

SELF- AND OTHER-PRESENTATION IN THE ROMANIAN 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION. A DISCOURSE-BASED ANALYSIS

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Abstract. The present paper examines the main themes used by the top candidates for the Romanian presidency to present themselves versus their opponents in online environments during the election campaign October–November 2024. Building on theoretical frameworks in digital communication (Yus 2011), online campaigning (Chadwick 2017), and the presentation of self (Goffman 1956), the candidates' performance is analyzed with a particular focus on the construction of ordinariness, referencing medium-level credentials as a (de)legitimization strategy, and gender-conditioning in relation with political leadership. The data consist of public statements and interviews selected from online discussion spaces, and are analyzed through a pragma-semantics lens in addition to Critical Discourse Analysis. In particular, we examine preferences in terms of lexis and propositional content, speech acts, representation and agency, while also taking ideological perspective into consideration. We aim to outline a profile of the current Romanian electorate, as a blueprint of “the public from the mind of the candidate”.

Keywords: presidential elections, political discourse, digital communication, online election campaigning, self-presentation theory, ordinariness.

1. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The most recent presidential elections in Romania attracted (widespread) international attention due to a series of unexpected developments: these had a profound impact on the worldwide perception of Romania, its political system and society at large. 2024 has been intensively discussed by the press and commentators² as a “super-election-year” in Romania³ and worldwide⁴, with almost half of the world population called to the polls, without considering the many unforeseen events, fallen governments, snap elections, and multiple first-time occurrences. In Romania, the presidential election – held to designate a new head of state after two consecutive five-year mandates by liberal Klaus Iohannis – was initially scheduled to take place in two rounds, on the 24th of November

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² In digital environments, as most Romanian newspapers appear only online.

³ https://romania.europalibera.org/a/economia-romaniei-in-anul-electoral-2024/330_99904.html

⁴ <https://www.euronews.ro/articole/retrospectiva-2024-anul-super-electoral-alegeri-sua-moldova-marea-britanie-franta-georgia>

and 8th of December 2024. Subsequently, following a decision of the Constitutional Court, the first round was annulled and the runoff eventually cancelled, causing waves of discontent among right-wing supporters, leading to protest movements demanding the reinstatement of the second round⁵ (“Turul 2 înapoi”, i.e., ‘[we want] the second round back’, translation mine).⁶

Despite a typically highly aggressive (Radu 2024 in Vasilescu et al. 2024) and exhausting campaign during the autumn of 2024, the mainstream media consistently featured the same well-known and highly disputed candidates, periodically alternating favorites. These included social-democrat Marcel Ciolacu, the incumbent prime minister (the top favorite); liberal Nicolae Ciucă, Ciolacu’s co-leader during the previous alliance; center-rightist Elena Lasconi, who obtained second place in the runoff; former social-democrat (currently) independent Mircea Geoană, defeated by Traian Băsescu in the 2009 presidential runoff; right-wing extremist George Simion; and Diana Șoșoacă, who was eventually removed from the presidential race for extremist discourse and violations of the constitution. However, to many people’s shock, on election day, polls as well as the official results presented independent candidate Călin Georgescu – among the lowest ranking candidates until that moment – in first position, on the verge of gaining presidential office. Representing strong antiestablishment views, many hadn’t heard of him until that moment. His last-moment ascension was later attributed to an unlawful use of social media platform TikTok, as well as to foreign interference. His candidacy and campaign were judged by the Constitutional Court of Romania to have thwarted the electoral process⁷, which eventually led to the cancellation of the first round and the postponement of the entire procedure to May 2025. Later, political tumult continued, with the resignation of the incumbent president, Klaus Iohannis; the appointment of interim president, Ilie Bolojan; next, the resignation of the prime minister, Marcel Ciolacu; and the interim appointment of liberal Cătălin Predoiu, resulting in the formulation of a completely interim government. Finally, five months after November 2024, following another ruthless campaign (described and analyzed in Botaş 2025), independent pro-European Nicușor Dan was elected president, defeating far-right nationalist George Simion. The new president’s inauguration took place on May 26, 2025.

The present paper examines selected instances of discourse produced by candidates highly rated in polls conducted by online media (i.e., polling at top positions) between October and November 2024.

The narrow objective of the study is to elucidate and analyze the topics and motives considered most relevant by the press and commentators, and thus which were prominently featured in the campaign discourses of the leading candidates. These topics were used to construct a favorable self-image which appealed to the electorate, and ultimately to secure votes. Looking at the themes and motives chosen by the candidates as a means of self- and other-presentation, the broad objective of the analysis is to outline a profile of the current Romanian electorate, namely to reflect the blueprint of the “public from the mind of the candidate”.

⁵ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/protest-aur-bucuresti/33272933.html>

⁶ It is important to mention that at the time of the collection of these data and, implicitly, the presentation held at the workshop on *Digital language and online communication* at the 24th International Conference of the Department of Linguistics, University of Bucharest (15-16 November 2024), to my knowledge, there was yet no foretaste of the chaos that was about to unfold very shortly.

⁷ <https://www.ccr.ro/comunicat-de-presa-6-decembrie-2024/>

In support of the above-mentioned objectives, I formulated the following research questions:

- (1) Which attributes were considered most relevant in the self- and other-presentation of top Romanian presidential candidates in the election campaign discourse of October-November 2024?
- (2) How do these attributes reflect and shape the profile of the current Romanian electorate, as envisaged by the candidates?

In determining the prominence of certain campaign topics and motives applied by candidates in their self- and other-presentation, a corpus-based approach was adopted. Among the relevant elements examined are lexis and propositional content, speech acts, representation and agency, as well as ideological perspectives, viewed as intentional, prioritized choices.

This paper is a continuation of a study initiated in the pre-campaign period of the 2024 Romanian presidential election, which analyzes how the leading presidential candidates portrayed themselves during mid-August and October 23, 2024 (Botaş 2024), and follows the evolution of these themes throughout the election campaign, up to election day, i.e., November 24, 2024.

