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# Nonverbal communication as argumentation: the case of political television debates

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## ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates how nonverbal communication may perform argumentative functions in television debates by acclaiming and defending the debater's own ethos and in attacking the opponent's ethos. We argue that studies of non-verbal communication in debates should not only study *what* is done nonverbally, but also *how* it is done. This informs our analyses of excerpts of television debates between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in the 2008 primary election campaign. Our analyses establish two main types of nonverbal rhetoric, enacted actio and restrained actio, and show how these may be used argumentatively. We introduce the concept of the *personal qualifier* to signify how debaters nonverbally can express degrees of certainty and emotional involvement, similar to the function of qualifier in Stephen Toulmin's argument model.

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## Introduction

Do politicians argue with their bodies? Argumentation deals with attitudes and opinions proposed through claim and ground. It thus appears impossible for a person's nonverbal communication to make arguments. Neither body nor voice – it seems – can create the verbal two-part structure of an argument. However, if such nonverbal communication can work as a stimulus evoking a receiver's cognitively generated argument, then also non-verbal communication may function as rhetorical argumentation.

In this article we explore nonverbal communication as argumentation in the case of political television debates. We first provide critical accounts of the relevant theoretical aspects: argumentation theory, debate studies, and research on nonverbal communication. On this basis we develop our theoretical apparatus and make an argument for how non-verbal communication may function as argumentation. We then present our method and empirical material before we carry out analyses

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demonstrating the argumentative aspects of nonverbal communication in television debates. The material consists of excerpts of debates between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in the 2008 televised primary debates for the Democratic Party. Our aim is neither to describe the communication styles of the two contenders, nor to generalize about the nonverbal communication they employ in the debates. Instead, we use the analyzed instances to exemplify that nonverbal communication can have argumentative functions, and to illustrate how such communication works. More specifically, we examine how nonverbal communication performs argumentative functions in acclaiming and defending the debater's own ethos and in attacking the opponent's ethos. We establish two main types of nonverbal rhetoric, enacted and restrained actio, show how these may be used argumentatively, and we introduce the concept of *the personal qualifier* to signify how debaters nonverbally can express degrees of certainty and emotional involvement.

### **Theory: multimodal argumentation and ethos, debate, and nonverbal communication**

Human interaction is a complex phenomenon, especially in conflict-laden discourse, thus, to understand nonverbal argumentation, we need a theoretical framework that considers more than just rational arguments. In our exploration of nonverbal arguments and in our attempt to establish a rhetorical theory about this we turn to research on argumentation and ethos, research on debates, and research on nonverbal communication.

#### ***Multimodal argumentation and ethos***

In our view, argumentation can occur in a host of different forms of expressions, including speech, pictures, and nonverbal behavior. With Wayne Brockreide, we believe that arguments are found “not in statements, but in people” (Brockriede 1992). Further, we subscribe to a contextual and cognitive view of argumentation (Hample 1980, 1992, Kjeldsen 2007), where the message – for instance the nonverbal behavior – performs as “a stimulus for the receiver's (cognitively generated) argument” (Hample 1992, 93; cf. Gronbeck 1995). We consider argumentation as communicative action, which is performed, evoked, and must be understood, in a rhetorical context of opposition (Kjeldsen 2007, 2012, 2018). Here we also draw on Robert Pinto's view that arguments are instruments of persuasion, with a goal to call forward an inference in the audience that the arguments are addressed to Pinto (2001). Pinto writes: “the premisses that are put forward by the arguer are intended to elicit assent to the argument's conclusion by forming the basis of an inference drawn by the person to whom the argument is addressed” (37).

Thus, argumentation in this sense works enthymematically. This is particularly the case with visual, multimodal, and nonverbal argumentation (Kjeldsen 2018), because the audience must themselves reconstruct the presumed arguments based on the available semiotic signs in the rhetorical situation they are expressed.

Of course, there is no denying that the semiotic mode of verbal communication allows for more precise and elaborate forms of argumentation than pictures or

nonverbal communication. However, we argue that this does not prevent nonverbal communication from performing certain types of argumentative acts. As we will demonstrate, in television debates these nonverbal argumentative acts especially pertain to ethotic argumentation (e.g. Brinton 1986, Oldenburg 2015, Grancea 2016). Brinton (1986) defines ethotic argument as “the kind of argument or technique of argument in which ethos is evoked, attended to, or represented in such a way as to lend credibility or detract credibility from conclusions which are being drawn” (Brinton 1986, 246). In his work on presumptive schemes Walton (1996, 85) establishes an argument scheme involving the appeal to an arguer’s character in this way:

If *x* is a person of good moral character, then what *x* contents (A) should be accepted (as more plausible).

*a* is a person of good moral character.

Therefore, what *a* contends (A) should be accepted (as more plausible).

