

Exploring 'The Past' in French Identity-Politics Discourse

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ABSTRACT

People may notice that the speeches of Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen in their presidential campaigns, in terms of their quality, were different from those of other presidential candidates. They use particular discursive strategies to promote their own political interests, with historical references easing audiences' understanding of their political discourses and contributing to their image and identity. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate how these presidential candidates used historical references to convey their intent and promote their platforms. This investigation, which is conducted on Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen's speeches, is done through discourse analysis approach in order to discover the candidates' interactional strategies reflecting the relationship between discursive situations when the speeches were delivered and their verbal acts. The candidates' speeches are compiled into a lexicographic, textual corpus. The data is extracted using qualitative data software NVIVO and analyzed using Van Dijk's discourse analysis theory. The findings show that historical references support the process of interactional communication, and they hold the power of symbols. This study should contribute to discourse studies that attempt to understand the relevance of the use of language to the construction strategy of political discourse.

Keywords: *Political discourse, presidential campaign, historical references, interactional strategies, national identity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Historical references are commonly used in political discourses around the world, including those developed during presidential campaigns. Such practices were seen in the 2017 French presidential debates, during which the candidates Emmanuel Macron (henceforth EM) and Marine Le Pen (henceforth MLP) utilized historical references to convey their intent and promote their platforms. Take, for example, EM, a presidential candidate backed by the liberal *La République en Marche!* (LaRem) Party, during his 2016–2017 campaign, he drew on French perceptions of Joan of Arc and her troops' heroic campaigns against the British, intending not only to describe her services to the French people but also to imply that her patriotism should be maintained (Macron, 2016). In other words, by using the historical memory of Joan of Arc, EM implied that France should be led by a person who embodied such

values of patriotism. Furthermore, he used this historic narrative to promote his concept of national identity, as embodied within his phrase *identité ouverte et généreuse* ('an open and generous identity'). MLP—a candidate backed by the National Front (FN)—similarly made references to Joan of Arc and her legacy (Pen, 2016). MLP sought to explicitly identify FN with the moral values of Joan of Arc, whom it had taken as a symbol and regularly commemorated on her feast day.

It may be seen that historical references are used strategically in speakers' construction of discourses. During presidential campaigns, speakers (i.e. candidates) must use rhetoric to draw the interest and sympathy of new voters while simultaneously retaining the loyalty of existing voters (Baider & Constantinou, 2015; Davidson, 2018; Ray & Singh, 2017). Words, thus, have significant power in the creation of political discourses (Žúborová &

Borárosová, 2017). The discursive strategies used by MLP in her political speeches have been examined by Stockemer and Barisione (2017) in their “The ‘New’ Discourse of the Front National under Marine Le Pen: A Slight Change with a Big Impact”. They find that MLP and FN had created an effective new political discourse by reframing immigration using populist tactics and rhetoric that are more readily ‘accepted’ by their audiences, including historical chauvinism, charismatic leadership, anti-elitism, simplicity, and appeals to emotion. Similarly, in “Immigration and the Revival of Nationalist Sentiments in France: A Nationalistic Rhetoric of Marine Le Pen”, Atabong (2018) has explored how France’s immigration crisis and its economic, political, and socio-cultural effects, as well as how it affected MLP’s political rhetoric. Atabong (2018) argues that MLP has discursively framed the immigration crisis as resulting from globalization and presented herself as the only candidate capable of defending the interests of the French people. From such studies, we may conclude that presidential candidates use particular discursive strategies to promote their own political interests, with historical references easing audiences’ understanding of their political discourses and contributing to their public image.

However, both above-mentioned studies limit their explorations to MLP’s rhetoric within the context of immigration. This is problematic, as EM and MLP have discussed more than immigration in their political discourses and rhetoric; they have also espoused understandings of national identity. A brief review of speeches by EM and MLP show that both candidates attempted to discursively construct their own versions of French national identity; thus, this study attempts to answer the following questions: how EM and MLP use historical references in their speech construction?

