

On Identifying Conflict Related Stances in Political Debates

Jens Allwood, Massimo Chindamo, Elisabeth Ahlsén

SCCHILL Interdisciplinary Center, Department of Applied IT, University of Gothenburg
Göteborg, Sweden

jens.allwood@gu.se, massimo.chindamo@gu.se, elisabeth.ahlsen@gu.se

Abstract— The purpose of this paper is to discuss some problems in identifying stances and the features that express these stances in televised political debates where there is conflict escalation. The study is based on an analysis of video-recorded political debates in different European languages (Italian (1), German (2) and US-American English (1)) and consists of a qualitative analysis of the videos in order to understand the similarities and differences in the use of social signals for stances in conflict situations in a similar setting (televised political debate) in three western cultures.

Keywords: *stance, conflict, political debate, multimodal communication*

I. INTRODUCTION - WHAT ARE STANCES?

The term “stance” has been used in several ways and has a number of definitions, some of the most well known ones being suggested by Biber [1], [2], Scherer [3] and DuBois [4]. As our point of departure we take the following definition of “stance”. A “stance” is “an attitude, which, for some time, is expressed and sustained interactively in communication, in a unimodal or multimodal manner” [5]. The qualification “for some time” means that normally a stance is not short term but sustained through a sequence of contributions. Arbitrarily and somewhat stipulatively, we suggest that period should be at least 20 seconds, (Attitude is here taken as a complex cognitive, emotive and conative orientation toward something or somebody, often a result of an appraisal or evaluation). Stances are expressed in most, if not all, communicative activities, among these political debates. Political debates also often provide authentic conflicts where stances are assumed and expressed. They are documented on video and thus, provide an accessible and interesting area for the analysis of stances.

II. BACKGROUND

The study relies on transcriptions and annotations of four conflict episodes from four televised political debates in German (2), Italian (1) and English (1). Political debates are activities in which the conflict potential is high since the discussion of diverging ideas is the core of the activity. Even though the expression of stances depends on various factors, such as biological disposition, culture and social position of the participants as well as on their personal experience and health conditions etc., we could find similar stances connected with conflictual behavior occurring in all the debates we analyzed (cf. [6], [7], [8]). For transcribing the videos, we used the Gothenburg Transcription Standard [9] and the Modified Standard Orthography (MSO6) [10], while annotations of the videos were done using ANVIL [11]. For vocal features we used PRAAT [12].

Apart from the debaters, in all the videos there is a TV-show host, who acts as a moderator and sometimes as a mediator, an audience in the studio and a home audience to consider. Since all of them take some part in the debate, we included both the action of the TV-show host (moderation, turn giving, etc.) and that of the audience in the studio (applause, boos, laughter, etc.). Two of the relevant parties have a more indirect part in the debates, i.e. the TV-station broadcasting the debate and the audience at home. Our study shows that not only the interaction between the debating parties influences the development of a political debate, but that, the TV-show host, the studio audience and beliefs about the TV audience also do so.

The *actors* in the televised political debates i.e. the debating participants (politicians or politics experts), TV-show host, and the audiences, all have different goals.

The goal of the debaters is to convince the audience that their point of view is more valuable than that of the other debaters. The main goal of the studio audience in the studio and at home is to be informed on the debaters' positions, while the main goal of the TV-show host is the "correct" development of the TV-show so that all other participants reach their goal.

Sometimes, the TV show hosts acts as moderators in the debate, especially if a "blind alley" occurs, when the goal of most of the participants is disturbed by the development of the debate. This often means that a conflict needs to be settled. Moderators might intervene in the debate expressing their point of view on the discussed topic. In this way, the interaction of the moderator/TV-show host with debating parties or audience can sometimes favor one debating party.

One way to state the goal of the participants in a political debate is to say that they want to *conquer the [political] stage*. Argumentation merely serves the goal of reinforcing one's own point of view and not as a means of resolving a conflict [13], or even of trying to communicate with one's fellow debaters. There are two main reasons for this: first, there is an interest in winning the favor of a majority of the viewers, in order to seize or maintain political power and, secondly, a televised political debate is usually a very short event (usually no longer than one or two hours) so there is no time to find a solution that can be agreed upon by all parties.