2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Before delving into the analysis of the themes considered most relevant and most popular by the media in the aforementioned campaign discourses, in this section I will provide several theoretical considerations to clarify and contextualize the key concepts found in the title of this paper. These include *digital communication*, as understood through the cognitive-pragmatic lens proposed by Yus (2011). This framework is also extended to the notion of *online campaigning*, understood to be a “deinstitutionalized” (Oliver 1992, Aksom 2021) form of *political discourse*, no longer bound by formal conventions (e.g., parliament, press conferences, etc.), yet still preserving its core principles, as described in the mainstream literature (van Dijk 1997, 1998, Chilton 2004, Fairclough 2001, etc.), rounded in the conceptualization of the *presentation of self* as described by Goffman in his 1956 theory which postulates that humans naturally attempt to control how others perceive them, and engage in different types of performances to avoid embarrassment in their social interactions.

2.1. Digital communication

A description of online political communication must begin with an outline of “internet-mediated communication” (Yus 2011). Yus offers a cognitive-pragmatic framework for the analysis of communication in digital environments, defining cyberpragmatics as the study of “how information is produced and interpreted within the internet environment” (Yus 2011: 13). To understand how users interpret messages based on available contextual cues, this approach is grounded in the Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995), which postulates that human cognition is naturally oriented towards maximizing relevance, i.e., achieving the greatest cognitive effect with the least processing effort.

In digital environments, communication and its efficiency are impacted by a number of particularities, with noticeable effects at a linguistic level. The virtually unlimited technological affordances, lack of time constraints, and fluid social dynamics of digital environments, combined with the vast volume of content they generate, encourage a casual conversational style that closely resembles everyday speech rather than formal rhetoric. This contributes to a blurring of boundaries between message and performance, persona and authenticity, public and private spheres, as well as between serious and satirical modes of discourse, as “the new media [introduce] additional dimensions of hybridity” (Fetzer 2019: 11). Additionally, because content produced in online media persists and can be circulated in isolation from the original context, giving rise to, i.e., decontextualization, information is permanently exposed to potential reframing or recontextualization, which may easily lead to manipulation. Also, the permanent interest in increasing reach or readership on online platforms fosters an increasing use of ridicule and populist discourse, through an amplification of narratives that reinforce specific language patterns within ideological bubbles. It also has the effect of intensifying polarization, and paradoxically reduces the space for dialogue across communities or cultures.

2.2. Online election campaigning

Online campaigning (including online pre-campaigning) is a form of campaign discourse, which is based on the core principles of political discourse, i.e., it is primarily oriented towards the exercise of power (van Dijk 1997, 2006), where language is used to maintain or challenge power relations (Fairclough 2001). In line with the general features of political discourse, it aims to influence opinion, legitimize or delegitimize authority, and mobilize the people through persuasive language (Chilton 2004). Campaign discourse is loaded with ideology, which is expressed through lexical choices, argumentative structures, and discursive strategies such as positive self-representation and negative other-representation (van Dijk 1998); it plays a tremendous role in the construction of political identities through the strategic use of pronouns, e.g., formulating in-groups and out-groups (Reisigl and Wodak 2001) and *us* vs. *them* dichotomies or intergroup polarization (van Dijk 2000). Considering the performative nature of many types of political utterances, political discourse – to a large extent – does things through words (Austin 1962, Searle 1969), e.g., it makes promises, threats, declarations, alliances, separations, warnings, reassurances, etc., and involves ritual, symbolism, and performance to sustain or challenge authority and legitimacy (Chilton and Schäffner 1997).

To a certain extent, political discourse is versatile in nature, adapting to different formats of media communication, e.g., displaying variation in terms of style, pace, or rhetorical strategies, from TV to social media to livestreams. Digital communication transforms political discourse into more informal, fragmented, and interactive forms (Yus 2011), or “hybrid media systems” (Chadwick 2017), as social media encourages “ambient affiliation” (Zappavigna 2012), where political discourse is used to build solidarity and identity through vernacular speech. The digital environment, by virtue of its generalized unrestricted, but also unauthorized, unofficial nature facilitates a “deinstitutionalisation” of political discourse, in the sense of “an erosion or discontinuity of an institutionalized organizational activity or practice” (Oliver 1992). This may lead to behavioral “dissipation”

and “inconsistency” (Aksom 2021), among other things, as a “consequence of changes to the perceived utility or technical instrumentality” (Oliver 1992).

As a form of campaign discourse, online campaigning focuses on the self-definition and image crafting of the candidates, along with attempts to disqualify opponents, i.e., with each candidate claiming a certain type of ethos while simultaneously trying to undermine the opponent’s constructed image (Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 2011: 2013). These forms of discourse increase noticeably in intensity throughout the campaign, giving rise to further visibility, controversy, and ruthless scandals which inevitably emerge in the lead up to election day. Discourse produced ahead of elections is aimed at revealing and shaping tendencies or trends; it determines and influences voting intentions, creating a desire to be on “the winning side”, not through rational evaluation but through social influenceability and heuristic reasoning, i.e., the bandwagon phenomenon (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948, Mutz 1997).

Online campaigning utilizes all the genres of campaign political discourse, as “traditional genres” – e.g., slogans, speeches, ads, manifestos, public statements, interviews, debates – have mostly migrated onto the online environment, taking on the abovementioned characteristics (as facilitated by a lack of restriction and informality). These traditional genres are no longer limited by setting, format, or time constraints (e.g., during the current campaign, the public was presented with interviews up to 6 hours long). This also goes for “hybrid genres” and multimodality – facilitated by the digital environment – such as social media posts combining text and video, GIFs, hashtags, live interactions and commentaries, which evolve complex dialogic dynamics, which are magnified by the immeasurable volume of information posted on and circulated by the online media.

In Romania, the online media officially surpassed more traditional forms of political journalism and communication in 2014, with Klaus Iohannis’s historic “internet victory”⁸ raising questions about “the power of social media” in winning presidential elections.