Similarly, in his book on *Ad hominem arguments* (2009), Walton describes five subtypes of abusive ad hominem arguments. One is the “Negative Ethotic Ad Hominem Argument from Veracity” (215):

*a* has a bad character for veracity

Therefore, *a*’s argument should not be accepted

The four other variants are *ad hominem* arguments from prudence, perception, cognitive skills, and morals (ibid.).

Argumentation theory, then, helps us consider two types of nonverbal argumentation in debates pertaining to ethos: Firstly, arguments where the debater’s ethos *is* the issue, determining the person’s competence (phronesis), character (arete), and good will (eunoia) (McCroskey 2001). In a presidential debate, for instance, this is relevant for considering whether the candidate is fit for the job. Secondly, we may consider arguments where the debater’s ethos influences whether one should adhere to the debater’s argument *about* the issue, as exemplified with *the ad hominem* argument from veracity quoted above.

Because such nonverbal argumentation must necessarily be inferred from some semiotic signs expressed through voice or body, it will generally have the form of a symptomatic argument scheme as it is described in pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Snoeck Henkemans 2002, 96ff.; Garssen (2001, 91ff). In an argument scheme based on a symptomatic relation “a standpoint is defended by citing in the argument a certain sign, symptom or distinguishing mark of what is claimed in the standpoint. On the grounds of this concomitance, the speaker claims the standpoint should be accepted” (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Snoeck Henkemans 2002, 97). The symptomatic argument scheme has this form:

Y is true of X,

*because* Z is true of X,

*and* Z is symptomatic of Y.

Above we have relied mostly on theory of argumentation from pragma-dialectics. However, to fully appreciate the character of nonverbal argumentation we must introduce an aspect of Stephen Toulmin's argumentation model: Qualifier. Toulmin defines a qualifier as an "explicit reference to the degree of force which our data confer on our claim" (Toulmin 1958, 101). In a later work this is described as "the qualifying phrases that are commonly employed to mark the degree and kind of certainty that attaches to different claims" (Toulmin, Rieke, and Janik 1984, 82). While qualifier in the Toulmin-tradition is connected to the certainty of the claim, we suggest that one may apply the same kind of qualifying related to the certainty of the speaker's belief: the conviction the speaker has about the claim put forward. We call this the *personal qualifier*. Compared to Toulmin's qualifier it represents a distinction between "It is certain/uncertain that" and "I am certain/uncertain that". As we will show in our analyses, this is relevant for nonverbal argumentation, because expressing certainty of belief and emotional involvement is easily and effectively done through bodily expression.

So, our study of nonverbal argumentation departs from the position that such argumentation is necessarily enthymematic and follows symptomatic argument schemes. Here nonverbal communication has affordances to express the strength of the claim or belief in case as a personal qualifier. The enthymematic movement may occur when semiotic signs in a specific situation invite audiences to certain rhetorical inferences. Such invited inferences are conditioned by the context and type of situation the nonverbal signs are put forward in. In our case, this situation is a presidential television debate.

## Debate

Research on television debates has examined a range of aspects, covering issues such as debate effects (e.g. McKinney and Warner 2013), content of debates, the rhetoric of debates, incivility and politeness in debates (Scott, Chanslor, and Dixon 2021, Hinck et al. 2021), and debates as spectacle (e.g. Rowland 2021). Research also examines how viewers experience debates and discuss them on social media (McKinney and Spialek 2017). While much research examines US presidential debates (e.g. Benoit 2014, Benoit and Harthcock 1999, Benoit and Brazeal 2002), there is also studies providing international perspectives (Coleman 2000) and giving insight into the rhetoric of television debates in parliamentary multiparty systems (e.g. Sandvik 2016; Vatnøy, Andersen, and Kjeldsen 2020). Seiter and Weger's book *Nonverbal communication in political debates* (2020) provides an impressive and thorough overview of research, it also demonstrates that the issue of nonverbal argumentation in debates is rather overlooked (except for Gelang and Kjeldsen 2011). They analyze the presidential debate between Clinton and Trump from 2016 in a section devoted to rhetoric and the rhetorical means of persuasion. Here they state that "delivery can function argumentatively, primarily through enthymematic reasoning" (Seiter and Weger 2020, 171) but they do not expand on this topic. Therefore, our article focuses on the argumentative role of debaters' nonverbal behavior. We provide an interpretative multimodal analysis of

instances of debates and generalize these instances of nonverbal communication into argument schemes.

A wide range of studies suggest that nonverbal communication affects the audience in their liking or disliking of different debaters or leaders (Sullivan and Masters 1988, Atkinson 1988, Bucy 2000, 2003, Bucy and Bradley 2004, Jørgensen, Koch, and Rørbech 1998, Poggi & D’Errico 2010). One general finding in such research is that non-speaking debaters expressing nonverbal disbelief or disagreement when their opponent is talking, are perceived as deceptive, less likable, and less credible, when compared to debaters not exhibiting such background behavior (Seiter 2001, Seiter et al. 2009, Seiter, Kinzer, and Weger Jr 2006, Seiter and Weger 2020). We suggest that such evaluation of speakers and debaters contains argumentative dimensions.