Below, we will describe a German debate on whether it was correct to support rebels in Libya with military interventions (German debate "Enthaltung ist keine Haltung", that is, "Abstention is no position"). We have also analyzed a conflict episode from another German debate, "Atomkrieger", where the health and moral implications of using nuclear energy are discussed among the participants of the debate [14]. We have an Italian debate "Giuliano Pisapia vs. Letizia Moratti", which is an election debate of the two main candidates running for the position of Mayor of Milan (2011), a political process lasting at least months. In our last example ("Republican Debate October 18, 2011" or "Perry vs. Romney"), we have two candidates running in the primary elections of the US, Republican Party; it is an excerpt from one of the many Republican Leadership Conference debates concerning the nomination of the party's candidate for running for the US Presidency.

III: AN EXAMPLE OF A CONFLICT EPISODE IN A GERMAN POLITICAL DEBATE

The following example describes one of four analyzed conflict situations, occurring in a German political debate.

"Enthaltung ist keine Haltung" ("Abstention is no position")

In January 2011 a vote at the United Nations authorized a military intervention in Libya supporting rebels' uprising against Ghaddafi. Germany's position was abstention. The debate is between opponents and supporters of Germany's abstention. The selected conflict episode is two minutes long. The participants directly involved in the conflict are Oskar Lafontaine (L), Co-Chairman of Die Linke (Left Party) and opposed to the military intervention in Libya and Ulrich Kienzle, (K) journalist and Middle-East "expert", in favor of the armed intervention, and the TV-show host.

The TV-host has just asked Lafontaine what he thinks about the NATO-attacks against Libya and Lafontaine starts his answer (see figure 1) gazing at the TV-host, leaning against the back of the chair.



Figure 1. Lafontaine starts his contribution.

After approximately 30 seconds, Kienzle tries to interrupt Lafontaine, accusing him of abandoning the Libyan rebels alone: Kienzle, leaning his upper torso forward, points his index finger towards Lafontaine.



Figure 2. Kienzle tries to interrupt - accusing.

Kienzle: "Wenn ich Sie richtig verstehe... Wenn ich Sie richtig verstehe...a-la, jetzt, kein Wahlkampfreden, kein Wahlkampfreden"

("If I get your point... If I get your point...a-la. No electoral propaganda now. No electoral propaganda.")

Kienzle's contribution overlaps with Lafontaine's, but Lafontaine keeps his turn. He utters this part of his argument raising his voice, moving his upper torso forwards in Kienzle's direction and holding his head upwards (see figure 3).



Figure 3. Lafontaine keeps the floor.

L: das ist kein wahlkampfreden das ist eine frage... warum wo+ warum... es war... es...

(this is no electoral propaganda this is a question... why wh+ why... it was... it...)

K: ...natürlich [ist es]! Die entscheidende Frage ist...
(...of course [it is]! The real question is...)

The conflict escalates, when Kienzle continues his accusation breaking the unwritten rule of turn taking. Again, Kienzle uses his hand pointing at Lafontaine with stretched index finger and accuses him of not answering Kienzle's question, but giving a propaganda speech ("keine Wahlkampfrede": "no electoral propaganda", repeated), his voice is raised. Lafontaine is irritated, he raises his hand to strengthen his speech and he now counterattacks Kienzle's accusations (this is not electoral propaganda). Until this point the TV-host has not intervened, none of the two participants is willing to drop the fight for the turn, thus their contributions are overlapping all the time.

The conflict comes to a very brief ceasefire when Lafontaine annoyed reminds his interlocutor of good manners: "*Mister Kienzle, if you are polite and let me finish my sentence your turn will come sooner*" ("Herr Kienzle, wenn Sie höflich sind, lassen Sie mich den satz zu ende führen, dann kommen Sie eher dran") (see figure 4).



