
- As for the final phase of a debate sequence, it can be characterized as a return back to the expression of the first debater. It involves again a debater and the host, once the polemic has been stopped, and that's why I term this phase *“stabilizing of an opinion”*. One can argue that this phase constitutes the conclusion of the reasoning, marked in our excerpt by the explicit reference to the host's request. See line 46 : *“this is why I have accepted”*.

#### 4. Argumentation and persuasion in media debates

These are the oversimplified properties of a media debate considered as a complex social practice and as a sequence of text (see Burger 2004; Burger in press, for more details). To deal with the issue of persuasion and argumentation implies to bear in mind these properties.

As the aim of a debate is to bring the audience to subscribe (or to reject), the debaters always anchor their discourse in a controversial social reality. Therefore, discourse is supporting a particular group or organization and sets them up against another group or organization. In this broad sense, a media debate fundamentally resorts to persuasion and argumentation.

#### 4.1. *The communicative dimension of argumentation*

Amongst the numerous perspectives dealing with argumentation, I refer first to the communicative perspective by Breton (1996) and then to the semantics of argumentation by Ducrot (1980) and Anscombe & Ducrot (1983). According to Breton (1996: 5): “argumentation is a means to persuade by the implementation of a reasoning in a particular communicative setting”.

An “argumentation” implies to discuss opinions. It has therefore nothing to do with a scientific demonstration nor propaganda or seduction which constitute other means to convince an audience but without a discursive negotiation, as shown on figure 3 taken from Breton (1996).

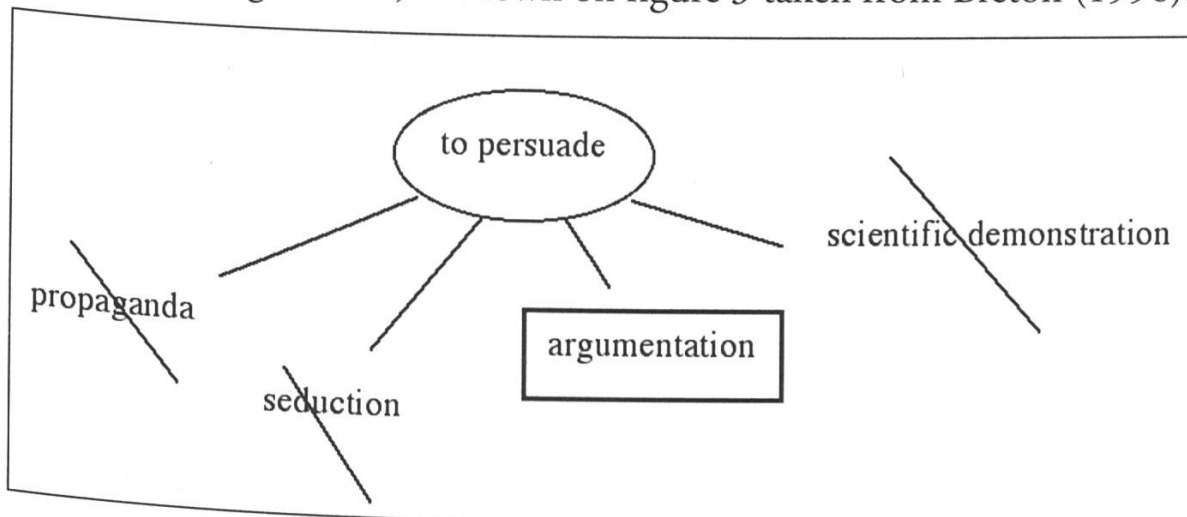


Figure 3: *argumentation, persuasion and communication*

Considering the contextual properties of media debates, one can argue that our sequence globally resorts to argumentation in the sense of Breton. The fact is, the debaters face each other after their opinion having been solicited, and even if both of them do not develop actually a strong reasoning, they are nevertheless engaged in a discursive negotiation focused on self-images. In this sense, the solicited debater (Tapie) manifests a strategy of addressing indirectly the absent audience of television viewers with the aim of persuade it to give support exploiting the apparently disrespectful acting of the other debater (LePen).