2.3. The presentation of self (and other)

In this analysis of digital political campaign discourse, the Self-Presentation Theory, articulated by Goffman (1956), offers insight into the way in which politicians construct their public personas to seduce their audience and influence voter perception. Goffman postulates that, during interaction, individuals engage in performances to control the impressions other people form of them, stating that “when an individual plays a part, he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” (Goffman 1956: 10). He distinguishes between “front stage” and “back stage” communicative behavior, namely an individual’s performance for an audience, i.e., their public persona, as opposed to their relaxed and authentic “private” self. This distinction parallels the one between deliberate expressions and unintended cues, namely the expressions that one “gives” vs. the cues one “gives off”.

Political campaign discourse in an online environment presupposes meticulous persona-crafting to project a favorable image of the self, i.e., essentially “front stage”

⁸ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/romania/11249449/Romanian-presidential-election-does-Klaus-Iohanniss-victory-prove-social-media-can-win-an-election.html>

behavior. Social media platforms serve as stages for politicians to manage impressions through their posts and interactions, also allowing them to tailor messages for specific audiences, which can be understood as performances based on audience expectations. The online environment, through its informal, casual, and “deinstitutionalized” nature (Oliver 1992), often blurs the borders between front and back stage, or between public and private life aspects, offering potential voters a sense of authenticity and relatability to politicians.

Operating within the digital environment to build and maintain public support ahead of presidential elections, a candidate puts permanent effort into managing impressions and adapting their performance to various audiences, at an individual level “wishing them to think highly of him [/her] and to think he [/she] thinks highly of them” (Goffman 1956: 2), working to “create an impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his [/her] own plan” (Goffman 1956: 3), while *others* (i.e., interlocutors) make inferences and “skeptically examine aspects of his [or her] activity, of whose significance he [or she] is not aware” (Goffman 1956: 3).

3. METHOD AND DATA ANALYSIS

3.1. Preliminary assessment

The dataset for this study consists of a selection of samples of self-presentation, as well as other-presentation, in online discussion spaces⁹. Sampling was done randomly and thematically, through observation and random selection. The unit of analysis is the theme, defined as a conceptual structure that contains a number of inter-related scripts (Tannen 1979: 25), analyzed in relation to the motives declared, i.e., assertions made throughout the course of self- and other-presentation. The themes analyzed – evaluated according to the criteria of (a) frequency of use and (b) salience – are: (1) *ordinariness* as a strategy of self- and other-presentation, (2) *medium-level credentials* as self-legitimization and other-delegitimization, and (3) *gender dynamics* in political leadership as favorable for the self and unfavorable for the other. Besides these, a number of additional, more or less frequent themes are e.g., secrets, or extremism, or, along the lines of (2), knowledge of English as a basic skill, and conversely a lack of knowledge of English as a potential point for other-delegitimization. On the other hand, several “non-themes”, i.e., themes whose validity is questioned by the press (e.g., Euronews¹⁰), or taboo topics, have a marked presence in campaign discourse; these include women’s right to abortion in Romania as a democratic, European country¹¹, the traditional family, sexual minorities, etc.

A preliminary assessment suggests that the data display a tendency towards amalgamation. Candidates tend to produce indistinguishable discourses and – regardless of

⁹ *Starea Nației* cu Dragoș Pătraru, *Față în față* cu Andreea Esca, *40 de întrebări* cu Denise Rifai and online news platforms (adevarul.ro, hotnews.ro, euronews.ro, etc.). The statements selected for analysis were originally shared over the respective social media platforms and multiple online channels which can be accessed online. For this reason, during data analysis, examples are isolated, with a (narrow) focus on the linguistic data, with sources excluded.

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXAyveYdvtI>

¹¹ <https://www.digi24.ro/alegeri-prezidentiale-2024/avortul-si-candidatii-la-functia-de-presedinte-al-romaniei-ce-spun-politicienii-despre-dreptul-femeii-de-a-decide-privind-corpul-sau-3001833>

political affiliation – promote similar values, e.g., conservative, traditional, religious, and nationalist, falling under what could be loosely labelled a right-wing orientation. Initially, the examination of the themes and motives prioritized by the top candidates in their self- and other-presentation during the presidential election campaign was driven by a curiosity concerning whether candidates would match the expectations of the Romanian electorate, and to what extent. A study which received attention from the press¹² found that an “ideal” or “landmark candidate” should display sophistication, diplomacy skills, and an explicit desire for change. Building on the observation that candidates prioritized significantly different qualities than those proposed in the study, Botaş (2024) broadens the focus and raises cultural awareness of Romania’s contemporary socio-political context by outlining what may be termed the “profile of the electorate from the candidates’ view”.

3.2. Data analysis

As briefly discussed in previous sections, the data for this analysis were selected thematically and organized according to the identified themes, i.e., *ordinariness* as an object of self- and other-presentation (3.2.1); the significance of medium-level credentials – “the baccalaureate diploma” (3.2.2); and gender dynamics in adversarial discourse related to political leadership (3.2.3). These themes emerged in the pre-campaign period and were kept in the spotlight throughout the campaign, up to the elections, with theme (2) medium level credentials, still unclarified by the end of the campaign. The incipient phase of the emergence of these themes was discussed to some extent in Botaş (2024), which raised cultural awareness about the profile of the Romanian electorate as envisaged by the candidates. Starting from a lexical and propositional level, the themes are interpreted as discursive constructions supported by individual preferences concerning speech acts, representation, and agency, as well as by ideological views.

3.2.1. *Ordinariness as a theme of self- and other-presentation*

One of the earliest and most prominent themes employed by candidates in the self-definition process is *ordinariness*, “as an object of talk” (Fetzer 2019: 7). According to Fetzer’s (2019) description, *ordinariness* is a discursive resource used by politicians to construct themselves as ordinary people, from their position as privileged elites running to be the country’s head of state. It is used/performed with the goal of achieving symbolic closeness with the electorate, through personalization and informalization of the political discourse. Linguistically, *ordinariness* is constructed through the use of informal vocabulary and syntax, along with personal stories or anecdotes referencing everyday life, humble origins, and through a show of support for “populist claims of representing the ‘real’ people” (Fetzer 2019: 72). *Ordinariness* is instrumentalized as “a symbol of moral virtue” (Fetzer 2019: 51).

