

## **1. Introduction**

Over the last couple of months, we have seen the start of one of the most important events worldwide when it comes to politics. In November 2016, the next president of the United States of America will be elected; an event that will certainly have an impact on the world's economy and politics. With the elections coming, the candidates of the different parties have started their campaigns and are ready to do whatever it takes to win the votes of the American population. As part of their strategy to communicate their ideas, the Republican Party started its debates on August 6th, 2015 to select the candidate that will compete for the presidency. The debates are broadcasted worldwide and to all of us watching them, it is serious business.

Political debates are an example of how humor is present in most parts of our lives; it is part of human nature. Raskin (1985) refers to humor as a universal trait comprising important social and psychological manifestations. But, why do we use humor in serious contexts such as politics? In order to answer this question, we first need to gain a better understanding of the functions of humor in society. Most of us see it as an amusement tool, something we use when we are with friends and family. Actually, some of us were taught that we do not use humor in serious situations such as religion, politics, and science. Humor is usually not seen as a tool to attack others, making it a very effective one. When it comes to political debates, humor is an effective choice to attack one's opponents without putting at risk the positive opinion the voters might have of the attacker. In this study I argue that humor can be used to attack someone else's face while saving one's own.

The use of humor to attack others is very effective, mainly because humor is often considered harmless. However, it has the power to decrease the likability of others while positioning

oneself in a position of power and superiority. Carranza (2010, p. 469) states that “humor can be regarded as an important weapon in conflictive interpersonal relationships”. Using humor to threaten others in political debates has the purpose of modifying the audience’s view in order to gain votes and subsequently win the elections.

Face, our public self-image, allows us to be recognized as an individual, striving to be accepted by others. Still, while speaking, we are constantly risking our own face through what we say and how we react to others. But when it comes to politics, do the candidates want their opponents to be liked? Certainly not! However, attacking one’s opponents directly may cause damage to one’s own face rather than that of the other candidates. This is where humor becomes a useful tool considering that it can be used as an indirect face threatening act (FTA). To avoid losing one’s own face, humor can be employed to cover up or soften the face threat.

However, to date, there is no exhaustive research on the relationship between humor and face threatening acts. The present study aims to understand how humor and FTAs are related further investigating the importance of the use of humor for different purposes and in different social contexts. I claim that humor is used as a powerful face threatening tool having a negative effect on how the opponent is seen while having a positive effect on how the speaker is recognized by the audience.

This study unites two fields of linguistics, semantics (humor) and pragmatics (FTAs). The two main questions the present study seeks to answer are: 1. How is humor used as an FTA in political debates? And 2. Why is humor used as an FTA? Answering these two questions will help us gain a better understanding of the powerful and strategic function humor has in

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society besides being used for amusement. Specifically, the study shows that humor is used in serious contexts such as politics with the goal to accomplish certain objectives while also shedding light on the effect humor has on both communicative partners, the listener and the speaker, as well as a third-party audience.

Chapter 2 of this thesis provides a detailed discussion of the necessary concepts and knowledge for a better understanding of humor, face threatening acts, and the relationship between these two phenomena. In Chapter 3, I explain how the data was collected and analyzed in order to answer the research questions. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study and a detailed discussion of the analyzed data. And finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the obtained results, points out the limitations of the study, and suggests further research on this topic.