

THE GENDER DIVIDE IN ELECTION CAMPAIGN INTERVIEWS: QUESTIONING BARACK OBAMA AND CALLING INTO QUESTION HILLARY CLINTON

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Introduction

Presidential election campaigns are among the most newsworthy events that attract a very large amount of media coverage. In connection with presidential election campaigns, joint efforts are made by political parties, groups, etc., on the one hand, and by various media companies, on the other, to reach as many members of the public as possible. Both media representatives and political agents are working to provide the targeted audience with carefully tailored pieces of news, information, opinions and interpretations. The goal is twofold: first, to motivate and activate varying categories of the public to participate in the election process; second, to influence the decision making process of specific groups of targeted voters.

TV interviews with presidential candidates are specifically aimed at scrutinising and challenging political candidates, at unveiling their status and power relations, at exposing their strengths and weaknesses, at inducing them to publicly spell out their political commitments, as well as (often reluctantly) even personal disclosures. By virtue of its own nature, the election campaign interview is multifunctional in that it enables interviewers, on the one hand, and interviewees, on the other, to gain access to the public arena and to pursue their respec-

tive agendas. At the same time, both interviewer and interviewee are fully aware that they are enacting a dialogue for an overhearing and overlooking audience that remains largely unknown (Clayman 1992, Heritage 2002). This is why the interviewer and the interviewee can be seen to pursue double agendas: on the one hand, a topic-oriented agenda aimed at carrying out pre-established institutional goals, and on the other, an audience-oriented agenda aimed at adjusting to and meeting presumed audience expectations.

It is generally acknowledged that election campaigns are not only about candidates waging a war of language with each other, but sometimes also about interviewers and interviewees waging a war of language with each other. Bias in verbalised interaction thus depends, to a large extent, not just on what is being said, but also on who is saying what to whom in what circumstances with what purpose. According to an increasing number of studies, female politicians are submitted to a harsher scrutiny by the media despite the emergence of more women in politics and more women in the media. Gender bias in verbalised interaction is often manifest in rather subtle forms and can usually be perceived by inference more than by direct access to tangible linguistic evidence. It is thus harder to pin down and eradicate.

As more women are entering the top political arena, a number of typical gender issues are becoming apparent in the rhetorical style, discursive devices and argumentative strategies used in reports and enquiries carried out by different media. The depth and quality of media coverage of women is still inadequate in that it exhibits pervasive stereotypical thinking that leads to gender-specific expectations and evaluations. Gender has traditionally been viewed as an attribute of individuals, rather than as a factor of social organisation that systematically affects a person's behaviour and total life experience (Stacey and Thorne, 1985: 307). This traditional view still affects female politicians' careers through biased media descriptions and narratives.

Scholars have long considered a gender bias in media coverage of elections as one of the major reasons for the underrepresentation of women in politics. Negative stereotyping of female politicians results in undermining public perception of their accomplishments and leadership capabilities. Even when the amount of coverage is similar, men often receive greater attention to their experience, accomplishments, and policy positions (Niven & Zilber, 2001; Banwart et al., 2003).

The political landscape of the American presidency, like several other presidencies, has been dominated exclusively by men. This is why the 2008 presidential campaign which saw a woman, Hillary Clinton, as a promising presidential candidate represents a historic turning point. Although Clinton was the 25th woman to run for U.S. president, she was the first female candidate to have held a highly probable chance of winning the nomination of a major party, and the presidential election. As a result, the gender balance in interviews with presidential candidates changed suddenly when one of the democratic presidential candidates happened to be a woman. But the gender bias persisted and it still does.

The initiative to carry out this study was prompted by the various revelations made in the American media with regard to the gender bias exhibited by the media against Hillary Clinton during the 2008 presidential elections. There are undoubtedly good reasons why Diane Sawyer, co-host of ABC's 'Good Morning America' asked on February 28, 2008: "Have all of us in the media used boxing gloves on Clinton and kid gloves on Obama? Have we been unfair?" Hillary Clinton has been constantly haunted by the biased treatment of the media since her days as First Lady. Lakoff reports how Corcoran (1993), a journalist herself, discussed the attempts of the media to demonise and blame Hillary Clinton, noting that some of the harshest criticism came from female members of the media. The present analysis takes a comparative approach, highlighting the most salient gender-specific stereotypes emerging from the questioning patterns and rhetorical strategies used in parallel interviews with Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama by the same interviewer, Katie Couric, a well-known American journalist, who led CBS News' coverage of the 2008 Presidential election. The aim is to show how the context-specific structuring of the form and function of questions, as well as the rhetorically targeted way in which they are addressed, contribute to reinforcing gender roles and stereotypes.