For any discourse to be argumentative it must address some sort of difference of opinion (cf. van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Snoeck Henkemans 2002, 3 ff., van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992). The television debate is a genre that can be described as institutionalizing differences of opinion. It is a constitutive trait in presidential debates – as well as other kinds of debates – that the candidates will argue for their own view and against the view of the opponent, while simultaneously trying to weaken the opponent’s ethos and strengthening their own (Auer 1962).

As functional theory proposes, political debaters may *acclaim* (praise, boast of, tout) their character and policy. They may *attack* (criticize, condemn) their opponent’s character or policy, and they may *defend* those accusations (Benoit and Wells 1996, Benoit, Pier, and Blaney 1997, Benoit and Harthcock 1999, Benoit and Brazeal 2002). The audience will interpret both the verbal and the nonverbal discourse of the candidates according to these generic conventions. Thus, nonverbal communication can be taken as signs for spoken or unspoken premises and propositions about the candidates’ or the opponents’ character or policy.

### ***Nonverbal communication and actio***

Research on nonverbal communication concerns such phenomena as facial expressions, hand gestures, movements, postures, and the use of voice. When rhetorically performed in public speaking, we refer to these nonverbal means as *actio*.

To interpret *actio* it is important to gain an understanding of the context within which it is performed because the recipients in a rhetorical situation normally interpret a speaker’s *actio* in accordance with the constraints within the situation. Constraints are one of three aspects which Lloyd F. Bitzer used in the 1960s to define a rhetorical situation. Bitzer’s constraints, which are somewhat similar to Bourdieu’s concept of *doxa*, since both refer to preconceptions and expectations that are present in any given situation (Bitzer 1968, Bourdieu 1990). Therefore, Bourdieu’s concept *doxa* can be seen as part of Bitzer’s constraints in the sense that how we behave in the world becomes embodied knowledge which in turn affects our perception and understanding of nonverbal communication. For instance, one can assume that the preconceptions and expectations regarding *actio* during a private conversation are different to those in a public debate among politicians. Hence,

what is considered credible and valuable *actio* will differ in various rhetorical situations. The expressive *actio* of the orators on the rostrum in ancient Greece and Rome would not be equally persuasive in the television debates of today. In this way, *actio* is a historically, socially, and culturally situated activity.

Our perspective differs from nonverbal communication research where it is common to carry out quantitative studies, not least within voice research (Scherer 2010, Martin 2010). We also depart from rhetorical and psychological research about nonverbal communication aiming to find correlations between certain expressions performed by a speaker and the effects this creates among the audience (Mehrabian 1972, Burgoon, Birk, and Pfau 1990, to some extent also Jørgensen, Koch, and Rørbech 1994, 1998).

In this study we use a nonverbal multimodal approach: We examine how different human modalities such as gestures, facial expression, and nuances in voice interact and work simultaneously. We also study *what* a speaker does (for instance nodding her head), and, in particular, *how* she is doing it (nodding eagerly or hesitantly).

The nonverbal multimodal approach, how different human modalities interact, is confirmed in previous research on *actio*, which found that the recipients of a message in a rhetorical situation create their perception of the speaker through a holistic perspective. In other words: An audience evaluates an orator or speaker based on how they perceive the different modalities of *actio* interact simultaneously (Gelang 2008, Gelang 2021, about multimodality see also; Lindström and Mondada 2009). For instance, when an audience was asked to explain why they felt the speaker was committed, they usually commented on several different modalities such as eye contact, gestures, postures, voice management, and how these interacted. Feeble or a lack of gestures, for example, could be offset by a pleasant voice; poor eye contact could be compensated for by vibrant and energetic gestures when the recipients described a speaker's committed *actio* (Gelang 2008, Gelang and Petermann 2017).

In the same way, we believe that knowledge about rhetoric and argumentation in television debates cannot be acquired by looking at the different modalities of nonverbal communication separately, examining them one by one. The communicative – and argumentative – *actio* is created in the way these modalities interact and function together. This even includes the words accompanying the bodily actions (See Seiter and Weger 2020, 5–8). So, even though our focus in this article is the multimodality of nonverbal communication, our interpretations are also based on the words that follow.

The study of *how* a gesture is performed, we refer to as studying *actio qualities*. The *actio qualities* are the aspects of *actio* that create nuances and make *actio* appear with variation (Gelang 2008). The *way* a gesture is performed is equally important for its rhetorical impact and argumentative dimensions as the gesture chosen. What we call *actio qualities* is in many ways similar to the concept's *paralinguistics* and *paracommunication*. Paralinguistics (Argyle 1988) describes different qualities in relation to the voice, for example variations of tone, while paracommunication describes qualities in relation to bodily communication, for example how energetically a gesture is carried out (Schefflen 1973, Birdwhistell 1970). Similar aspects are also noted within artistic research, for instance in relation to a dancer's movements or an actor's on-stage actions (Laban 1974, Sjöström 2007).