Figure 4. Lafontaine asks Kienzle to be polite and give the floor to Lafontaine.

Lafontaine can continue his speech, now more vehemently than before, showing both a passionate engagement for the argument discussed and anger at his opponent Kienzle. But after only a few seconds Kienzle interrupts him again accusing him of leaving rebels to "die under Ghaddafi's bombs".



Figure 5. Kienzle accuses Lafontaine.

K: Sie hätten diese Menschen in Benghasi geopfert! Sie hätten diese Menschen geopfert! Nicht ausweichen!
(You'd have sacrificed these people in Benghazi! You'd have sacrificed these people! Don't avoid this issue!)

Lafontaine counters telling Kienzle that he should have the chance to answer Kienzle's previous question: Lafontaine is looking Kienzle directly in the eyes, with his eyebrows frowning and his upper torso leaning strongly forwards (see figure 6). But he is again interrupted by Kienzle who complains that Lafontaine does not answer his question. At this point, Lafontaine becomes angry and he uses several hand gestures (batic and indexical) with higher frequency than before, with his eyebrows frowning (see figure 6) and his speech is loud.



Figure 6. Lafontaine first irritated, then angry.

L: Ich weiche Ihnen nicht aus, lassen Sie mich antworten!
(I'm not avoiding you, let me answer your question)

Kienzle is not happy with Lafontaine's answer, so he interrupts him again, this time shouting and again pointing at Lafontaine with his arm and hand. The conflict has reached its climax (see figure 7).



Figure 7. The climax of the conflict.

Both interlocutors are shouting, sitting with their upper torsos forwards, using one arm/hand with the index finger stretched pointing at the opponent. The dialog has turned into a fight to

gain the floor as well as the agreement of the audience. Only at this point does the TV show host try to stop the quarrel, but the two participants are not finished with the fight. Lafontaine counter-accuses Kienzle of being cynical and at the end of his speech he turns his face in the direction of two other participants, i.e., the TV-host and another participant in the debate, Schönblohm (see figure 8). Then, Lafontaine checks whether his opponent wants to continue the fight: he looks Kienzle directly in the eyes again for 3 seconds (see figure 8).



Figure 8. Lafontaine – gaze at host and audience, then checking Kienzle for three seconds.

Kienzle has no more arguments and drops the fight: he is speechless, he does not make any gestures, though he is watching Lafontaine, who seems to be the winner of this conflict.

IV. IDENTIFYING STANCES IN THE CONFLICT EPISODES OF A POLITICAL DEBATE

The following affective-epistemic properties, adhering to mental states and processes and/or communicative acts, were all exhibited by one or both participants in the conflict episode we described above: annoyed, irritated, angry, provocative, accusing, complaining, disagreeing and resigned. The question is, however, if they should all be identified as separate stances.

4.1 Level of Abstraction

Rather than seeing the mentioned properties as separate stances, one possibility is to see them as parts or aspects of a more complex "conflictual stance". If we adopt this view, there is probably only one stance that is assumed by both participants in the conflict and all the properties, with the possible exception of "resignation" are features of this stance.

Another possibility, if we want a much less abstract and more specific analysis, is to try to regard all the observed properties as stances. As a compromise position between these two extremes, we will explore a middle course by trying to find a limited number of stance clusters in each conflict episode.

4.2 Individuation of Stances

One aid in deciding on what level of abstraction we should adopt, is to evaluate whether the observed properties really are independent of each other. This can be done, by investigating the logical relations between them. We thus, for example have to investigate whether one can be annoyed without being irritated. If the result is negative, annoyance and irritation are, even if in some sense, analytically distinct, not empirically separable. We can also investigate whether annoyance and irritation are logically independent of anger. Here there is a

slightly different situation, since, if we take irritation and annoyance to be milder forms of anger, anger seems to imply annoyance and irritation, but annoyance and irritation do not necessarily imply anger. The difference between anger and either irritation or annoyance seems greater than that between irritation and annoyance. Note that there is also a Gricean implicature [15] involved, affecting our judgements, so that just as *he is 40 years old* implies *he is 30 years old* and "anger" implies "irritation", the expression *he is 30 years old* normally implicates (rather than implies) that he is exactly or only 30 years old. Similarly *he is irritated* normally implicates that he is (exactly or only) irritated and not angry.