It is rather ironical that Katie Couric herself, whose gender-biased interviewing strategy is under scrutiny in this study, is reported to have said: "However you feel about her politics, I feel that Senator Clinton received some of the most unfair, hostile coverage I've ever seen." (Lawrence and Rose 2010: 1). Moreover, Couric further argued that Clinton's defeat was rooted in sexism. There is considerable evidence indicating that Couric's perceptions were shared by a large number of feminists, Clinton supporters and others.

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The view proposed here is that the institutional practice of political interviewing is a socio-historically and politically based pragmatic and rhetorical process in that the ensuing dialogue gets articulated through deliberate linguistic choices, interpersonal behaviour patterns and purposeful audience targeting. The political interview dialogue, which is largely monitored and mediated, can provide significant input about the following aspects:

- the effect of the interactants' status, position and gender roles on the structure and impact of the interview
- the discursive and rhetorical negotiation of power relations between interviewer and interviewee (in both mixed-gender or same-gender configurations)

Interview questions

Mediated portrayals of candidate images are constructed and re-constructed by interviewers through the process of varying questioning strategies. Referring to the questioning tradition in journalism, Cohen (1989) rightly argues that the way the questions are formulated will determine to a large extent the amount and quality of information that will be obtained. Both the interviewer and the interviewee have own agendas that they want to pursue. While interviewees want to transmit a positive and trustworthy image of themselves and their policies, interviewers need to scrutinise and challenge the interviewees, as well as problematise the issues under consideration. Consequently, there are moments when their agendas are likely to clash and when the two collocutors can be seen to interact at cross purposes.

On examining the interviewing process of question-response sequences, many studies tend to focus mainly, and sometimes exclusively, on the number and/or content of questions and answers without also analysing the form, goal and focus of questions in correlation with the corresponding answers. An essential aspect of political interviews is far too often ignored, namely that it is equally important for interviewers to ask justified and relevant questions as it is for interviewees to give informative and relevant answers. All too often the researcher's emphasis is laid exclusively on the evasiveness of politicians without paying equal attention to the degree of relevance and

reasonableness of the interviewers' questions in relation to the topic of the interview, as well as the interests and expectations of the audience (Harris 1991). For obvious reasons, presidential campaign interviews are the least likely to exhibit the interviewees' evasiveness. Since these interviews also serve as a special kind of job interviews (see Ilie 2008), it is but natural that the interviewed candidates should avoid giving evasive answers, since it would be counter-productive and at worst self-defeating. Actually, a political candidate is primarily interested in appearing responsive and willing to provide the required information, as well as personal views and opinions.

The elicitation force of questions

During the interviewing process the interviewer's and the interviewee's turns alternate following a predictable and institutionalised questioning-answering pattern. The form, structure and functions of questions are decisive for the final outcome of the interview, which is a strong impact on the audience. The present study uses an integrative approach based on the pragmatic framework for the analysis of questions and response elicitation developed by Ilie (1994, 1999, 2009) with reference to the elicitation force of questions. A pragmatic classification of questions has been developed by Ilie (1994) in terms of their elicitation force. The elicitation force is ascribable to the addresser of the question according to his/her explicit and implicit intentions when performing the act of questioning. Three major classes of questions can be distinguished:

- *answer-eliciting questions* are questions designed to elicit verbalised information or confirmation from the addressee
- *action-eliciting questions* are questions designed to make/motivate the addressee to perform a particular action
- *mental response-eliciting questions* are questions designed to induce in the addressee some kind of mental or emotional reaction, which need not necessarily be verbalised or exteriorised through laughter, applause, etc.

Depending on the discourse in which they occur, questions display a combination of the three types of elicitation. Interview questions are

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generally regarded as answer-eliciting questions. However, this is an oversimplification of a rather complex discourse situation. First of all we should keep in mind that the question-response turn-taking structure involves more addressees than the interviewer and the interviewee. A particularly important rhetorical feature of political interviews consists in the fact that the interviewed politicians address simultaneously multiple audiences (the interviewer, members of a studio audience, TV-viewers representing a national and international public), which calls for the use of context-bound and situation-adjusted communication strategies, including specific combinations of literal and figurative linguistic styles. While interviewers normally want to elicit answers from their interviewees, this does not rule out instances when they want at the same time to elicit spontaneous reactions and emotional responses from the interviewees so as to indirectly affect the targeted audience emotionally.