2. METHOD

As the first stage of this study, data were collected by reviewing the corpus of the political speeches delivered by the two presidential candidates with the goal of identifying the context of their utterances and the correlation between said utterances and reality. Specific linguistic references to history and national identity were recognized through two means. First, lexical tables were created using the concordance program NVIVO to determine the frequency of specific linguistic elements; this software was selected because it enabled the researcher to rapidly and readily identify the lexicon and themes. From the lexical tables produced through this software, analytical tables were created to determine such

elements as lexical frequency and variation (including context). These analytical tables were then elucidated and interpreted. Second, from the modules created through the first stage, the utterances and communicative strategies used by candidates in their political speeches were analyzed. Particular focus was given to the lexical variation and utterances that candidates used to discursively construct national identity; these were analyzed using critical discourse analysis.

The lexicon and expressions identified through NVIVO were used as data that were analyzed using the model suggested by Van Dijk (2006) to determine their ideological content and structure. To determine the ideological content and structure underlying candidates’ expressions, an ideological scheme was created using such basic categories as social identity, activity, goals, norms, and values (with a particular focus on political parties). In its analysis, this study considered both the production side of discourse—the speakers (i.e. candidates)—and the consumption side of discourse—i.e. audiences.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Temporal Framework and Discursive Situations

History as a concept has been intensively discussed by philosophers. According to Delaperrière (2002), history as a social science began with Nietzscheanism, a periodization of modern and contemporary philosophy that resulted in the rise of phenomenology and ultimately linguistics. Delaperrière (2002) questions this concept of ‘concrete reality’: did events truly happen in the past? Are events ‘real’? For Ricœur (1983), ‘reality’ is informed strongly by individual memory, and thus shaped by various interpretations. However, for Ricœur (1983), individual experiences are not history in and of themselves; they only gain historic significance if they are expressed, either by the individuals themselves or through others (Delaperrière, 2002). History is also closely linked to temporal distance, that which separates the individuals who tell or retell events from those who receive these narratives. Recipients of historical narratives, meanwhile, must understand themselves and their identities from a historical perspective (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

Temporally, this study applies two perspectives to understand specific textual and discursive contexts. It assumes that discursive analysis of political speeches must recognize three discursive frameworks. The first,

the ‘present’ temporal framework, refers to the time at which the discourse was expressed. The second, the ‘past’ temporal framework, refers to facts or events that occurred before the discourse. The third, the ‘future’ framework, refers to discursive descriptions of activities that are planned for the future (Kaempfer & Micheli, 2005; Neiger & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2016).

The ‘past’ temporal framework, meanwhile, is commonly used by speakers to consolidate their image and identity. The ‘past’ strengthens their arguments and their assertions of their identities, and functions to convey a particular personal identity and character. Finally, the ‘future’ temporal framework is used within two relevant theoretical contexts: the descriptive and the interpretative. Within a descriptive context, speakers may selective particular stimuli and discursive actions that direct the mind to the desired discursive goal. Meanwhile, within an interpretative context, the “future” is characterized by its emphasis on probability. As such, the ‘future’ is given a temporal value, one that can be perceived pragmatically even when it is not marked linguistically. Such a framework is utilized in political speeches when it representatively reflects the image and experiences of the speaker (Auchlin, Filliettaz, Grobet, & Simon, 2004; Maingueneau, 2014).

This framework is not enough on its own. This study examines the imagination of national identity promoted by presidential candidates; as such, it must also define the concept of national identity based on existing scholarly works, as well as the link between national identity and nationalism. This is provided below

3.2 Identity Politics and Social Processes

The French distinguish between nationalism and national movement, with the former being understood as an ideology and the latter being defined as an expression of collective beliefs. When combined, nationalism, history, and social sentiments present a strong political force, one whose context and conditions are determined and guided by social processes. It is through such social processes, including cultural symbols, that nationalist ideologies are spread (Atabong, 2018; Ray & Singh, 2017; Unterreiner, 2015).

In later writings, Smith (1998) distinguished between nation, nationalism, and national identity. He understood nationalism as an ideological phenomenon, one including particular ideas and concepts, which must be adhered by all members of a community and thus is

created and spread to attain and maintain hegemony. Nationalist ideologies are not ‘given’, but rather created and expressed through political forms. As such, national movements are manifestations of political power, which are supported by their particular social, economic, and cultural characteristics. National identity, meanwhile, is a political expression of the individual, an objective reality rather than one determined by other social identities (Malešević, 2011; Unterreiner, 2015). How have concepts of national identity been incorporated into French presidential campaigns? This question will be answered below.