#### 4.2. *The semantic dimension of argumentation*

One can detail what is at stake in this sequence in taking into account the argumentative dimension of verbal units. Following Plantin, in a rhetori-

cal perspective, “two sentences S1 and S2, have a argumentative dimension if we can paraphrase their link as: “Sentence 1 legitimates, justifies, allows to believe, or to say, or to think Sentence 2” (Plantin 1996:14, my translation). More generally, when referring to Ducrot (1980: 12-48) and Anscombe & Ducrot (1983: 8-15), a sentence S1 is an argument if it constitutes a reason for Sentence 2 which is the end or the conclusion of the reasoning (Anscombe & Ducrot 1983). As an example, the lines 42 to 44 realize such an argumentative relation. In fact, in our sequence, the host clearly requests an explanation from the debater Tapie, as marked on line 9: “why did you say yes”. In this sense, the answer of Tapie globally functions as an argument, in the sense of Anscombe & Ducrot, for it could be prefaced by the text relation marker *because*.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.3. Structure of argumentation

One can synthesize the structure of the argumentative dimension of the whole sequence on a diagram indicating who is the current speaker, the phase during which the discourse is produced, and the status of the discourse: argument or conclusion:

<u>speaker</u>	<u>when</u>	<u>argumentative function</u>	<u>text</u>
HOST	phase 1 (lines 1-9)	= S0 argumentative preface = S2 conclusion (thus)	<i>we got a chain of refusals tell us why did you say yes</i>
DEB. T	phase 1 (lines 10-22)	= S2 implicit conclusion = <b>S1 argument (because)</b> .	<i>(I said yes) (I am not like the others) I read him the Riot Act and forget the political consequences</i>
	phase 2	reasoning apparently interrupted	
	phase 3	=S1 argument (because)	<i>if he exceeds the limits, that have fixed to myself me I won't become like Stoléru</i>
		= S2 explicit conclusion	<i>This is why I have accepted</i>

Figure 4 : argumentation and the three phases of a debate sequence

<sup>4</sup> In Ducrot (1980) and Anscombe & Ducrot (1983)'s perspective, an “explanation” constitutes an argument for a conclusion.

In the first phase, the host produces a prefatory statement before requesting the debater : therefore Tapie's answer is linked to the host's conclusion S2 ("why did you say yes": line 9-10). Then, the debater formulates twice the same argument S1 (**bold type**), which could be introduced by *because*:

- the first time, at the beginning of his turn taking during phase one (see lines 11 to 24) : (because) "I read him the Riot Act and forget the political consequences".
- And then, during phase 3, after the phase of direct confrontation has been stopped : (because) "if he exceeds the limits I won't become like Stoléru", followed by the explicit conclusion S2 : "this is why I have accepted" (lines 44 to 46)

As for the second phase of the sequence, the debaters confront directly which implies that the expression of the reasoning of Tapie is apparently and temporarily interrupted. In this sense, the sentences produced during phase 2 are not properly speaking argumentatively linked. They nevertheless play a role in the global argumentative functioning.

#### 4.4. *Negative other-presentation and positive self-presentation*

Indeed, one have to recall what is at stake in this sequence. Tapie clearly bases his explanatory argument on repeatedly expressed self and other-images. That is, in Tapie's discourse Le Pen is verbally manifested as a violent and disrespectful debater, who frightens most of the politicians. As for himself, Tapie produces a more implicit image: the one of a debater who is less well-mannered and do not hesitate to read the opponent the Riot Act, as he puts it.

Such a typical strategy is aimed at making LePen react in initiating a phase of direct confrontation, which is successfully achieved (see the lines 25 to 40). In this sense, one can argue that Tapie wants LePen to perform literally according to the verbal characterization made in phase 1. Thus, LePen's acting constitutes a kind of prove as it validates or legitimates Tapie's argument (see Martel 2000).

#### 5. The hierarchical dimension of the sequence

One can detail this state of affair in taking into account the hierarchical dimension of the sequence. In the perspective of the Geneva Model of Discourse Analysis, a "text structure is based on the hypothesis that the

construction of any verbal interaction or written text reflects a process of negotiation in which speakers/writers recursively initiate, react on, or ratify propositions by means of text constituents belonging to various hierarchical levels” (Roulet, forthcoming: 7).

In this framework, an “exchange” (symbolized by the capital letter E) constitutes the largest text unit reflecting a dialogical result, that is a complete communicative slot, as for example in our sequence, the request of the host followed by a developed answer of debater Tapie. We call “move” (symbolized by the capital letter M) these verbal units endowed with an illocutionary force.