Presidential campaign interviews with Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama

When conducting interviews with political candidates, journalists are fully aware that the discourse of dialogic communication is affected by various interpersonal processes. Actually, political communication theorists Nimmo and Combs (1990) noted that journalists still devote more time to the personae of candidates than to issues that distinguish them. This is particularly true of interviews with presidential candidates, whose private lives are scrutinised very closely. Since the candidates' private and public lives are intertwined, their overall image varies according to the continuously changing intersections of media interpretations, personal self-presentations and voters' induced perceptions. The audience members often project unexpected meanings into the messages and images they are confronted with (Kendall and Paine 1995). Thus, when early in the 1992 presidential primaries Hillary Clinton told audiences enthusiastically that if Bill Clinton was elected, "You'll get me too!", some voters saw her as a self-confident, hard-working lawyer, willing to donate her talents to the country. But for others these words and her assertiveness presaged a kind of co-presidency with one of the partners unelected (and a woman), a prospect they viewed with alarm. She soon dropped these words from her speeches.

During the 2008 presidential election campaign, the leading presidential candidates – Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama – had very similar views on crucial issues for the American citizens, but they stood for different symbolic categories of electors: female vs. male, white vs. black, senior politician vs. junior politician. In many respects, the race for the White House in the 2008 election campaign was by far harsher and more spectacular between the two Democratic candidates than between the Democratic and the Republican candidates. Hillary Clinton, the former First Lady, has been in the public eye on the national level for a period of sixteen years. This may explain why, fairly or unfairly, most people have formed an opinion about her. Unlike Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, the former Senator from Illinois, with seven years in the Illinois State Senate and one term in the US Senate, was a Washington outsider, starting from scratch. Obama's popularity, unlike Clinton's, has had more to do with what he was and wanted to do, rather than what he had done or not done.

The dynamics and outcome of Hillary Clinton's campaigning positions – how she almost won but eventually lost the Democratic nomination – need to be understood in terms of three interrelated factors: the role of gender in presidential politics (running for office in a male-dominated political institution), the routines of prevailing media norms, and finally, the candidate's personal background and her particular political context.

Questioning strategies in election campaign interviews

The present paper provides a scrutiny of two sets of interviews (on 4th of February and 5th of May 2008) carried out by the same journalist – Katie Couric (CBS) – separately with Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, the two Democratic presidential candidates in the 2008 American presidential election campaign. The main focus of the analysis has been on four interviews – two interviews with each of the two presidential candidates – that took place on the same days, 4th February and 5th May 2008, respectively. Why these particular interviews? The main reason is a general perception that Hillary Clinton was submitted to negatively biased questioning by journalists, including Couric, who, at the same time was seen to go soft on Obama. This issue was a major debated topic among journalists

themselves. There have been many allegations that Clinton's victories were downplayed whereas Obama's losses were shrugged off, and that journalists looked at Obama uncritically while subjecting Hillary Clinton to microscopic scrutiny.

Irrespective of their actual content and rhetorical force, questions normally contain implicit assumptions and presuppositions. Interviewers pursue different effects depending on the overall goal of the interview, the particular issues on the institutional agenda, as well as the presumed concerns and assumed expectations of the targeted audience. For the present analysis I have carried out a close examination of the questioning and answering strategies paying particular attention to the interpersonal patterns of behaviour and the dynamics of the interlocutors' intentions and expectations within the framework of mediated interaction and institutional talk framing. The comparative analysis of the interviews with Hillary Clinton and with Barack Obama concerns primarily the contextualised manifestations of three main characteristic features of Katie Couric's questioning strategy:

- discrepancy between the order in which the same questions are addressed to Hillary Clinton and to Barack Obama, respectively
- prevalence of a repetitive questioning style in the interviews with Hillary Clinton
- predilection for a manipulative use of closed (yes-no) questions with hidden presuppositions in the interviews with Hillary Clinton

The discussion based on illustrative interview extracts has concentrated on the discursive interplay between the scope, focus, aims and effects of the interviewer's questions in relation to the interviewees' intentions, expectations and corresponding responses.

The distinctive order of the interviewer's questions

A striking feature of Couric's line of questioning in these interviews is the order in which she asks particular questions. There is an obvious and significant discrepancy between the order in which she addresses the same questions to Hillary Clinton and to Barack Obama, respectively. On 4th February 2008 Couric interviewed the two leading

democratic presidential candidates about what they had achieved and what they had yet to overcome. She chose to ask each of the candidates identical or similar questions, which provide adequate material for a comparative analysis of the interviews. While the content of the questions exhibits a high degree of similarity, there is a significant difference as to the order in which the questions are being asked. Let us consider the first question posed by Katie Couric in the interview with Hillary Clinton on 4th February 2008:

(1)