One of the most popular scripts of self-presentation identified in the data is that of “a normal person”, from “a normal family”, having “a normal life”, wishing for “a normal country”, who is able and committed to restore “normality”. While previous campaigns also

¹² <https://www.euronews.ro/articole/studii-ce-fel-de-presedinte-vor-romanii-de-la-candidati-locomotiva-la-candidati-f>

promoted sophistication and erudition, during this election, ordinariness (as a populist strategy) was prioritized by all presidential candidates, regardless of party ideology or political orientation, e.g., left-wing, right-wing, elitist, populist, etc.

During the 2024 election campaign, one of the most salient lexical choices for rendering ordinariness was through a reference to “normality” and the quality of being “normal”, in particular in propositional structures of a simple, modal, or mixed type. Alternatively, ordinariness is constructed through assimilation/collectivization (van Leeuwen 2008: 37) – to “the many”, “millions of Romanians” – or through determination (van Leeuwen 2008) – through personal stories describing a propensity for work from a young age, along with a lack of shame for this propensity. Some such statements, made by candidates to present themselves as “normal”, “akin to the many”, and “working hard from a young age”, may be found below:

- (1) „Sunt un om normal, care a avut o viață normală.” (Nicolae Ciucă)
I am a normal person who has had a normal life.
- (2) „Suntem o familie normală și modestă.” (George Simion)
We are a normal and modest family.
- (3) „Am o calitate importantă: sunt un om normal”. (Marcel Ciolacu)
I have one important quality: I'm a normal person.
- (4) „Eu, unul, sunt un candidat căt se poate de normal.” (Marcel Ciolacu)
I, for one, am a perfectly normal candidate.
- (5) „[Candidatura mea este] o candidatură normală, firească.” (Mircea Geoană)
[My candidacy is] a normal candidacy.
- (6) „Nu am ieșiri, sunt ieșiri normale.” (Diana Șoșoacă)
I don't have outbursts; [these] are normal outbursts.
- (7) „O să fiu un român ca toți românii, un președinte normal.” (Nicolae Ciucă)
I will be a Romanian like all Romanians, a normal president.
- (8) „Vreau o Românie normală, în care fiecare cetățean să se simtă reprezentat”. (George Simion)
I want a normal Romania, where every citizen feels represented.
- (9) „Sunt un om simplu, ca toți românii, care vrea o țară normală și dreaptă”. (George Simion)
I am a simple man, like all Romanians, who wants a normal and just country.
- (10) „Am fost și am rămas un om simplu, oricât de departe am ajuns”. (Nicolae Ciucă)
I have been and I remain a simple man, no matter how far I've come.
- (11) „Apreciez că Marcel Ciolacu și-a acceptat înfrângerea. Este un gest de normalitate.” (Elena Lasconi)
I appreciate that Marcel Ciolacu has accepted defeat. It is a gesture of normality.
- (12) „Eu nu sunt Iohannis, să îmi doresc să fiu cel mai iubit dintre pământeni.” (Marcel Ciolacu)
I am not Iohannis, wishing to be the most beloved among mortals.
- (13) „În acest moment, sunt singurul candidat care poate aduce o normalitate în România.” (Marcel Ciolacu)
At this moment, I am the only candidate who can bring normality to Romania.

(14) „Sunt unul dintre milioanele de români care, după Revoluție, și-au văzut de viață. Sunt unul dintre milioanele de români care, după Revoluție, s-au îndrăgostit, au clădit o familie, și-au construit o carieră.” (Elena Lasconi)
I am one of the millions of Romanians who, after the Revolution, have moved on with their lives. I am one of the millions of Romanians who, after the Revolution, fell in love, started a family, and built a career.

(15) „Am muncit imediat după ce am terminat liceul. Tatăl meu m-a dat afară din casă. Voi nu ați prins vremurile acelea. Taică-miu a zis: Mă, dacă nu ești în stare să intre la facultate du-te la muncă, mă! Pe urmă m-am dus în armată. Erau alte vremuri. Așa e adevărul! Mi-am făcut o familie, am muncit, am muncit în mediul privat... nu-mi e rușine de absolut nimic” (Marcel Ciolacu)
I worked right out of high school. My dad kicked me out of the house. You didn't live through those times. My dad said, "Dude, if you can't go to college, get a job. Then I joined the army. Those were different times. That's the truth! I started a family, I worked, I worked in the private sector... I'm not ashamed of anything.

In examples (1), (2), and (3) the speaker presents the self through the adjective “normal”, basically meaning “conforming to a standard” (merriam-webster.com), attributing a quality, a moral virtue, to their identity and private life, e.g., *normal* person, *normal* life, *normal* family. From a CDA perspective, “[being a] normal [person]” represents a semiotic-behavioral social action (van Leeuwen 2008: 73); it is recontextualized as a desirable feature, a positive marker of familiarity, stability, and modesty. Through syntactic coordination, “normal” is equated to “modest”, another moral virtue. Ordinariness is also represented as an object that may be possessed, e.g., “I have an important quality [=ordinariness]”. In (4) and (5) the quality of “normal[cy]” is attributed to professional identity and public life, in association with the activity, occupation, or role of being a candidate, through functionalization (van Leeuwen 2008: 42); association through possession is also expressed in (5) with “[mine is] a normal candidacy”. In (6), “normal” is used to humanize violent expressions of feelings, i.e., “outbursts”, yet the speaker disassociates through a denial of possession of what could be perceived as a fault, i.e., incapacity of self-containment, which could possibly affect the perceived affiliation with the audience. At a speech act level, these are all assertives, namely confident statements, or simple claims to truth. In examples (7), (8), and (9), ordinariness is constructed through the use of modality. (7) is a commissive speech act orienting towards future collectivization with “all Romanians”, and also includes a slight fallacy in the association between the (singular) elitist position of the president and the “normal” quality describing “all Romanians”. An expressive speech act (8) frames “normality” as a desirable, moral quality for Romania, representing the electorate through beneficialization (van Leeuwen 2008: 52): under this frame, Romanians are passive recipients, i.e., beneficiaries of equal representation in the “normal Romania”, a desirable and achievable result, according to the speaker. Similarly, through an assertive speech act and a simple claim to truth, (9) presents the speaker as an ordinary citizen who shares the desire for a “normal” and “just” country with his compatriots. In (10), ordinariness is constructed through the adjective “simple”, i.e., free from vanity (merriam-webster.com), a quality akin to modesty and humility. The speaker reinforces this trait as a consistent feature of both his private and public life by using the deictic “remain”, which anchors the deictic center of his identity in the previously