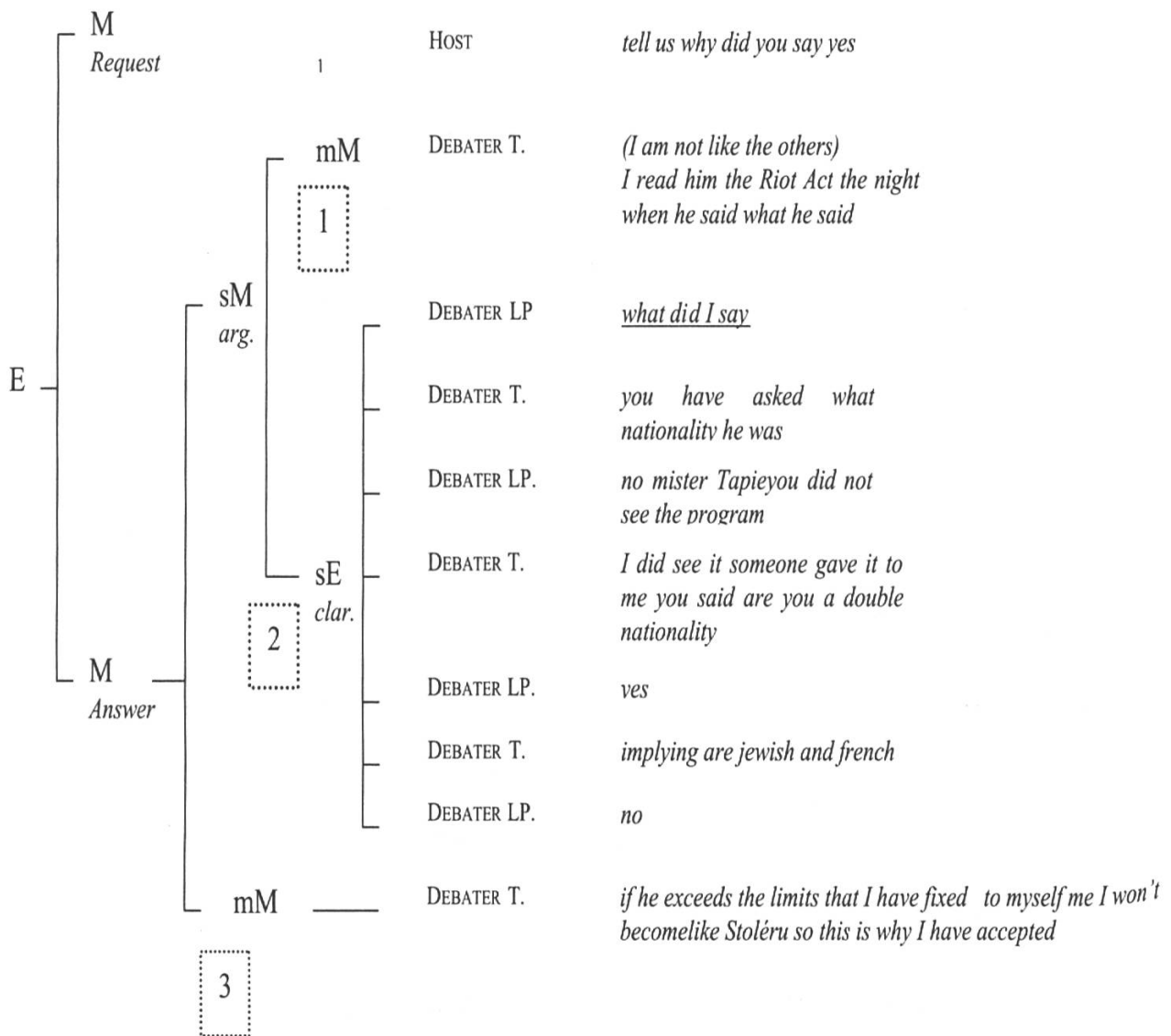


Figure 5: the hierarchical structure of the debate sequence

One can observe that Tapie's answer is a complex text unit. As it is strategically organized to present LePen as a disrespectful debater, one can argue that the quite long polemic exchange with LePen is a part of Tapie's answering process. In this sense, the answer comprises three clearly delimited constituents : namely the two similar arguments formulated step by step respectively at the beginning and at the end of the move, and the literally enclosed polemic exchange.

Following Roulet et al. (2001), a hierarchical structure shows, on the one hand, how the process of negotiation is realized by text units. On the other hand, these text constituents acquire a main or secondary status which manifests their probable cognitive prominence for the speakers.

In our sequence, the polemic exchange clearly functions as a meta-communicative unit which could be deleted without distorting the global content. It is therefore a secondary exchange, linked as a clarification unit to the main move provided by Tapie. Thus, these two constituents are secondary to the ultimate formulation of the argument and the conclusion by Tapie.

Considering the foregoing, one can observe that all the negative other-presentation contents are produced in a salient hierarchical position. Thus, they manifest best that Tapie is first trying to provoke a reaction. Then, the polemic exchange not only legitimates the ultimate main constituent (that is the second argument and the conclusion which express rather positive self-images of Tapie), but it also proves that Tapie is capable to impose both a positive self- and a negative other-presentation.