KC: Okay. So let me start right away so you can get moving, because I know you've got a lot of places to go. Tomorrow is a big day obviously for both the Republican and the Democratic Party, super Tuesday, the closest thing to a national primary. *What do you perceive Barack Obama's biggest weakness is?*

HC: *You know, Katie, I'm only gonna talk about my strengths as we move into this Super Tuesday.*

The fact that she starts the interview by asking Hillary Clinton about Barack Obama's weaknesses is not only highly surprising, but it also signals a biased attitude in that the counter-candidate's profile is disproportionately foregrounded. This is so much more surprising as Couric apparently expresses concern for Hillary Clinton's busy schedule: "*So let me start right away so you can get moving, because I know you've got a lot of places to go*". Whereas asking a candidate about a counter-candidate's weaknesses can certainly be justified at some point during the interview, it is hardly justifiable to ask such a question at the very beginning, before having even found out more about the interviewee's current position, concerns, plan of action. As I have already mentioned, Katie Couric asks Barack Obama the same question in a separate interview with him on the same day:

(2)

KC: And finally, let me ask the question ... that I've asked all the candidates today. *What do you perceive is Hillary Clinton's biggest weakness?*

BO: *Oh ... that's not a question that, you know, I'm gonna focus on.*

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As illustrated in extract (2), the question is semantically identical with the question posed to Hillary Clinton, and it also gets, not unexpectedly, a very similar answer. In asking an apparently answer-eliciting question, Couric performs a speech act whose intended effect is to elicit a spontaneous reaction and, hopefully, a personal disclosure from the interviewee. In other words, Couric tries to force the interviewees to reveal their personal attitudes towards their respective counter-candidate, i.e. Hillary Clinton's attitude towards Obama, and Obama's attitude towards Hillary Clinton. Obviously, the interviewer's intention is to trigger emotional reactions rather than informative answers. In each case, it is not what the interviewee reveals about the counter-candidate that is important, but rather what s/he reveals about her/himself. This means that the question is less answer-eliciting and more emotional display-eliciting. In spite of their identical content, there is actually a decisive aspect that differentiates the two questions, namely the order in which they are asked: it is the very first question addressed to Clinton, whereas it is the very last question addressed to Obama. This distinction becomes so much more significant as the first question of an interview usually sets the tone for the whole interview and triggers particular expectations in the audience of TV-viewers, who in this case are also voters. In the interview with Hillary Clinton, this question is given unmotivated priority and is likely to take away the emphasis from the interviewee's personality, strengths and positive emotions.

The interviewer's repetitive questioning style

Another distinguishing feature of Couric's questioning strategy is a clear tendency to repeat the same question several times in the interviews with Hillary Clinton. This repetitiveness is not displayed to the same extent in interviews with Barack Obama. For example, in the interview of 4th February 2008, Katie Couric asks Hillary Clinton the following successive questions:

(3)

KC: And finally, our poll also shows respondents evenly split about whether your husband, President Clinton, has been helpful or hurtful to your campaign. *Was there a point in time, Sen. Clinton, where you wanted to tell him back off?*

HC: *Well, it's my campaign. And I've made that very clear. I have a lot of great supporters who are out there making the case for me. But at the end of the day, there are only two names on the ballot. And I'm presenting myself on the basis of my qualifications, my experience, my ideas and vision for the country. The big difference between my opponent and I over health care and other important issues in the minds of Americans. So, I expect to be judged for who I am and what I'm presenting. And that's what I think the voters expect.*

KC: He [Bill Clinton] was much more low-key last week or in recent days, compared to prior to the South Carolina primary. *Did you advise him in any way to chill out of it?*

HC: Well, Katie, I think that it's clear that, you know, the campaign that I'm running is about the future. It's about what we do together to have the kind of America we want, to solve the problems that are awaiting. I think *most Americans think that, you know, he was a very good President who made a lot of positive differences in their lives. And I'm gonna try to be the same kind of President who gets up every day, puts the American people first and goes to work.* I'm gonna roll up my sleeves, if given the chance, to solve our problems.