mentioned “simplicity”, a quality intended to foster closeness with ordinary people. The endurance of the moral virtue of simplicity is presented as having outweighed the speaker’s presupposed successes, inferred through the use of the concessive “no matter how [far I’ve come in life]”, where both qualities are meant to seduce the potential electorate. In (11), “normality” is represented as a quality of the opponent, through single determination (van Leeuwen 2008: 52), and is used to describe the gesture of a political opponent, namely that of having accepted defeat (in the electoral race won by the speaker). The winner no longer treats Marcel Ciolacu as an opponent and thus a threat, and has no need to disqualify him in front of the audience: instead, she (the speaker) expresses “appreciation” for the “normality” he showed by ceding defeat. In (12), the speaker constructs ordinariness through disassociation from the elitist figure of the then-incumbent president Klaus Iohannis, to whom he also attributes a desire for superlativeness and a narcissistic need for validation from his fellow citizens, even beyond the borders of Romania (with the alleged “wish to be the most loved among mortals”). The utterance is an assertive, representing the speaker’s ordinariness through disassociation, determination, and nomination (van Leeuwen 2008: 52). In (13), “normality” is an indefinite object framed as a desirable acquisition for the country, attainable through the agency and competence of the speaker, who is (self-)proclaimed to be unique in his ability to achieve it. The use of “bring”, an intrinsically deictic verb, implies that the object to be brought (in) – in this case, normality – is positioned at a distance from the deictic center and can be moved closer through the speaker’s deliberate action (Romania, i.e., *I/we-here-now*). The last two examples, (14) and (15) construct the ordinariness of the speaker through assertive speech acts, i.e., anecdotes of working from a young, in direct association with “millions of Romanians”; “[falling] in love”, “[building] a family/a career” in (14), along with “the army” and “the private sector” in (15), are presented as qualities of the ordinary self, resonating with the large public. Anaphora and repetition are employed as intensifiers, producing the impression of hard work and noteworthy effort, qualities acquired by the speaker in the early days of his/her life, conferring appropriateness and reliability to his ethos as a presidential candidate.

Ordinariness is prioritized as a top quality in the self- and other-presentation of presidential candidates. Candidates make claims to the attribute of “normality”, as a property of their private and public identity, but also modal claims, committing to future action or expressing desire for the “normality” of Romanian society. In line with the principle of positive self-representation and negative other-representation (van Dijk 1997, 1998), speakers dissociate from figures who lack the quality of “normality” and who engage in practices perceived as detrimental to the speakers’ face. Ordinariness is constructed through lexical choices, stemming from terms like “normal”, “simple”, “modest”, but also through association with “millions of Romanians” or “all Romanians”, as well as with middle and lower classes practices, such as working from an early age and having a propensity for hard work.

In summary, the concept of “normal” is used in the performance of assertive and commissive speech acts, including claims to the veracity of being a “normal person” and commitments towards future action associated with the desirable quality of “normal people”. The examples show that “normal” is also used as a rhetorical device to downplay expectations of perfection and to emphasize relatability, serving to position the speaker as an approachable, down-to-earth figure, as opposed to a remote or privileged leader indicating a populist campaign.

To integrate these findings in the definition of a strategy, and to relate the construction of ordinariness to its lexical, propositional, and representational manifestations, this process could be described as *normalification*. *Normalification* acts as a proposal to nuance *normalization*, specifically emphasizing the human agency involved in the process of “becoming normal”, i.e., in the *construction* of normality (vs. the *evolution* of normality).

The emergence of ordinariness as a prominent theme in the 2024 presidential election campaign is facilitated by the digital environment and the online media as dominant means of communication which, as discussed in 2.2, encourage “ambient affiliation” (Zappavigna 2012). Thus, political discourse is used to build solidarity and identity with others through vernacular speech. This also explains the diachronic shift towards an increasing popularity of ordinariness as a theme in campaign discourse, in comparison with previous elections where more “traditional” media predominated (see 2.2).

3.2.2. *Medium-level credentials*

Another diffuse topic, which has become a theme, consists of references to “the baccalaureate degree” as a means of questioning candidates’ education, and thus validity, in presidential races. It was launched into discussion early in the pre-campaign period (August 2024) and kept in focus throughout the entire campaign (November 2024), with echoes persisting still after the election (2025). In September 2024, USR candidate Elena Lasconi “put pressure on” the incumbent prime minister and favorite candidate PSD Marcel Ciolacu to reveal his baccalaureate diploma to the Romanian public, implying that he didn’t possess one¹³. What ensued was a seemingly endless discussion concerning “the baccalaureate diploma”¹⁴.

According to political commentators, journalists, and even some of the candidates, this was the first time in the history of presidential campaigns in Romania that credentials, i.e., high-school certifications and diplomas (with a particular focus on the exact marks obtained by each candidate) were prioritized as campaign topic. Previous elections had consistently highlighted issues related to plagiarism of doctoral works (e.g., Victor Ponta in 2014). The last decade has seen some variation in the socio-cultural evolution of this theme, whose use is decreasing.

The theme of medium-level education and the topic of the baccalaureate diploma were employed both as positive self-representation and negative other-representation. The spread of this topic – which became a disputed theme in the pre-campaign period before the official launch of any candidacy – had the effect of disqualifying one particular candidate, implicitly benefiting the others, and later led to “elections with BAC diplomas on the table”¹⁵.