Although these qualities are often mentioned in research on nonverbal communication, they are seldom the main topic. Some studies from the early 1970s have given attention to these qualitative aspects of actio, especially regarding the voice. Mehrabian (1972), for instance, showed that a credible and/or convincing speaker conveys a sense of power, energy, activity, and vitality. Research has employed concepts such as openness, firmness, precision, relaxation, and energy to describe a successful speaker (Jørgensen, Koch, and Rørbech 1994, Babad, Avni-Babad, and Rosenthal 2004).

In judging the *how* of actio, we distinguish between the three actio qualities energy, tempo/rhythm, and dynamism (Gelang 2008). Some research points to energy as a particularly important factor in nonverbal communication (Mehrabian 1972, McCroskey 2001, Babad, Avni-Babad, and Rosenthal 2004, Landau & Keeler-Jonker 2018). George Kennedy (1998) develops “rhetorical energy” and refers to energy as something a speaker can convey in his speech. One study of 37 television debates concludes that the speakers who won the debates were characterized by modulated voice, energetic articulation, intense gaze, energetic posture, eager gesticulations and firm, directive gestures in comparison with their opponents and in relation to the rhetorical situation (Jørgensen, Koch, and Rørbech 1994, 1998).

*Energy* concerns flow, intensity, and focus. Flow refers to the energy, constant or variable, that exists in the succession of expressions that the speaker produces in a public appearance. Intensity refers to the degree of energy in a particular modality or in the multimodal expression. Focus refers to the way in which energy is concentrated on the most meaningful modalities. The second actio quality is *tempo and rhythm*, which concerns flow, speed and timing. Tempo refers to the basic rate that pervades the entire performance, while rhythm refers to the variations of pace that can occur by means of changes in one or more modalities. Timing concerns the right actio at the right time. The third actio quality is *dynamism*, and concerns variations. Dynamism is a quality that is related to the variations in actio. The dynamic variations usually occur with the help of other qualities such as energy, rhythm and/or the magnitude of the expressions. Naturally the actio qualities occur most often in parallel, and it can be about energy and tempo at the same time. So, in our analysis we have focused on actio as a nonverbal multimodal activity and the actio qualities as defined above. We believe that it is the degree, strength, and intensity of the actio qualities, working simultaneously and jointly with other modes used, that are of importance in the rhetorical situation.

Although our focus is on *how* the debaters perform their arguments, we will also comment on *what* the debaters do, especially their gestures and facial expressions since these are visible in all our material. In the history of rhetoric there are descriptions of gestures and their functions in speech and conversation. In addition to the classic descriptions of Cicero and Quintilian, John Bulwer (2003[1644]) and Desmond Morris (1977) can be mentioned. They have defined gestures, described their function and given instructions on when they are best used. Later research has followed the trodden tracks and categorizes gestures, very well-known in the field of nonverbal communication research are Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen’s gesture categories. They defined five categories: Emblems, Illustrators, Affect displays, Regulators and Adaptors. The categories can be difficult to use in analysis since



they often overlap with each other. In our study the categories of Illustrators and Affect displays are the most common. Illustrators have subcategories, one of them is Baton gestures which sets the rhythm of the speech and emphasizes specific words. Affect display are mainly facial expressions of emotions. (Ekman and Friesen 1969) Contemporary research has chosen to see gestures along a continuum with stylized gestures at one end and spontaneous gestures at the other (for research about gestures see Kendon 2004).

### **Method and material: interpretative analysis of US democratic primary debates in 2008**

The source material is from Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton contest for the 2008 American Democratic presidential nomination. The material consists of four film clips from three different political debates: South Carolina, 21 January 2008; Texas, 21 February 2008; and Ohio, 26 February 2008. The debates were televised on national television in USA. We have chosen to focus on the interactions between Clinton and Obama, because they generally exhibit two dissimilar debating styles, and because their rhetorical exchanges provided a rich source of illustrative material for the exemplification of nonverbal argumentation.

We have performed an interpretative, multimodal analysis of the clips, directed by our understanding of nonverbal multimodality, the actio qualities, and the television debate as a rhetorical situation. More specifically we have studied how the nonverbal communication of the participants may evoke or support arguments in acclaiming and defending a debaters' own ethos and in attacking the opponents' ethos.

First, the film clips were analyzed by the authors separately, and notes were taken. The authors then analyzed and interpreted the clips together while comparing their notes. Then the clips were shown to two other researchers, followed by discussion about the preliminary findings, which were then verified or discarded. After this, the analysis was confined to parts of the material where the debaters used nonverbal expressions to emphasize their point of view. Four film clips of approximately one to two minutes each were chosen. In two of the clips the candidates are sitting down where only the upper body is visible. In two clips the candidates are standing with alternately upper body and the whole body are seen. The selected parts were analyzed in detail. The lines of dialogue were transcribed, along with the nonverbal communication.