In excerpt (3) Hillary Clinton is faced with practically the same question that is asked twice: *"Was there a point in time, Sen. Clinton, where you wanted to tell him [Bill Clinton] back off?"; "Did you advise him [Bill Clinton] in any way to chill out of it?"* Not only are the two successively asked questions identical in form, they are also performing the same speech act of challenging Hillary Clinton to make a personal decision to reduce her husband's involvement in her campaign. Several issues arise here that require a closer examination. Interestingly enough, Couric explicitly admits that the CBS poll found that half of the respondents regarded Bill Clinton (former President and Hillary Clinton's husband) as helpful and half of them regarded him as hurtful to Hillary Clinton's campaign. Nevertheless, she chooses to totally disregard the significance of the positive opinion of half of the poll respondents and insists exclusively on Bill Clinton's allegedly negative influence. When a well-established interviewer like Couric keeps repeating the same question, she obviously signals that the question is particularly relevant in the context of the interview. This confirms

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the findings of several scholars who pointed out that media coverage of female candidates stereotypically focuses on their marital status and family life. Braden, for example, explained that the press holds “women politicians accountable for the actions of their children and husbands, though they rarely hold men to the same standards” (1996: 5). She also added that “journalists often ask women politicians questions they don’t ask men” (1996: 5).

Equally significant is the fact that the two questions about Bill Clinton are the last to be asked, at the end of the interview. If we correlate these two observations with the fact that the first question was about Barack Obama, there are good reasons to conclude that Couric’s questioning strategy is liable to induce in the TV audience the belief that the two major issues facing Hillary Clinton at that moment in her campaign were not so much related to her own personal achievements and political prospects, but rather to the personalities and actions of two men involved, in different ways and roles, in the Democratic presidential campaign: her counter-candidate (Barack Obama), on the one hand, and her husband and former President (Bill Clinton), on the other.

The observations above are reinforced by the fact that the two questions in (3) addressed by Couric to Hillary Clinton are not information-eliciting questions. They are linguistically and rhetorically referred to as *leading questions*, i.e. questions which are designed to invite a particular answer that is easily inferable by the addressee (Ilie 2009). With regard to form these are *closed questions* (also called *yes-no questions*), namely questions that constrain the answerer to choose one of two possible answers: ‘yes’ or ‘no’:

(i) “Was there a point in time, Sen. Clinton, where you wanted to tell him back off?”

Possible answer: Yes / No

(ii) “Did you advise him in any way to chill out of it?”

Possible answer: Yes / No

It is apparent that the two questions have the coercive force of restrictive yes-no questions since they literally force the interviewee to

provide one of only two possible answers. Their constraining effect in this interview is so much stronger as these leading questions are preceded by Couric's authoritatively conveyed speech acts: "*our poll also shows...*"; "*He [Bill Clinton] was much more low-key last week or in recent days, compared to prior to the South Carolina primary*". Such assertive statements are made whenever the interviewer wants to legitimise the justifiability of her questions and thereby to obtain a higher acceptance and a stronger impact on the audience. Hillary Clinton forcefully resists the pressure of Couric's leading questions and counteracts them by using genuinely informative speech acts in the first person singular in order to draw attention to her political programme and the real issues that she wishes to be discussed: "*Well, it's my campaign. [...] The big difference between my opponent and I over health care and other important issues in the minds of Americans. So, I expect to be judged for who I am and what I'm presenting. And that's what I think the voters expect.*" In her answers she shows a high degree of self-assurance in two respects: first, she deliberately avoids being trapped by Couric's biased questions, thereby indicating that she does not consider them relevant to the issues under discussion; second, she chooses to deliberately express her views by emphatic self-referencing and by repeatedly using the first person singular pronoun "I" and "my".

This instance shows that Hillary Clinton masters the art of countering the pressure of biased questioning. When continuously pressed with allegations about her husband's involvement in her presidential campaign, she resorts to the strategy of re-directing the dialogue towards the actual purpose of the interview which is supposed to deal with her own campaigning and political agenda. By pointing to the really important and relevant issues to be discussed, Hillary Clinton wants to redress the power balance in her favour.

The interviewer's manipulative use of closed questions (vs. open-ended questions)

Both interviewers and interviewees know that the way of formulating questions can influence not only the direction of the interaction, but also its outcome. With respect to pragma-syntactic structure, questions fall into two main categories: *closed questions* and *open-ended questions*. As explained above, closed questions elicit a simple choice be-

tween an affirmative and a negative answer. They are primarily used to require confirmation, rather than information. Pragmatically, they are best suited for situations where there is a clear distinction between an affirmative and a negative answer. In institutional discourse closed questions may also contribute to keeping the questioner's control over the interaction by reinforcing a particular line of argumentation. This is particularly the case of courtroom questioning, where counsels put pressure on the defendants, plaintiffs or witnesses by repeatedly asking strongly targeted closed questions. Open-ended questions are also referred to as *wh-questions* because they are constructed by means of *wh-interrogatives* (e.g. *what, which, who, whose, whom, where, when, why, how*) to elicit specific information about the object, the participants, the location, the time, the reason or the manner. Unlike closed questions, they elicit specific information that may be provided in several answers. This is why these questions can be regarded as more respondent-friendly in that they allow the time and space for reflection, providing the respondent with a wider range of answering options. Moreover, unlike closed questions, they allow interlocutors to have shared control over the interaction.