Pragmatically, the baccalaureate diploma attests the completion of intermediate studies. This theme largely relates to middle-class citizens, which constitute the (mass)

¹³ <https://ziaristii.com/strans-cu-usa-sa-si-arate-diploma-de-bacalaureat-ciolacu-raspunde-ca-am-luat-o-medie-suficient-de-buna-dar-ca-prefer-ca-autoritatatile-sa-va-dea-raspunsul/>

¹⁴ In line with the French system, Romanians receive this certification when they complete high school, following the “Baccalaureate exam”, so it can be understood loosely as a “high school diploma”.

¹⁵ <https://adevarul.ro/alegeri-presidentiale-2025/alegeri-cu-diploma-de-bac-pe-masa-ce-note-aulat-2442980.html>

audience of this public self-legitimization and other-delegitimization. In the theme structure, interrelated scripts alternate accusation of or disapproval of (not) possessing a baccalaureate diploma with a challenge to publicly demonstrate the possession of a baccalaureate diploma.

In the form of a modal claim to truth and commitment, made in the performance of assertive and commissive speech acts, the baccalaureate diploma is introduced as a topic through intensifiers (“naturally”) and indefinites (“anyway”, “anytime”), emphasizing the undoubtable existence of such a diploma and its unconditional availability upon request. The use of modals such as “can”, used as markers of ability and willingness, emphasizes the speaker’s claim to control when, how, or if they choose to share their diploma, suggesting an underlying defense mechanism, in this case addressing skepticism and doubt cast by a political opponent.

To illustrate this theme, I provide some examples from the period between September and November 2024 below:

(16) „Vin odată la dumneavoastră și vă dau toate diplomele. După campanie. Toate, și de la facultate, și de peste tot. Am și foile matricole. Și eu m-am minunat, la unele am avut note mici, la unele note mari” (Marcel Ciolacu)
I'll come to you and give you all my degrees. After the campaign. All of them, from college and everywhere else. I've even got the transcripts. I was surprised myself, I got low grades in some subjects and high grades in others.

In this example, positive self-representation is achieved through the performance of a commissive speech act set in a distant future; this was interpreted as hesitation in the public space, with some commentators suggesting that the refusal to publicly show the baccalaureate diploma raised questions regarding the veracity of his declarations. The commitment to show the degrees is articulated using multiple indefinite elements, e.g., through reference to an indefinite future, an indefinite number of diplomas, an indefinite number of institutions, additional types of documents, a wide spectrum of grade levels. The action is represented as instrumental (van Leeuwen 2008: 73).

Amid public discussion of Marcel Ciolacu’s baccalaureate diploma, the theme was brought under discussion by Elena Lasconi, in a press conference in September 2024. She declared:

(17) „Oricum eu am o diplomă de bacalaureat pe care v-o pot arăta.” (Elena Lasconi)
Anyway, I have a baccalaureate diploma that I can show you.

At the time of the utterance, the definiteness constructed through the indexical “that I can show you” was interpreted as an allusion to Marcel Ciolacu’s lack of transparency regarding his baccalaureate diploma. Doubling down on this, Lasconi emphasized that she is not part of the system and is not backed by interest groups, in contrast with her opponents.

(18) „Bacalaureatul l-am susținut acum 38 de ani, l-am luat cu media 7,03. Iar dacă tot am căutat, am și diploma de licență de la facultate, unde am susținut examenul și am luat media 9.” (Marcel Ciolacu)

I took the Baccalaureate 38 years ago, with an average of 7.03 [out of 10]. And while I was searching, I also found my Bachelor's degree from university, where I took the exam and got a grade 9 [out of 10].

In full realization of the theme, Marcel Ciolacu came out with a declaration packed with exact data on his baccalaureate diploma, but failed to commit to revealing the document publicly. Exact information (“38 years ago”, “average of 7.03”, “grade 9”), in association with synchronicity (“[found multiple diplomas simultaneously] while I was searching”) create reliability and invite commitment, as a burden of proof, yet is impeded by lack of transparency.

In this example, positive self-representation is achieved through the performance of an assertive speech act set in an exact past, claiming the achievement of a baccalaureate and additional possession of a Bachelor's degree, with specification of an exact grade. The declaration was interpreted as lacking proof in the absence of the exhibition of the diploma in the public space, with some commentators suggesting that the refusal to publicly show the baccalaureate diploma raised questions regarding the veracity of his declarations. The claim to truth is formulated through multiple definite elements, e.g., through reference to a definite past, the use of the simple past tense, exact numbers, the progressive aspect, followed by reference to additional exact numbers and a large spectrum of digits. The action is represented as nontransactional (van Leeuwen 2008: 73), with no concrete outcome to date.

To summarize, “the baccalaureate diploma” is employed in assertive and commissive speech acts, which claim the veracity of possessing a baccalaureate diploma and commitments towards future action associated with the desirable situation of publicly showing his baccalaureate diploma. The examples indicate that “the baccalaureate diploma” also functions as a rhetorical device to conceal a defense mechanism developed in response to public skepticism. It serves to mitigate negative portrayals and to position the speaker as a reliable, resilient figure – one who deflects suspicions of incompetence – as part of a populist strategy.

The theme of “the baccalaureate diploma” emerged in the digital environment and was fomented by the online media, and was spread throughout the entire press. The “baccalaureate diploma” is additionally associated with reluctance of or boasting over showing the baccalaureate diploma, (not) having been a good pupil, female gender associated with more diligence in education, all used as strategies for positive self-representation and negative other-representation.

3.2.3. The gender card

Considering that “gender has become one of the first languages of politics” (Roventă-Frumușani 2022: 212), the gender card is a worldwide popular theme, in campaigns and in general. ‘The gender card’ is understood here as a rhetorical strategy whereby a female candidate highlights her gender—explicitly or implicitly—as an asset, seeking to capitalise on perceived advantages such as empathy, inclusiveness, novelty, or symbolic progress, in contrast to male opponents or the political establishment (also discussed in Botaş 2020 and Botaş 2021). Furthermore, gender identity is understood in Goffman's terms as “the way in which the individual elaborates the feeling of who he/she

is, by referring to his/her sexual class" (Rovența-Frumușani 2022); in adversarial interactions "gender stereotypes are used strategically" (Rovența-Frumușani 2022: 221).