So perhaps there is a complex "aggressive" stance, or rather complex of related aggressive stances which as milder forms have an "annoyed" or an "irritated" stance. The difference between annoyance and irritation is less clear, but perhaps also involves an intensity difference. We thus have a dynamics involving aggressive stances which escalates from annoyance, via irritation to anger.

If we continue our investigation, we can see that provocation, accusation and complaint are all possible without any degree of anger and that anger is also possible without connection to these states. But we should also note that even if they are not necessary for anger, the properties are all compatible with and often instrumental for an angry stance. At any rate, provocation, accusation and complaint seem logically independent of anger. However, it is less clear whether the three properties are independent of each other; accusation and complaint against persons seem to imply provocation of the same persons, but provocations do not necessarily imply accusations against persons or complaints, so they are both special cases of provocations. Similarly, accusations against persons seem to imply complaints against persons, but there are complaints (e.g. about the weather), that are not accusations, so we could group complaint and accusation together as successively more provocative stances. Of the remaining three stance candidates, engagement and disagreement seem implied both by the aggressive stances and by the provocative stances as features of both of these types of stances, so that both aggressive and provocative stances can be seen as special cases of engagement and disagreement. Again, we are perhaps confronted with analytical distinctions, which are not always empirically distinguishable. The only remaining stance candidate, "resignation", does not seem to be logically implied by the other properties, rather it is a causal consequence of behavior associated with the two dominant stances and therefore probably should be seen as a stance, independent from the aggressive and provocative stances.

We would, thus, end up with the following stances as characteristic of the conflict episode, we described above:

1. Aggressive stances (annoyance, irritation, anger)
-> (engagement, disagreement)

2. Provocative stances (provocation, complaint, accusation) --> (engagement, disagreement)
3. Resignation

In addition to these three stance types, we have the stances that are associated with the fact that as the debate starts, conflict is latent, leading to stances of engagement and disagreement on the part of the participants.

4.3 Co-construction of Stances

Since conflict is already initially latent in the political debates, stances of provocation and aggression are expectable. However, it is not clear whether the stances we have observed are the manifestations of individual dispositions of the debaters or rather are interactively coproduced, either simultaneously or sequentially as a series of temporally consecutive steps. In the case of the angry stances, we described above, it seems fairly clear that they, to a large extent, are coproduced. Kienzle and Lafontaine are coproducing shared angry stances. Anger and irritation are contagious.

This is also true when it comes to accusation-provocation. These stances can be manifestations of an individually assumed stance, but are also mostly coproduced. Something B says or does makes A provoke B who might then react with anger. But coproduction is not automatic, since A can be provocative without managing to provoke B, or angry without having an effect on B. Co-production of stances is a contingent and multicausal phenomenon, rather than a monocausal and deterministic one.

V. STANCES IN FOUR POLITICAL DEBATES

Below, in table 1, we will now summarize the stances, we found in the four conflict episodes we have analyzed (i.e. affective-epistemic states and processes as well as communicative acts connected with external behavior, which, according to the definition given above, can be called stances). The table gives an overview of what stances occur in the four conflict episodes we have examined. Besides anger and irritation, which occur in all four episodes, we see that annoyance, accusation and sarcasm have three occurrences, while ironic, superior, provocative and surprised have two occurrences. The remaining stances only have one occurrence each.