Prospective journalists are normally being trained in the art and technique of interviewing for information-gathering by practising "the five W's", or more exactly "the five W's and one H". They denote the main types of questions introduced by *wh-interrogatives* (and their derived forms): *what, who, where, when, why* and *how*. In many interviews, however, there is usually an alternation of closed and open-ended questions, which can normally contribute to problematising and probing into complex facts, events and opinions. From this point of view Couric's line of questioning displays a noticeable imbalance in the use of questions: she asks mainly open-ended questions in the interview with Barack Obama, whereas she resorts mainly to closed questions in the interview with Hillary Clinton, as will be discussed in this section. A typical illustration was shown in connection with excerpt (3) above, where practically the same closed question is asked two times successively: "*Was there a point in time, Sen. Clinton, where you wanted to tell him [Bill Clinton] back off?*"; "*Did you advise him [Bill Clinton] in any way to chill out of it?*" This is far from being an isolated instance in Couric's interviews with Hillary Clinton. In this particular example Couric's repetitive use of closed questions reflects an obsessive concern with Bill Clinton's role in his wife's presidential

campaign. Moreover, Couric appears to enact the role of a spokesperson for opinion poll respondents when she explicitly indicates that Bill Clinton's involvement in Hillary Clinton's campaign is resented and should be minimised. The gender divide could hardly be more obvious: while the support loyally given by the wives of male presidential candidates has been taken for granted throughout history, the comparable support given by the husband (and former president) to his wife running for president is negatively evaluated and criticised. At the same time, no criticism was expressed against the support given by Michelle Obama to her husband's presidential campaign.

In order to draw a systematic parallel between Katie Couric's differentiated use of closed questions in interviews with Hillary Clinton, on the one hand, and Barack Obama, on the other, the following illustrative excerpts have been taken from interviews carried out with the two presidential candidates on the same day, 5th May 2008. To further increase the comparability of the data, the discussion will focus on the questions addressed to the two candidates with regard to Reverend Wright. Jeremiah Wright was one of the most influential black pastors in the U.S. and spiritual advisor to Barack Obama until the two became estranged during the 2008 presidential campaign over Wright's controversial sermons and public remarks. In March 2008 a handful of video clips featuring excerpts from his politically controversial sermons found their way into television campaign coverage. In one, Wright said that America deserved God's damnation after September 11 for its hostility towards its own poor and towards other nations. Obama at first defended Wright, saying: "It is a man I've known for 17 years, [who] helped bring me to Jesus, helped bring me to church". But the presidential candidate eventually distanced himself from the pastor, condemning the latter's racially charged sermons. Obama also urged Americans not to reject his presidential campaign because of "guilt by association."

Let us first consider the questions and answers about Reverend Wright in the interview with Hillary Clinton:

(4)

KC: Yesterday you said we should move on from Reverend Wright, but your campaign continues to raise this issue with superdelegates. *So are you telling the public one thing and superdelegates something else?*

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HC: *No, that's just not the case. Our campaign responds to questions and concerns of those that talk to us, voters. A lot of voters on rope lines raise it. I say, "let's talk about the economy, let's talk about healthcare, let's talk about education."*

KC: *You have a lot of superdelegates raising it [the issue about Reverend Wright]?*

HC: Well, well, it's not, you know, the press has done a pretty good job keeping this in the news for more than a week. Let's talk about, how this is on the minds of a lot of people. It's something that is in the atmosphere. But I have consistently said that I want to run a campaign on the specific proposals that I have put forth.

KC: *But, Senator Clinton, are superdelegates raising the issue of Reverend Wright with your campaign?*

HC: Katie, I know the people across America have thought about this, like they think about everything else that comes into the atmosphere. So, of course, people talk about that. They talk about a lot of things, but what people talk to me about are gas prices and grocery prices and jobs, and trying to make sure that their kids have as good a future as they've had.

Couric's sequence of questions in (4) represents in fact a threefold reformulation of practically the same question:

(i) *So are you telling the public one thing and superdelegates something else?*

(ii) *You have a lot of superdelegates raising it [the issue about Reverend Wright]?*

(iii) *But, Senator Clinton, are superdelegates raising the issue of Reverend Wright with your campaign?*

All three questions above belong to the category of *declarative questions*, i.e. a special sub-category of closed questions that have the word order of declarative sentences. They are known to be less neu-

tral than questions with an interrogative syntactical form, such as wh-questions. They are usually intended to convey a biased attitude: if they have an affirmative form they implicitly elicit an affirmative answer, and if they have a negative form they implicitly elicit a negative answer. A distinguishing feature is that declarative questions often begin with the conjunctions 'so', 'and' or 'but', which are often argumentative. This is clearly the case with questions (i) and (iii) above.