### **Nonverbal communication as symptomatic argumentation**

As we have argued for above, premises and propositions can be executed through singular nonverbal acts (such as shaking the head) *and* through the amount of energy put into their nonverbal communication (such as shaking vigorously). When a candidate exhibits an active or less active actio it may be taken as an argumentative act of *acclaiming*, *attacking* or *defending*. In all three instances, nonverbal communication is used as ground for propositions claiming the praiseworthy ethos of the candidate, the blameworthy ethos of the opponent, or the injustice of the

attacks directed at the candidate. We refer to active manifestations as *enacted actio*, and less active actio refers to *restrained actio*, because the candidate appears to perform an inner mental state, an emotion or opinion.

As described in the theoretical part, semiotic signs in nonverbal communication can function as cues for such symptomatic arguments. This, of course is also the case with *enacted* and *restrained actio*. An energetic, enacted, actio can be seen as a sign of an involved and passionate person. Within the institutionalized difference of opinion that a debate offers, this is transformed to an invitation to inference involving a line of reasoning saying: this politician exhibits energetic nonverbal communication, thus he must be an involved and passionate person. Because being involved and passionate is an important character trait (arete) for a leader, this is a good reason to support this politician.

In short: Performing the nonverbal argument that you are involved and passionate, is important for establishing the character (arete) and goodwill (eunoia) of the speaker. By the same token, fluent speech may also function as an implied argument about the competence (phronesis) of the speaker. Such assessments, of course, are always culture specific and both their elicitation and efficacy depend on the opinions, attitudes, and values of the audience ascribing these arguments to the nonverbal behavior.

If an orator or a debater uses a nonverbal style of communication that is more expressive and energetic compared to what people normally experience in speeches or television debates, the debater risks appearing exaggerated and out of control (cf. Jørgensen, Koch, and Rørbech 1994, Streeck 2008). An example of this is the so called “Dean Scream”: During the US 2004 primaries, Howard Dean (D) spoke at a rally in Iowa, finishing a section of the speech with a screaming “Yeah!!”, supported by huge swing of his arm. This outburst caused the speech – and hence Howard Dean – to be framed as loud, peculiar, and un-presidential. Senator Dean was widely ridiculed, and the “Yeah!” was widely distributed on the web (cf. Warnick 2007, 11).<sup>1</sup> In concordance with the ethotic arguments describe above, such behavior may be read by the audience as an argument suggesting that a candidate is not fit to be president.

Moderate physical movement can in some circumstances be taken as a premise for the claim that a person is suitable as president; because it signals that the speaker is in control, where other people would be steered by their emotions. It is this kind of moderate movement, exhibiting a limited degree of expressiveness, we refer to as *restrained actio*. Like the enacted actio, restrained actio may work argumentatively on the basis of a symptomatic argument scheme.

The enacted and the restrained actio can be placed at either side of a scale, where the nonverbal communication is either expressive and expanded or constrained and limited. This does not mean that one is rhetorically beneficial and the other problematic. On the contrary, the debater that can move along this scale, while adjusting her actio to the situation and the topic of the speech will have an advantage over the opponent. Because a debater in a presidential debate rhetorically must demonstrate both the ability to be in control, as well as involved and impassioned, she must be able to display both enacted and restrained actio and try to balance these in accordance with the cultural circumstances and rhetorical situation.

## Nonverbal arguments addressing ethos and supporting arguments

The following part illustrates through empirical examples how nonverbal communication in political debates can invite inferences, thereby evoking and structuring argumentation. We will use debate excerpts from the primary election debates in the US democratic campaign in 2008 between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. We first look at arguments connected to acclaim, and then arguments connected to attack and defend.

### Acclaim

Two of the film clips show examples of how the debaters *acclaim* their ethos through nonverbal communication. In a sequence from a debate in Ohio on 26 February 2008, one can see how Hillary Clinton is acclaiming her ethos through her nonverbal communication.<sup>2</sup>

Clinton is answering a question about her view on public health care. She comments briefly on this and goes on to explain what she would like to do if she is elected president. Clinton has an open face, affect display, with raised eyebrows and a moderate smile, leaning slightly forward while constantly keeping eye contact with the audience. Her use of voice is steady, clear, and determined when saying “[...] how we can get back \$55 billion from the special interests – the giveaways to the oil companies [...]”, she demonstrates, by using gesticulation categorized as *illustrator*, how the money will be taken back by moving both hands from a distant position closer to her body. Her gestures are performed with an energy that sets a rapid tempo to her performance. The qualities in *actio*, energy and tempo, together with a multimodal activity, face, posture, gesture, and voice in simultaneous use, create a dynamic *actio* that indicates resoluteness and determination which supports her ethos. Clinton hereby performs an enacted *actio* that works as a symptomatic sign – a premise – supporting the claim that she is a committed and passionate person. The general symptomatic argument scheme for such an *enacted actio*, may be expressed like this:

Politician A is a passionate person,  
*because* Politician A exhibits an enacted and energetic nonverbal communication,  
*and* Enacted and energetic nonverbal communication is a sign  
 of a passionate person.