TABLE I. STANCES IN FOUR SELECTED CONFLICT EPISODES

No of Conflict Episodes Sharing Stance		Conflict Episodes			
		German 1	German 2	Italian	US
4	Angry	x	x	x	x
4	Irritated	x	x	x	x
3	Annoyed	x	x		x

3	Accusing	x		x	x
3	Sarcastic		x	x	x
2	Ironic		x		x
2	Superior	x			x
2	Provocative	x		x	
2	Surprised		x	x	
1	Engaged	x			
1	Impatient		x		
1	Accusing with a smile			x	
1	Confident				x
1	Complaining	x			
1	Ridiculing		x		
1	Apparently kind			x	
1	Satisfied				x
1	Disagreeing	x			
1	Disapproving			x	
1	Contemptuous (laughing theatrically)				x
1	Resigned	x			
1	Calm				x
1	Tense				x
1	Displaying morality				x

Based on our earlier discussion, concerning the possibility of grouping stance candidates into more complex stances, a possible grouping is the one given below:

German 1

1. Aggressive stances: angry, irritated, annoyed
2. Provocative stances: accusing, complaining, provocative
3. Resigned
4. Superior
5. Latent conflict states: engagement, disagreement

Both the aggressive stances and the provocative stances imply engagement and disagreement. However, engagement and disagreement do not necessarily imply or lead to anger or accusing. Since they are part of the initial conditions, they have been grouped separately.

For illustrations of these “stances” of German I, see above, section III.

German 2

1. Aggressive stances: angry, irritated, annoyed
2. Sarcastic stances: sarcastic, ironic, ridiculing
3. Superior
4. Surprised
5. Impatient

Examples of the “stances” in German 2 are illustrated below.



Figure 9. Roth: Surprised (second from the left)

R: “Ah! Es ist nicht eine Aufgabe einer Kirche die ethische Begründung für eine Technologie in Frage zu stellen, die nicht beherrschbar ist?!“ (“Ah! It is not the duty of a Church to question the the ethical justification of a technology, which is not controllable?!“)



Figure 10. Herles: Angry + sarcastic

H: “Da wird eine Technologie zum absolut Bösen erklärt! Weiche Satan!” (“Then a technology is declared as absolutely evil as the utterly evil! Begone Satan!”) / shouting



Figure 11. : Roth: Superior (has won)

Examples of the “stances” in the Italian debate are illustrated below.

Italian

1. Aggressive stances: angry, irritated
2. Provocative stances: accusing, provocative, accusing with a smile, apparently kind
3. Sarcastic stances: sarcastic
4. Surprised
5. Latent conflict states: disapproval, impatience



Figure 12. Moratti: Irritated and accusing

M: “la commissione antimafaiain consiglio comunale non avrebbe avuto competenze / noi abbiamo chiesto al prefetto e sulla base di quello che la prefettura ci ha indicato abbiamo preso una decisione”

(“the antimafia commission in milan would have had no powers / we asked the prefect and based on what he told us we took our decision”)

M: “credo che l{ }avvocato pisapia queste cose dovrebbe saperle”

(“i think lawyer pisapia should know these things”)



Figure 13. Pisapia: sarcastic, provocative with a smile and Moratti: Responding to the accusation with a smile.

P: “è un [1 po‘ nervosa / se mi lascia parlare forse sarebbe: anche più gentile // sarebbe più gentile]1

(“you’re [1 quite excited / if you let me speak that’d be very kind // that’d be very kind]1”)

M: “[1 // l{ }abbiamo fatta laddove si poteva fare]1”

(“[1 // we have done it where we could]1”)

Transcription conventions: [] marks indexed overlap, { } marks unpronounced letters, / = short pause, // = medium pause

Examples of the “stances” in the US American debate are given below.

US American

1. Aggressive stances: angry, irritated, annoyed
2. Provocative stances: accusing
3. Sarcastic stances: sarcastic, ironic, laughing theatrically
4. Superior stances: confident, satisfied, calm, display of high morality
5. Latent conflict stance: tension
6. Resigned



Figure 14. Perry accusing and Romney laughing at Perrys accusations



Figure 15. Effect of support from the audience: Romney satisfied, Perry hesitant

We see that aggressive stances occur in all four conflict episodes. Since this is also a criterion for having selected the episodes for our study of conflict episodes, it is hard to draw any conclusions from this, over and above the fact that aggressive stances apparently do occur in televised political debates in Germany, Italy and the USA.