3.3 Conceptualizing National Identity in French Presidential Campaign

Within the context of the French situation and condition between 2007 and 2017, these political platforms and phrases indicate that the question of French identity remained widely discussed and debated (Desintox, 2017; Raoult, 2017). The candidates’ opposed ideologies significantly influenced their individual discourses. EM was identified as a leftist, a progressive who rejected xenophobia, populism, authoritarianism, reactionary-ism, right-wing extremism, and left-wing conservatism (Weber, 2017). Meanwhile, MLP was a rightist who presented herself as a defender of secularism and the integrity of the French republic. MLP sought to restore the “Christian values” that had been lost in the French Revolution. She argued that the practice of secularism had deviated from its principles, using this to legitimize her anti-immigration politics (Firmonasari, Udasmoro, & Mastoyo, 2020).

The disparate ideologies of the two candidates had significant implications for their political discourses. During a speech delivered in Orléans on May 8, 2016, in commemoration of Joan of Arc, EM used terms such as *identité française* ‘French identity’, *identité fixe* ‘fixed identity’, and *notre France* ‘our France’ several times. EM argued that the French people should embrace the patriotic values embodied by their national heroine, who had fought as the French were creating a dignified and just national identity, who had gone to war when all of the French people took pride in their nation (Ravinel, 2016).

Meanwhile, in her 2017 presidential campaign, MLP linked the concept of French national identity with ‘sovereignty’. Take, for example, a statement she made during the Festival of Fréjus on September 18, 2016, ‘there would be no France without identity, and there would be no identity without sovereignty’ (Sulzer, 2016).

She generally framed such a concept of identity through the French motto *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* ('Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity'), understanding the motto as guaranteeing that the French Republic would avoid the feudal discrimination that had subjugated its people in the past (Udasmoro, 2010). This slogan was also understood within the context of FN's ideology, a blend of neo-fascism, conservatism, counter-revolutionism, and populism. In the above statement, the French motto is inferred through the terms 'sovereignty', 'people', and 'democracy', all of which MLP understood as constituent elements of the French national identity (Almeida, 2017; Bastow, 2018). From the above examples, it may be seen that EM and MLP used different communication strategies during their presidential campaigns. Both, however, incorporated historical references. How did they use these references to construct and assert their own visions of national identity during the election?

3.4 A Quantitative Comparison of Historical References in The Political Discourse of EM and MLP

Table 1. Historical references in EM political discourses

No	Subject of Speech	Total (%)
1	'Joan of Arc is part of our [French] history' in Orléans	12,27%
2	Presidential inauguration speech at the Louvre	7,76%
3	Speech about the department's entry into the French Republic in Mayotte	3,21%
4	First presidential campaign speech in Mutualité Paris	1,13%

Table 2. Historical references in MLP political discourses

No	Subject of Speech	Total (%)
1	'France, World Civilization in the 21st Century' in Paris	5,08%
2	Victory speech after winning the first-round of presidential election	3,94%
3	Speech about journalists who had been killed around the world at a press conference in 2017	2,21%
4	Speech about Joan of Arc and her heroic fight at the meeting of patriots in Paris	0,29%

As seen in Table 1, the political discourses of EM and MLP contained many historic references. These may be broken down quantitatively as follows:

His Orleans speech, delivered on May 8, 2016, contained significantly more historical references (12, 27%) than his other speeches; this can be readily understood, as the speech was delivered in commemoration of Joan of Arc (a French heroine and Catholic saint). Emphasizing that 'Joan of Arc is part of our [French] history', EM explored in detail the heroism exemplified by the French national heroine, highlighting such values as justice, nationalism, and unity and describing these values as being integral to the French Republic and as inexorable elements of the French national identity. Building on his references to Joan of Arc, EM also underscored that her values had been embraced by such respected figures as Jules Michelet (the French historian who introduced the term Renaissance), Jean Jaures (the founder of the Socialist Party), Léon Gambetta (a leader of the Opportunist Republicans), and Charles Peguy (a socialist patriot).