If the audience ascribing this reasoning to the nonverbal behavior, values an involved and passionate leader, they will naturally extend the reasoning to the aim of the debate and the election campaign, and construct the argument: “One should support this politician because she is involved and passionate”. Which in turn strengthens her ethos and her argument because the passion and energy expressed non-verbally is a personal qualifier, indicating a strong belief.

Compared to Clinton’s energetic, enacted *actio*, Obama’s nonverbal communication is often more restrained, withheld. He does not express as much energy

and emotion in his gestures and facial expression, thus safeguarding him against “Howard Dean-like Yeah-gaffes”. At the same time, such calm and self-controlled *actio* risks presenting the candidate as reserved and aloof. However, Obama often exhibits trustworthiness through his restrained energy and deep, commanding voice. His speech has variation in melody and an almost perfect sense of tempo, with excellent timing expressed by pauses and well-placed emphasis as is seen in the following example. In a debate in Texas on 21 February 2008 Obama is acclaiming his ethos when explaining how he will handle the economy.<sup>3</sup> While saying “[...] making sure we bring an end to this war in Iraq” he is moving his left hand with an open palm in a distinct motion up and down in front of him using a baton-gesture, continuing the motion as he says “[...] bring our troops home and invest our money here in the United States” while closing his hand, keeping the index finger stretched out and pointing down at the table in front of him in a distinct motion performing yet another baton-gesture. Obama expresses most of his nonverbal energy through the dynamic and varied use of his voice, for instance he puts emphases on words “[...] so that working family actually gets relief”, he uses a pause before saying “[...] end to this war in Iraq” and thereby lifts forward his coming action if chosen to be president.

Compared to Clinton, Obama here exhibits less bodily energy and thus appears a little less committed and passionate. Nevertheless, this kind of restrained impression management may be taken as a symptomatic sign of a person in control, and consequently of a person fit to be president. A general symptomatic argument scheme for such a *restrained actio*, may be expressed like this:

Politician A is a person in control,  
*because* Politician A exhibits a restrained and calm nonverbal communication,  
*and* Restrained and calm nonverbal communication is a sign  
 of a person in control.

The pragma-dialectical symptomatic argument scheme illustrates that a nonverbal communication can function as an invitation to inference by semiotically taking certain nonverbal acts as symptoms for certain aspects of ethos. As with the case of the restrained *actio* above, the impression that a politician is calm and controlled can be extended to an argument that one should trust – and thus support – this person and what he is saying. To capture this in more detail, and in a way that may better include situation, context, and *doxa*, we may express the argument-move from behavior to acceptance and trustworthiness in the style of Walton’s argument schemes:

### **Argument from restrained actio to reliability**

If *x* is a person that exhibits a restrained and controlled *actio*,  
 then *x* should be considered reliable (and trustworthy).  
*a* is a person that exhibits a restrained and controlled *actio*.  
 Therefore, *a* should be considered a reliable (and trustworthy) person

Here the underlying doxa is that a person in control of his feelings is reliable, and hence trustworthy.

In the same way trustworthiness can be inferred from an enacted actio explained in the example from Clinton above. In the style of Walton's argument schemes:

### **Argument from enacted actio to evidence of devotion**

If  $x$  is a person that exhibits an enacted and passionate actio,  
then  $x$  should be considered as a devoted (and trustworthy) person.

$a$  is a person that exhibits an enacted and passionate actio.

Therefore,  $a$  should be considered a devoted (and trustworthy) person.

Underlying this argument is the doxa that enacted and passionate behavior is a sign of aspects of ethos such as commitment and devotion and hence being authentic, honest, and trustworthy.

Thus, nonverbal communication can invite reasoning and arguments, since our behavior can be taken as symptomatic signs of who we are, and thus of our ethos and potential qualities as politicians and leaders. This is of course not to say that restrained withheld or enacted outward actio will predict a person's ability to become a president; there are many skills that are necessary to become a political leader of a country, with debating being just one of them.

### **Attack and defend**

A debater can also use nonverbal communication both to *attack* the opponent's ethos and *defend* her own, as the following examples illustrate. In debates, the nonverbal defending and attacking will often be performed simultaneously.

In a debate in South Carolina on January 21st, 2008, Hillary Clinton is defending her claim that Obama has not been clear about his view on the war in Iraq, while at the same time attacking Obama's ethos. Compared to the previous Clinton example, the tempo of her movements and speaking is much slower, and she takes longer and more frequent pauses. She uses both pauses and baton-gestures when emphasizing words in her speech. For instance, she makes a two-second-long pause before saying "We are not, neither my campaign nor anyone associated with it, are in anyway saying you opposed the war in Iraq".<sup>4</sup> The pause creates attention and emphasizes her verbal comment. She exhibits energy, through firm, directive gestures and focused eye contact. On several occasions during her turn, she uses baton-gestures that support her vocal emphases, e.g. when she says, "I think elections are about the future", she uses both hands in several distinct diagonal motions. The restrained but still energetic, focused, and insistent actio is a nonverbal signal telling the audience that Clinton takes the criticism very seriously. Here, Clinton's actio both helps communicate her argument in a clear way, and functions as a symptomatic premise for the claim that she is a sincere and conscientious candidate who is taking the issue very seriously. Expressed in an argumentation scheme, it looks like this:

### ***Argument from restrained actio to sincerity and conscientiousness***

If  $x$  is a person that exhibits a restrained and focused actio,  
then  $x$  should be considered a sincere and conscientious (and trustworthy) person.