At this point in the interview it is important to pay attention to another instance of Hillary Clinton's skilful use of the art of countering the pressure of biased questioning. When repeatedly pressed with implicit accusations about the superdelegates' raising the issue of Rev. Wright, she re-directs the dialogue by making the point that there are more pressing campaign issues to discuss and that her priority is always to talk with voters about their current concerns. By acting in this way, Hillary Clinton signals in a rhetorically forceful way that she is taking control of the interview.

In (4) Couric does not only start her question with the argumentative marker 'so', but she also addresses a direct challenge to Hillary Clinton, indirectly accusing her of practising double standards in her campaign. The fact that Couric is actually asking Hillary Clinton three times the same question about Rev. Wright and the superdelegates is particularly surprising for two reasons. First, repeating the same question usually signals that it has not been answered or that it has not been answered completely or accurately. But this is not the case, since her interviewee gives relevant and informative answers: *"No, that's just not the case. Our campaign responds to questions and concerns of those that talk to us, voters. A lot of voters on rope lines raise it. I say, "let's talk about the economy, let's talk about healthcare, let's talk about education."* Hillary Clinton makes a clear demarcation between the issues that she and the superdelegates are raising and the issues spontaneously raised by the "voters on rope", and points out that it is the latter who want to discuss issues about Rev. Wright. Second, it is apparent that Couric asks the three successive questions in reverse order: the most challenging one (discussed above) comes first, whereas the most basic information-eliciting question comes third: *"But, Senator Clinton, are superdelegates raising the issue of Reverend Wright with your campaign?"* Actually, an affirmative answer to this third question is already presupposed in Couric's first question which implicitly assumes that superdelegates are indeed raising the issue of Rev. Wright.

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This strategy is often used in argumentative dialogues, such as parliamentary debates, where the speaker asks a loaded question containing a hidden presupposition which is treated as already accepted by the respondent in order “to limit a respondent’s option in answering it” (Ilie 2010: 58).

By contrast, let us now consider the questions and answers about Reverend Wright in Couric’s interview with Barack Obama on the same day, 5th May 2008:

(5)

KC: Let me ask you, you mention a poll, our CBS News/New York Times poll shows that almost half of the voters believe that political motivation is the main reason you renounced Rev. Wright. *What is your reaction to that?*

BO: It’s interesting because if you think about it Katie, and I’m thinking about it politically, that would’ve happened much earlier. I would’ve denounced him immediately. But this was a relationship that our family had had with the church and we tried to handle it sensitively and in fact, ignored some of the politics behind this thing. But what your poll suggests is the American people have put this behind them and they are focused on who in fact can solve the problems they are faced with day in and day out: jobs being shipped overseas, high gas prices, high food prices, people trying to save for retirement. Those are the issues we are going to talk about today, tomorrow and all the way until November.

KC: *Are you concerned though, Senator, that your relationship with him may dog you or continue to dog you if in fact you’re the Democratic nominee during the general election process?*

BO: Katie, as I already indicated, your own polls indicate the American people are ready to move on on the issue and that’s why we’re really going to stay focused on the issues that really matter to the people who are struggling right now to make sure that they can achieve their American dream.

KC: *Do you think your relationship with Rev. Wright has been permanently damaged or severed?*

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BO: Yes, and I already indicated as much.

KC: *And finally Senator, have you heard from Rev. Wright, and we're not gonna use all this but I'm just curious, since you repudiated him last week.*

BO: No.

KC: *Okay, Sen. Obama, I know you're sick of the Rev. Wright questions, but we're going to focus mainly on the other stuff and I thank you for your time.*

A totally different tone and attitude can be noticed in Couric's questioning strategy in the interview with Barack Obama. First of all, she starts with an open-ended question: *"What is your reaction to that?"* This type of question gives the respondent the freedom to choose from a wide range of answering options, unlike the sequence of closed questions she addressed to Hillary Clinton. Whereas Hillary Clinton was put under pressure by Couric's repetitive and challenging questions, Barack Obama gets only one follow-up question, which is hypothetically framed: *"Are you concerned though, Senator, that your relationship with him may dog you or continue to dog you if in fact you're the Democratic nominee during the general election process?"* This can be regarded as a rather interviewee-friendly question compared to the questions addressed to Hillary Clinton. Presumably, in a similar circumstance, she may have received a leading question: *"Is your relationship with him going to dog you or continue to dog you if in fact you're the Democratic nominee during the general election process?"*