We also see that provocative stances, especially accusations, are a part of the conflict in all debates, except the second German debate, where instead sarcastic stances have an important role, as they also have in the US American and Italian debates. Surprised stances occur in two debates and superior stances also occur in two debates, playing an especially important role in the American debate. Resignation occurs in two debates (German 1 debate and US debate) and impatience only in one (Italian debate), since in this debate, one participant keeps the floor most of the time, which makes other participants impatient (moving on their chairs and shouting “no” etc.). In addition to the stances thus far noted, it is likely that stances of disagreement, engagement and tension are a result of the latent conflict conditions, which are a presupposition of all the debates. (Other stance related descriptions of conflict situations can also be found in [16, [17, [18], and [19].

VI. SOME OBSERVATION ON THE BEHAVIOR RELATED TO THE OBSERVED STANCES

The main ways in which stances can be manifested are through vocal verbal behavior, prosody, posture and movement of different parts of the body. Usually, a stance is manifested in a combination of these features. However, some “stances” are primarily manifested through the content of the vocal verbal contributions, e.g. accusations or complaints, while other, like the aggressive “stances”, perhaps are most clearly manifested by prosody, posture and body movements.

Below, we present some observations on the nonverbal aspects of stance.

In the conflict episode from German 1, we suggested that the stances could be grouped into aggressive stances, provocative stances and a resigned stance. Let us now see to what extent the three stances are distinguishable from an observational point of view, i.e. to what extent these stance types have been coded for eight specific expressive features.

Direct eye gaze: accusing, provocative, angry, irritated
 Pointing at the other debater: accusing, angry, irritated
 Body leaning forward: accusing, provocative, irritated, angry
 Interruption: accusing, irritated
 Turn claim: accusing, irritated
 Raised voice (shouting): accusing, irritated, angry

Quiet voice: resignation:
 Non-focused gaze: resignation

As we can see, resignation is fairly different from the aggressive and provocative stances. But the provocative and aggressive stances share all the features listed above. This probably means that it is primarily the vocal verbal content and possibly prosodic features that enable us to distinguish aggressive stances from provocative stances.

This conclusion is to some extent supported if we consider all four analyzed episodes where there are a number of recurring associations between stance types and types of expression. Below, we have listed types of bodily expression associated with stance types occurring in conflicts in at least two of the three countries involved (Germany, Italy and the USA).

Stance types:

1. Angry + Accusing + Ironic

Direct eye gaze at the interlocutor

2. Angry + Accusing

One hand forward towards the interlocutor

Repeated hand beats

Upper torso leaning forward

3. Angry

Wide eye opening

Flushing/Blushing

Overlap/Interruption

Raised voice/Loud/Shouting

Shaking one’s head

4. Accusing

Facing the audience

Eyebrow raise

Index finger pointing at the interlocutor

5. Sarcastic/Ironic/Surprised

Both palms pushing forward

Again we observe that single bodily features do not always uniquely identify stances, although there are a few candidates for typical and possibly often discriminating features, such as, for example, an accusing “stance” being identified by index finger pointing and eye-brow raise and anger being identified by blushing or shaking one’s head. Other expressive features,

like repeated hand beats, interruption and raised voice/shouting, are less unique for one conflict-related property. Thus, as we see, angry and accusing stances often co-occur.

VII: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The paper has discussed and presented data on stances in four conflict episodes taken from four televised political debates (two German, one Italian and one US American). Some of the conclusions are that the concept of stance needs more clarification with regard to how stances should be individuated. We have discussed the following questions: Should stances be very fine grained or grouped together in more complex stances? Should stances be regarded as manifestations of individual states or should they be seen as coproduced by interacting individuals? We have also discussed whether stances can be identified by unique bodily behavior and seen that this is not always the case. Compatible stances often share behavioral features.

We have further presented an analysis of the stances found in the four selected conflict episodes, suggested a way of grouping them together and on the basis of this shown that several of the stance clusters occur in televised debates from all the three countries considered.

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