Drawing on Erving Goffman's (1977) theory on the social production of gender – which considers gender to be a dichotomy used to perpetrate gender differences and distinguish between desirable and undesirable attributes for each gender – in this section I discuss a selection of examples to illustrate gender dynamics in the 2024 presidential campaign.

Gender performance is a recent concern in presidential campaign discourse in Romania, with only one previous election having a female finalist as a candidate for presidency, in 2019 (Viorica Dăncilă, defeated by Klaus Iohannis, who also refused to take part in a debate with her). Women in Romanian politics, despite a recent increase in visibility and activity, are still generally under-represented or framed mostly visually (Rovența-Frumușani 2022: 2014). In the last decade, from a (then) bitter and offensive socio-political relationship between finalists – with the press mostly reporting on fashion items, jewelry, hairstyles, and the like about the female candidate Viorica Dăncilă (Rodat 2019) – the 2024 campaign presents the Romanian public with an apparently overly polite gender discourse, covering gendered ideologies. One of the presidential candidates, far-right extremist George Simion, characterized the typical woman in politics as "easy, a mistress, a shrew"¹⁶ at a party meeting about the role of women in society, inviting his female colleagues to change this image. This discursive practice is referred to as "institutionalized sexism" by the press, in particular by recorder.ro¹⁷.

In 2024, the theme of the gender card was developed by multiple candidates, either through direct references or allusions to women's (in)ability to assume the highest state office. The political landscape was made up of 14 candidates officially enrolled in the presidential race, initially ten men and four women (with one eliminated for extremism), variably categorized by the press as candidates "with a real chance", "marginals", and "mavericks". Of these, Elena Lasconi was the only female candidate included in the first category, and ultimately ended up second in the runoff, which, as already discussed, was eventually cancelled and rescheduled for 2025. From the beginning of the campaign, she adopted a clear stance by playing the gender card, stating that despite the challenges, Romania is ready for a woman-president and calling on all Romanian women to unite in support of her. Presidency and gender dynamics quickly became a theme in the campaign, with Marcel Ciolacu conceptualizing "presidency" as "a big hat", particularly for "a lady", and Elena Lasconi counteracting the attack with an argument about "anyone", not only women. Furthermore, in other-presentations by male counter-candidates, the condition of "being a lady" is said to presuppose greater respect, protection, greater skill, but may also entail a poor understanding of "serious matters". The following examples illustrate such gender dynamics in the 2024 campaign:

(19) „Lasconi e o doamnă respectată. Nu vorbesc niciodată urât despre o doamnă [dar președinția] e o funcție cu părărie mare.” (Marcel Ciolacu)
Lasconi is a respected lady. I would never speak badly of a lady [but presidency] it's a position with a big hat.

¹⁶ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/george-simion-catre-femeile-din-aur-la-o-dezbaterere-despre-feminism-schimbat-modelul-femeii-in-politica-usoara-amanta-mahalagioica-4492804>

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KKZzE3Faio>

The first example, a declaration made by Marcel Ciolacu, is an ambiguous compliment and a hedged evaluation meant to indirectly disqualify his female counter-candidate, Elena Lasconi, from the presidential race on the basis of her gender. Wielding the metaphor of presidency as “a big hat”, the declaration serves to imply that the role of president is a task or a responsibility beyond someone’s capabilities, qualifications or authority, through overdetermination, symbolization (van Leeuwen 2008: 73). Targeted at a female opponent, it is an attempt of negative other-representation as unfit, incapable, or out of place, implying an overreaching attempt to handle something she is not prepared for or suited to, with the aim of invalidating the opponent through a reduction of her political identity and intellectual capabilities. The formulation triggers the presupposition that despite being respectable, Lasconi would not be fit for president. Ideologically, it is an expression of traditional gendered politeness indicating superficial respect, covering implicit biases, and leading to sexist interpretations given the inter-gender competition. Despite using the formal “lady” to describe Elena Lasconi, the appellative chosen is not a courteous one, i.e., her surname; he juxtaposes a questionable degree of respect for her statute and identity, formulated as an apparent compliment (“respected lady”) with a doubt about her capacity to exercise the position in question, as an insinuative counter-argument. The indirect delegitimization is rooted in the activation of cultural stereotypes about women’s inadequacy in leadership positions. The declaration achieves an elegant distancing between the speaker and the competitor, maintaining the appearance of respect but suggesting implicit superiority.

- (20) „Pălăria de președinte este categoric prea mare pentru oricine dacă te gândești la ceea ce înseamnă președinte. Aș putea să spun că nu sunt un politician cu tradiție, poate nu sunt exemplu, un politician cu experiență, dar vreau binele acestei țări.” (Elena Lasconi)
The president's hat is definitely too big for anyone if you think about what it means to be president. I could say that I am not a traditional politician, maybe I am not a role model, an experienced politician, but I want the best for this country.
- (21) „Pe mine mă tot întreabă jurnaliști dacă nu este o pălărie prea mare, dar au întrebat vreun bărbat? Și când am fost trimisă la crăciună, am câștigat Masterchef. Sunt gospodină, dar pot să fac și carieră.” (Elena Lasconi)
They keep asking me if it's too big of a hat, but have they asked any men? And when I was sent back to the kitchen, I won Masterchef. I am a good housewife, but I can also have a career.
- (22) „Încearcă să se inducă ideea că nu mă pricep.” (Elena Lasconi)
They're trying to make it sound like I'm not good enough.