In his inaugural speech, EM made multiple historical references (7,76%), often invoking previous French presidents: Charles De Gaulle, who helped France recover from World War II; Georges Pompidou, who strengthened France's industries; Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who brought France into the modern era; François Mitterand, who reconciliated the French and European dreams; Jacques Chirac, who showed France was able "to say no to those rushing to war"; Nicolas Sarkozy, who overcame the financial crisis, and François Hollande, who brought about the Paris Climate Warming agreement and protected the French people from terrorism. Meanwhile, in his Mayotte speech, EM's historical references (3, 21%) dealt predominantly with the department's entry into the French Republic. His speech at Mutualité Paris, finally, contained relatively few historical references (1, 13%). As this was EM's first campaign speech, he focused predominantly on his campaign promises and projects, using historical references solely to identify heroes who had transformed France.

Meanwhile, the historical references in MLP's speeches can be understood through Table 2.

From Table 2, the Paris speech had the most historical references (5,08%). She explained her understanding of French ideology and civilization 'All humans are born free and equal. France is a civilization of liberty and

reason' and followed this statement with a brief review of France's role in the development of global civilization. She mentioned several historical figures, including Jacques Cartier (the French explorer who discovered Canada), René Descartes (the French philosopher whose thoughts influenced Queen Christina of Sweden), Voltaire (the French philosopher whose thoughts influenced King Frédéric of Prussia), and Denis Diderot (the French philosopher who was invited to Russia by Queen Catherine II). She identified these philosophers as men who recognized the importance of liberty and equality.

Meanwhile, during her victory speech following her first-round victory, MLP made multiple historical references (3, 94%). Citing de Gaulle, she stated that 'the greatness of a people is derived from great people' and argued that this principle had been embraced by the French people for more than 1500 years. Meanwhile, during her 2017 press conference speech, MLP's historical references (2, 21%) were used predominantly to convey her respect for journalists who had been killed around the world. Finally, during her speech at the meeting of patriots in Paris, MLP made historical references (0, 29%) to Joan of Arc and her heroic fight against the British.

This quantitative analysis of speeches by EM and MLP show that the former used historical references more frequently than the latter. EM, a candidate from the center left LaRem, referred to historical figures and heroes with various political leanings, including socialists and republicans. This indicates that EM attempted to embrace all elements of French society, i.e. to reach voters from various political backgrounds. Conversely, MLP—the leader of FN, widely identified as part of the extreme right—focused predominantly on figures who had promoted the values of liberty and equality that was venerated by her party.

Having identified the percentage of historical references in the candidates' political discourse, the following section will explore how these references function to structure discourse, as well as candidates' reason for using these references within specific socio-political contexts and audiences' reactions to them.

3.5 The Function of Historical References

"Historical" utterances can be understood as utterances that refer to historical events and stories that are understood by audiences. These utterances are made with an intent, with a particular goal. To realize their discursive

goals, candidates must utilize three principles of communication: ethos (personal character), pathos (personal emotions), and logos (argumentative ability); this is also true when historical references are made. Analysis of speeches delivered by EM and MLP shows that historical references are intended:

First, historical references are tools for advocating arguments that are specific to the speaker (presidential candidate). For example, in the sentence 'The desire for justice, the energy of the people, and triptychs of Joan of Arc, all of these unite our republic. They are the binds that tie us to Joan, through Michelet, Jaures, Gambetta, and Péguy; theirs is the republican spirit', EM used historical references to construct a national identity that foregrounded justice, social unity, and togetherness. EM referenced Joan of Arc, Jules Michelet, Jean Jaures, Léon Gambetta, and Charles Péguy, all of whom he implied were respected socialists and republicans. With these historical references, EM sought to capitalize on knowledge that he expected most French people to share. The greater an audience's understanding of a discourse, the easier it is for the speaker (in this case, EM) to achieve the desired effect: to communicate a specific concept of national identity while drawing the attention and support of voters.