Couric's positive and sympathetic attitude towards Barack Obama is explicitly expressed in the next two questions in extract (5), where she proves to be extremely accommodating. In the former, anticipating Obama's resentment to the question, she reassures him by kindly providing a justification for her enquiry: *"and we're not gonna use all this but I'm just curious"*. In the latter question Couric shows even more understanding for Obama's feelings when she apologetically confesses: *"I know you're sick of the Rev. Wright questions, but we're going to focus mainly on the other stuff"*. No comparable admission ever occurred in her interviews with Hillary Clinton. Throughout the whole interview Couric shows special consideration for Barack Obama's

position, feelings and sensitivity, treating him as a discussion partner rather than an interview respondent. He is simply being questioned according to current interviewing routine, whereas Hillary Clinton is repeatedly being called into question. While Obama is asked to tell how he takes responsibility for particular actions, Hillary Clinton is held accountable for other people's actions, such as the voters' choice of debating issues (see extract (4) above).

The questions addressed by Couric to Hillary Clinton are repetitive in that they pursue the same issue with a persistence that reminds the tenacity of cross-examining counsels in court. There is, however, a significant difference: in the latter case the counsel cannot pursue his/her line of questioning unless each question is answered accurately by the cross-examined. This reason can always be invoked as a justification for the counsel's specific answer-eliciting questions. In legal questioning the counsel bears the burden of proving the guilt or the innocence of the defendant and this is what justifies the repetition of the same question. Winning or losing a trial depends on the answers given, and so eliciting the 'right' answers is decisive for the defendant's freeing or for establishing the type of punishment. In a presidential campaign interview, however, the situation is different since the interviewer does not have the same role and mandate as a counsel whose task is to prove something by using a wide range of carefully prepared questions. Presidential candidates are certainly not on trial. They even volunteer to give interviews in order to spread their political message. It is of course fair for interviewers to submit candidates to challenging and tough questions concerning facts and actions that they are or have been involved in or connected with. It is doubtful, however, that repeatedly asking emotion-eliciting and sensation-seeking questions helps voters to get a realistic image of the candidates and to make well-founded decisions. It seems therefore reasonable to examine more carefully and more critically the questions asked by interviewers, and not only the interviewees' answers.

Final remarks

Presidential election campaigns involve communication processes that are designed to shape voter perceptions that may be favourable to one candidate and less favourable to the other(s). Interviewing jour-

nalists are expected to help voters evaluate candidates by providing situational contexts for the candidates to act and speak in front of a TV audience. The focus of this article is on the political significance and effects of questioning practices in election campaign interviews with two American presidential candidates: a woman, Hillary Clinton, and a man, Barack Obama.

The 2008 American presidential election campaign was a historic campaign in many respects, and especially on account of the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, who was the first female front-runner for either major party's presidential nomination. Her race for the presidency encompassed the many challenges that faced virtually all would-be female presidents, such as gendered stereotypes in media coverage, in addition to the challenges stemming from her own public history as former First Lady. Starting from these considerations, this study has focused on two sets of significant interviews carried out by Katie Couric with Hillary Clinton and with Barack Obama on the same days, 4th February and 5th May 2008.

This article has raised and explored an under-researched issue concerning the construction and reinforcement of the gender divide through the interviewer's systematic use of differentiated questioning strategies in election campaign interviews with presidential candidates. While previous studies chose to focus almost exclusively on the candidates' answering behaviour and linguistic choices, the present study has adopted an integrative analytical approach by examining the micro-level and macro-level correlations between the interviewer's questioning strategies with the interviewees' answering patterns. Using the theoretical framework for the analysis of questions and response elicitation developed by Ilie (1994, 1999, 2009), the contextualised text analysis has led to the identification of particular mechanisms of biased questioning in Katie Couric's interviews with Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama:

- discrepancy between the order in which the same questions are addressed to Hillary Clinton and to Barack Obama, respectively
- prevalence of a repetitive questioning style in the interviews with Hillary Clinton
- predilection for a manipulative use of leading questions conveyed in the form of closed (yes-no) questions with hidden pre-suppositions in the interviews with Hillary Clinton

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Whereas *Barack Obama* is simply being questioned according to current interviewing routine in the American media context, *Hillary Clinton* is repeatedly being called into question. Whereas *Obama* is asked and expected to tell how he *assumes responsibility* for his particular actions, *Hillary Clinton* is held accountable for other people's actions, such as her husband's involvement in her election campaign, and her voters' choice of debating issues.

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