Examples (20), (21), and (22) express self-reflection, self-evaluation, and self-revalidation, and are reactions which contest (19), in an attempt to counter-balance the idea that “a president’s hat” is socially perceived as inaccessible to women. In (20) the issue is transmuted towards “anyone”, and she reaffirms her will and ethical stance on “[wanting] the best for this country”. The description of a statute-role misfit through the *hat* metaphor, mocks the preconception that women are “too small” for roles of power. The use of the intensifier “definitely” to double down on the notion of “the big hat” introduces a strategic downgrading of all candidates, and is followed by a reaffirmation of her personal

determination, from an assumed outsider-position (“I am not a traditional politician”), to suggest authenticity and political freshness. In (21) and (22), the speaker is representing herself as a target of “them”, i.e., both the press (21) and her male opponents (22). (21) is a plea for equal gender treatment, along with a self-presentation of high performance in gender-related activities (winning a cooking contest), but also professionally. In (22), through an assertion, i.e., a claim to truth, she alleges the complicity of her opponents in secretly cooperating towards the dishonest purpose of creating an impression of inappropriateness and incompetence about her.

- (23) „Este o doamnă, trebuie să o protejăm.” (George Simion)
She's a lady, we have to protect her.
- (24) „Deoarece este o doamnă.” (George Simion)
Because she's a lady.
- (25) „Ştiți bine că respect partea aceasta de contracandidați, când este vorba de o doamnă cu atât mai mult.” (Nicolae Ciucă)
You know well that I respect my opponents, all the more when it's a lady.

Examples (23), (24), and (25) reveal how lexical choices, propositional structures and implicatures construct femininity as an exceptional attribute per se. In (23), the speaker performs an assertive speech act with an embedded indirect directive. The female candidate's description as a “lady” constructs her identity as vulnerable and presupposes a need for protection, by an exclusive, male “we”. The use of the term “lady” is not merely polite address, but an index of social norms concerning femininity and fragility. (24) is an assertive elliptical justification relying on cultural commonsense assumptions that women must be treated differently, reinforcing gender differences as a strategy for positive self-representation and negative other-representation. Statement (25), despite displaying a more diplomatic formulation, continues the logic of (detrimental) exceptionality. By stating that respect for a counter-candidate who is a woman is contingent on “all the more” reasons, the speaker performs an expressive act positioning women as political outliers, i.e., requiring a specialized category of esteem, further constructing women in politics as marked figures.

- (26) „Oricum, femeile sunt de obicei mai capabile decât bărbații.” (Nicolae Ciucă)
Anyway, women are usually more capable than men.
- (27) „Am fost deșteaptă că am știut carte.” (Ana Birchall)
I was smart because I was educated.

Examples (26) and (27) are goal-oriented assertions of female superiority functioning as rhetorical devices to seduce the audience through a reversal of normative discourse. The use of the scalar implicature “usually” softens the assertion and maintains space for male exceptionality, and hinges on simplistic generalizations of gender dynamics. In (27), the female speaker foregrounds cognitive abilities as earned through intellectual effort, framing capability as a learned competence, which is used as self-legitimization.

- (28) „Fac un apel la doamna să înțeleagă un pic aritmetică și politică reală.” (Nicolae Ciucă)
I appeal to the lady to understand a little arithmetic and real politics.

In contrast to the previous examples, in (28) we are dealing with a polite formulation of a condescending directive, assuming the speaker's superior epistemic authority and presupposing the female opponent's deficiency in logic and pragmatism.

Looking at these selected examples, the theme of the gender card alternates inter-related scripts, where the indexing of female candidates as unfit for the highly demanding role of president is counter-balanced by a transfer of this challenge to 'any' candidate, by the trope that womanhood entails a need for extra respect and protection, along with the representation of women as more skilled or less skilled than men. Employing assertive and directive speech acts, gender is frequently represented through an interesting interplay of genericization and specification (van Leeuwen 2008: 52), i.e., generic reference. This is realized by the use of bare plurals, but also by reference in the singular accompanied by a definite article (van Leeuwen 2008: 36); it is also realized through specific treatment of women as lacking sophistication, as seen above, raising questions about what Yus calls "[operating with] a default level of politeness" (Yus 2011: 285), and confirming the observation that aggressiveness is a key feature of Romanian political discourse (Radu 2024 in Vasilescu et al. 2024).

4. DISCUSSION AND FINAL REMARKS

This paper discussed three main themes employed in online discussion spaces by top-ranking candidates of the November 2024 Romanian presidential elections during their campaigns. Through the lens of pragma-semantics and CDA, three themes were described and interpreted as discursive constructions; they are constructed through a choice of lexis and propositional content, preferred speech acts, representational choices, and ideological perspectives. The broad aim of the study was, through an examination of the themes prioritized in discourse, to outline a portrait of the Romanian electorate as envisaged by the candidates. It was found that the public "from the mind of the candidate" mirrors attributes of the social groups they (i.e., the candidates) identify with: (1) the ordinary person, (2) the baccalaureate diploma, and (3) the gender card, among other more or less prominent attributes, e.g., knowledge/lack of knowledge of English, etc.

Through reference to these themes during the campaign, candidates envisaged the electorate as valuing familiarity and traditional social norms. They chose to present themselves as "normal presidents", as "one of many" almost in unison, in equally populist approaches. The theme of the baccalaureate diploma reflected a conceptual "narrowing" of education, employed as a strategy to avoid overshadowing. The oft-played gender card was represented as valuing traditional gender roles, displaying culturally embedded expectations of how men and women should behave in public roles.

Broader implications of these observations arise, concerning the election criteria applied by voters in an election where campaign themes were treated in a similarly amalgamated fashion by all candidates. Also, did the selected campaign themes resonate strongly with the broader voter sentiment or did the candidates risk underestimating parts of the electorate? Looking back at the Romanian presidential election of 2024 – whose first and only round unfolded just several days after the completion of the data collection process and the preliminary phase of this analysis – the portrait of the public from the mind of the candidates acquires different shades, as a result of the "black swan" (Taleb 2007),

understood as a highly improbable and unpredictable event that has extreme impact, and which people tend to rationalize in hindsight as if it could have been expected, brought about by the unexpected outcome on November 24, 2024, and the chain of events that followed. It now appears that the employment of ordinariness as a strategy of normalization – namely legitimization through, as discussed, a reference to medium-level credentials and the gender card – was not as persuasive to the electorate as the candidates had anticipated, ultimately leaving them outmaneuvered and defeated by an outcome that had, until then, seemed highly improbable.

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