MLP likewise used historical references to support her arguments; in fact, she did so more often, using them in 17 utterances (as opposed to EM's 11 utterances). Take, for example, the speech she delivered at Marseille on April 19, 2017, during which she mentioned French philosophers (including François Rabelais, Jean de la Fontaine, Molière, and Blaise Pascal); artists (including Alphonse Daudet); political leaders (including Clovis I, Joan of Arc, and Charles de Gaulle); and historical events (including the Battle of Bir Hakeim). All of these were used to advance her concept of national identity: 'A France that is just, worthy of pride. A France that is sovereign and strong. A France that is united, sure of itself'. In such utterances, she narrated a "romanticism of the past", appealing to her audience's emotions and regaling them with tales of the past to build her own brand of French nationalism. She used this narrative not only to justify her opposition to terrorism and immigration, but also to show audiences that she was not sectarian.

Second, candidates often used historical references to recognize and acknowledge the cities or departments in which their speeches were delivered. Take, for example, the speech EM delivered in Mayotte on March 26, 2017. During this speech, he invoked the referenda through which Mayotte had chosen to remain part of France,

saying ‘in 1841, in 1974, in 1976, you chose France, the Republic, which others prefer’. He further noted that, after years as an overseas territory of France, the people of Mayotte had chosen in 2009 to become the 101st Department of France. This statement was intended to provide historical proof of the bond between mainland France and Mayotte, thereby appealing to audiences’ emotions to promote EM’s arguments, improve his public image, and familiarize himself with voters. These narratives, building upon the nationalism of the people of Mayotte, also inferred that threats to national unity could emerge from within.

Meanwhile, of MLP’s speeches, only one was used to recognize and acknowledge her venue: the speech delivered at Marseille on April 19, 2017. During this speech, MLP identified Marseille as a *cit  phoc enne* (Phocaeen city) in her statement ‘a Phocaeen city, the doorway to the world when France sought to recover its spirit of conquest’. She narrated the history of Marseille, beginning with the establishment of a port on the coast of France by Phocaeen sailors in 600 BCE; several centuries later, this port was conquered by the Romans, who renamed it Massilia (now Marseille). Through her narrative, MLP not only acknowledged her venue, but implicitly evoked France’s past glory—thereby advancing the nationalist concepts she promoted.

Third, historic narratives were used to express specific hopes and values. For example, during a speech delivered in London on February 21, 2017, EM stated ‘there is no one French Culture; there are many cultures that constitute the culture of France’. He then mentioned Pablo Picasso (a Spanish painter) and Marc Chagall (a Russian-French modernist) as examples of non-French artists who contributed significantly to French and global culture, thereby highlighting how values of openness and acceptance have enriched French culture.

MLP, meanwhile, used the name of Charles de Gaulle to define French identity in terms of ‘grandeur’ and ‘glory’. For example, in a speech she delivered on April 23, 2017, after winning the first round of elections, MLP stated ‘on August 8, 1943, General de Gaulle arrived at Casablanca; the grandeur and glory of France stems from de Gaulle’s appearance’. In her speeches, MLP regularly called for the French people to revive their past glory and promoted protectionist policies that (among other things) sought to curb immigration. As such, her strategy resembled that of Donald Trump, who had used the slogan “make America great again” to invite American voters to

bring back former glory and protect themselves from economic, social, and political threats.

4. CONCLUSION

Historical narratives always involve memory; as such, historical references are narratives that are constructed through the memories of events and experiences that are used to imbue life with meaning. These not only inform how communicants interpret utterances but are also used create certain effects. Historical narratives are selected or hidden in order to achieve a specific goal. In this process, identity is an important component, as it enables a speaker to create a consistent, logical, and sequential argument to communicate his or her intent.

From this study, it may be seen that the historical narratives used by EM in the 2017 French presidential campaign were intended to advocate the ideal of openness, to embrace people of various social, political, and economic backgrounds and even to sway people of diverse political leanings. Such narratives were intended to expand his voter base and thus help him win the election. Conversely, MLP tended to underscore the ‘past glory’ of France in her speeches, promoting a protectionist position. As such, she used historical narratives to justify her anti-immigration platform.

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