$a$  is a person that exhibits a restrained and focused actio.

Therefore,  $a$  should be considered a sincere and conscientious (and trustworthy) person.

Above we suggested that restrained actio may signal devotion and trustworthiness. Here we suggest that restrained actio may also – in this different type of exchange – signal sincerity and conscientiousness, because the restrained and focused behavior may be taken as a sign (e.g. symptom) for this. In the specific exchange between Clinton and Obama this can be inferred because the restrained behavior here is directly connected to the attack from Obama and Clintons verbal refutation.

During Clinton's presentation, Obama is seen shaking his head, lifting his index finger, turning his head, and looking toward the moderator signaling that he would like to comment on Clinton's allegations that he "agreed with President Bush", thereby implying that she is wrong. His posture is relaxed, neutral facial expression his gesture is performed with minor intensity. Altogether the performance is restrained. However, by means of the conventional pointing and insisting eye contact with the moderator, Obama is attacking Clinton's ethos, signaling that she is proposing some issue that he must be allowed to address, thereby performing a restrained objection. In this way the nonverbal communication anticipates the verbal arguments.

In the same debate in South Carolina on January 21st, Obama criticizes Clinton and her husband, stating that they incorrectly claim that Obama praises the Republicans, while they are actually the ones praising Reagan and the GOP.<sup>5</sup> In the beginning of the turn where Obama is criticizing Clinton, she is trying to stop him by starting to talk, shaking her head, and smiling superiorly, but stops herself and leans on rostrum shifting her eye contact from Obama to the audience seeking support. Her performance clearly shows her dislike of Obamas arguments even though her protest is restrained.

In the above examples the nonverbal behavior signals negation through different gestures, facial expressions, and movements: shaking head, looking to moderator, lifting index finger, shaking index finger, seeking eye contact with moderator, as well as performing negative affect displays. Such nonverbal forms of communication indicate that the opponent is wrong, and that a refutation of the opponent should be allowed. In the style of argument schemes, it may be expressed like this:

### ***Argument from restrained actio to refutation of opponent***

If  $x$  is a person that exhibits a restrained nonverbal negation,

then the behavior of  $x$  should be taken as a sign that the opponent might be wrong,  
and a refutation should be allowed

$a$  is a person that exhibits a restrained nonverbal negation.

Therefore, the behavior of *a* be taken as a sign that the opponent might be wrong, and a refutation should be allowed.

Obama responds to her actio by waving his hand towards her, first with a closed fist thereafter by open his hand performing a deictic gesture pointing his finger at her, the gesture is done without intensity, while saying, “let me finish”. Throughout the turn he repeats pointing his finger towards her, he turns his body towards her and uses his often-occurring gesture, holding his index finger and thumb together, the so called IFT – index-finger-thumb grip (see Lempert 2011), moving his hand up and down in a horizontal direction emphasizing his words combining IFT-gesture with baton-gesture. Obamas actio is restrained, apart from his use of voice with high pitch and some intensity, his energy is low, and his tempo is slow.

After initially trying to stop Obama during his attack, Clinton stands motionless, looking at Obama with an expressionless face, avoiding any nonverbal admission. However, when Obama involves her husband and accuses them of playing “political games”, she exclaims, “Now wait a minute, wow, wait a minute!” She lifts her hand, with the palm facing Obama as if to stop his unreasonable words. When he continues nonetheless, she takes a step towards him invading his personal space (cf. Hall 1963) to better contain his attack. In contrast to the restrained negation above, here the nonverbal reaction of Clinton is much more enacted, intense, and passionate. This intense energy – the *how* of the nonverbal communication – creates a different type of argument, namely an ethos argument claiming that Obama’s behavior is unreasonable. The reason in the situation is Clinton’s strong reaction to his behavior, which functions as a symptomatic sign that she thinks Obama has crossed a line, based on a cultural doxa that people will react strongly when encountering unreasonable behavior. Expressed as an argument scheme it looks like this:

### ***Argument from enacted actio to judgment of unreasonableness***

If *x* is a person that exhibits a strong enacted nonverbal negation,

then the behavior of *x* should be taken as a sign that (the person thinks) the opponent is unreasonable

*a* is a person that exhibits a strong enacted nonverbal negation

Therefore, the behavior of *a* should be taken as a sign that (the person thinks) the opponent is unreasonable.