## 6. Concluding comments

As a conclusion, what comes out of this paper is that the argumentative dimension of a discourse is necessarily framed by a particular type of communicative event : in our case, a media debate. Indeed, all media debates manifest an organization of sequences of three phases in which the process of argumentation is differently realised. Globally, as they address an absent audience, the debaters typically follow a guideline consisting in providing negative other-presentation and positive self-presentation. In this sense, the discursive construction of two schematic and opposite "ethos" functions together with the discursive construction of an argumentative "logos" which is not clearly manifest, in our case, at the level of the first debate sequence but needs to be characterized on a macro level, that is in taking into account several sequences of the debate.



One can nevertheless argue that the strategy of negative other-presentation and positive self-presentation resorts to the issue of argumentation for it is globally aimed at convincing on the basis of a discursive negotiation. In other words, an argumentation is step by step and interactively achieved. In this respect, one should not only provide a global content analysis in order to give evidence of a particular strategy, but also develop a micro-analysis which underlines the hierarchical position of arguments, that is the local cognitive prominence of the argumentative dimension of text units.

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## Appendix

French (original) text of the debate sequence

RÉGULATEUR il est bien un sujet sur lequel tous nos invités seront d'accord et vous-même qui nous regardez (.) c'est que (.) aujourd'hui (.) le débat le plus chaud le sujet le plus brûlant sur l'actualité à l'intérieur de nos frontières (.) c'est bien le débat sur l'immigration et sur l'intégration <...> nous nous sommes donc adressés à tous les partis qui ont une représentation parlementaire en France et on a eu une cascade de refus <...> mais nous on a dit qu'on voulait qu'il y ait quand même un débat et on a trouvé des hommes pour débattre entre eux (.) c'est la première fois qu'ils vont se retrouver face à face (.) tous les deux face à face (.) Jean-Marie LePen qui nous a dit oui (.) et Bernard Tapie qui nous a dit oui (.) Alors Bernard Tapie (.) vous êtes député apparenté socialiste (.) dites-moi pourquoi vous avez dit oui (.) vous ?

- DÉBATTANT T Je suis apparenté majorité présidentielle (.) avant de dire pourquoi j'ai dit oui il faut dire pourquoi les autres disent non <...> sur le fond je crois que sur le fond il faut accepter de débattre et il faut effectivement rencontrer tous ceux qui ont des idées-qui sont contraires aux siennes (.) par contre (.) après (.)il y a la forme (.) là elle est très discutable (.) elle est discutable parce que en général (.) et je ne suis pas celui qui cire les pompes de la classe politique (.) ce sont quand même des gens bien élevés (.) ce sont quand même des gens qui ont une retenue et face à un débattant comme Jean-Marie LePen qui a un talent incroyable pour faire prendre des vessies pour des lanternes c'est vrai que (.) de temps en temps ils [les politiciens] sont désarçonnés et j'ai un exemple récent (...) et je lui dis en face calmement (..) moi si je suis Stoléru juif que j'ai souffert dans ma famille je lui rentre dedans le soir où il a dit ce qu'il a dit j'oublie les conséquences politiques et mon image
- DÉBATTANT LP qu'est-ce que j'ai dit Monsieur Tapie vous pouvez me le dire
- DÉBATTANT T vous avez demandé de quelle nationalité il était
- DÉBATTANT LP non Monsieur Tapie (.) vous n'avez pas vu l'émission
- DÉBATTANT T je l'ai vue (.) je me la suis fait passer (.) vous avez dit (...) est-ce que vous êtes de double nationalité [ LePen: vous êtes comme les hommes politiques vous avez pris le virus déjà (...)]
- DÉBATTANT LP oui
- DÉBATTANT T sous-entendu est-ce que vous êtes juif et français
- DÉBATTANT LP non
- DÉBATTANT T sous-entendu c'est une nationalité
- DÉBATTANT LP non non ça c'est monsieur Bouret qui a posé cette
- DÉBATTANT T mais si je suis Stoléru (.) et le Stoléru je le connais bien il est resté coi (..) il n'y a plus de débat
- DÉBATTANT LP mais ce n'est pas la première fois monsieur Tapie que vous auriez frappé quelqu'un dans un débat (..) on le sait (.) on vous a vu à L'OM de Marseille
- RÉGULATEUR je vous donne la parole dans deux minutes
- DÉBATTANT T à partir de ce moment-là sur le fond ils ont tort (.) sur la forme on ne peut pas (.) on peut pas et il en donne encore une fois la preuve vous avez donné un temps de parole à chacun il commence déjà à empiéter sur le mien (.) la différence c'est que si à un moment il dépasse la limite que moi je me suis fixée (.) moi je ne deviens pas comme Stoléru (.) je ne deviens pas blanc et je ne deviens pas ko (.) donc voilà pour répondre (.) donc voilà pourquoi moi j'ai accepté (.) j'ai accepté car c'est grâce à lui si je fais de la politique (.)