This argument is created both verbally and nonverbally. The nonverbal enacting of the argument is done through a specific gesture (the stopping palm) and a specific movement (stepping forward) – the *what* of nonverbal communication. But it is also, particularly, performed through the enacted use of actio qualities – the *how* of nonverbal communication. The change of tempo in her performance creates a suddenness in actio, the use of intense energy and focused gaze together with a varied consequently dynamic and forceful response creates Clinton’s nonverbal

argument and makes it believable. Here the force by which she enacts her gestures and movements, the *how*, functions as a personal qualifier strengthening the argument and her ethos.

Because the nonverbal acts must be understood in the culture and rhetorical situation in which they are performed, there are no external, scientific units of measurement for determining the energy, dynamism and tempo that establishes the premise “I react strongly to his behavior”. However, with the embodied knowledge that comes with experience one can perceive whether someone has crossed the line for what is appropriate behavior or not. It is also difficult to determine singular gestures or movements as premises or arguments in themselves (Mirivel 2011). The rhetorical actio of the stopping palm, for instance, does not create an argument in itself. The argument is established through all the aspects of the nonverbal actio. It is the full nonverbal multimodality that creates the arguments and this, of course, is supported by the interaction with the words “wow, wait a minute”.

Thus, just like nonverbal communication can lead to inferences about acclaim and praise of one’s own character or policies, it can also serve as part of the argumentation involving attacking and defending. Furthermore, the force by which this is done, the *how* of the nonverbal communication, may demonstrate, through the personal qualifier, the intensity and force by which the argument is put forward.

## Conclusion

To fully understand the argumentative dimensions of political television debates, it is not enough to analyze transcriptions of verbal communication. We also must examine the multimodality of nonverbal communication, and we should not only look at *what* debaters do nonverbally, but in particular at *how* they do it with the help of actio qualities.

When doing so in the examples we have analyzed here, two main nonverbal rhetorical argumentative strategies emerged: enacted actio and restrained actio. An enacted actio refers to active manifestations, while a restrained actio refers to moderate movement, exhibiting a limited degree of expressiveness. These two strategies of basic nonverbal communication may take many forms, of course, but they can all be interpreted as inviting premises in variations of a symptomatic argumentation scheme, signaling a political debater’s ethos. We have demonstrated how the details of such multimodal argumentation (through a combination of nonverbal communication and words) can be expressed in argument schemes for presumptive reasoning (e.g. Walton 1996). As described above, such nonverbal communication can be used by debaters to acclaim and to defend their own ethos and/or to attack the ethos of the opponent.

In accordance with our multimodal and interpretative approach we have examined arguments that are evoked by rhetorical situation, words, and nonverbal communication in collaboration. Our examples illustrate how nonverbal communication can evoke ethos argumentation that is relatively independent of the words spoken. The way a presidential debater conducts himself or herself through enacted or restrained actio, will affect the audience perception of the debater’s general character, and thus offer an argument for or against the person’s ability to be president. Of course, the



more the bodily actions and the words uttered are in accordance and harmony with each other, the more clearly an invitation to inference will appear.

Our analyses reveal that there are many ways nonverbal communication may lead to the inference of argument, and that similar types of nonverbal behavior may lead to different arguments, depending on the circumstances and the communication by other involved modalities. Both enacted and restrained *actio* may evoke arguments about ethos or issues. How the evocation of arguments work in each specific instance, depends on how the debater calibrate her or his *actio* in accordance with the situation and her words. As our examples demonstrate the *actio* quality of energy (the *how*) can function as a symptomatic sign inviting an audience to determine both which arguments to infer *and* – through the personal qualifier – the degree of certainty and emotional involvement of the argument. Energy can be expressed with intensity and focus and be interpreted as a symptomatic sign for a person with control and credibility. Energy may also be outward and strong and be interpreted as a symptomatic sign for a passionate – and hence trustworthy – person. The *how* of nonverbal communication is also determined by the interplay of different nonverbal modalities, such as when Obamas commanding voice and sense of rhythm work in combination with his use of gesture to forms his nonverbal arguments. Similarly, when Clintons open face, and insisting eye contact work in combination with her baton-gestures to form nonverbal arguments.

We have examined some argumentative dimensions of nonverbal communication in a specific genre and culture: the televised presidential primary debates in the US. We have argued that because of the immanent context of opposition in this rhetorical situation, nonverbal communication can have argumentative dimensions and communicate arguments both about ethos and about specific issues of controversy. In other similar contexts of opposition, we may expect to find similar possibilities of nonverbal argumentation.

## Notes

1. See Wikipedia's article on Howard Dean [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard\\_Dean](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Dean)
2. Debate in Ohio on February 26, 2008. See: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?204188-1/ohio-democratic-presidential-candidates-debate>. Start at 00:52:35 (accessed on December 27, 2023).
3. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0uBgt7gTy3A> (accessed on December 27, 2023)
4. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD9F1t9GQzA>. Time: 2.34-3.40 (accessed December 11, 2023).
5. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD9F1t9GQzA>. Time: 5.25-5.38 (accessed December 11, 2023).

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