

Showing disinterest.

A persuasive strategy to win the electors' trust

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Abstract. The persuasive political discourses of two politicians, Ségolène Royal and Romano Prodi, are analysed according to a model of persuasion in terms of hierarchy of goals. Then the paper focuses on the persuasive strategy of “showing disinterest”: since in persuasion the Persuader proposes to pursue a goal by arguing that it is in the Persuadee’s interest, a subgoal of this may be to argue that the goal proposed is not in the interest of the Persuader. The verbal and multimodal body behaviour of the two politicians are illustrated to highlight their use of this strategy, and some implications of the whole approach are overviewed for the construction of Persuasive Agents.

1 INTRODUCTION

In this work we present an analysis of persuasive discourse according to a model in terms of hierarchy of goals. Focusing on a particular strategy of the Persuader, “showing disinterest”, we analyse two fragments of multimodal communication, by trying to account for why this strategy is exploited in persuasion, and arguing how it also leaks from the Speaker’s concomitant body communication.

In section 2 we overview a model of persuasion based on the notions of goal and belief, in 3 we define the strategy of “showing disinterest”; in 4 and 5 we analyse the verbal and multimodal behaviour of two candidates in the French and Italian elections, trying to single out the specific pattern of this strategy in bodily communication; finally we figure out how this analysis of persuasion in general and of its specific strategies can bear on the generation of Persuasive Agents.

2 PERSUASION AS A HIERARCHY OF GOALS

To analyse persuasion we adopt a model of mind, social interaction and communication in terms of a goals and beliefs (see [3]; [4]; [10]). Central to this model is a very abstract and general notion of goal, viewed as any regulatory state – not necessarily a conscious intention, but even a desire, a drive, an instinct, a need, an unconscious impulse – that when perceived as discrepant from the actual state of the world, drives the system to action. In these terms, persuasion is an act aimed at social influence, with social influence defined as the fact that an Agent A causes an increase or decrease in the likeliness for another Agent B to pursue some goal GA. But social influence is a very broad concept, and it can be brought about in many different ways, from the use of power, to communication, to deception. A first specific feature of persuasion is that here, to have B more likely pursue a goal GA, A adopts the device of

“goal hooking” ([13]): to raise the value of GA for B by making B believe that pursuing GA is a means – a subgoal – for B to achieve some other goal GB that B already has, and considers valuable. But this definition still encompasses different kinds of social influence, from violence to education, from threat to promise. Among these, persuasion is specifically a type of influence that 1) is pursued through communication, and 2) leaves B free of either pursuing the goal GA proposed by A or not.

To persuade B, A can make use of three different strategies [1]: *logos* (the logical arguments that support the desirability of GA and the means-end link between GA and GB); *pathos* (the extent to which A, while mentioning the pursuit of goal GA, can induce, or evoke the possibility for B to feel or to prevent, pleasant or unpleasant emotions, [10]); and *ethos*, encompassing two aspects: what we call “ethos-benevolence” (A’s moral reliability – his being well-disposed to the Persuadee, the fact that he does not want to hurt, to cheat, or to act in his own interest), and “ethos-competence” (his intellectual credibility, his expertise, his capacity to achieve his goals, including possibly the goals of the Persuadee he wants to take care of) [15], [16].

To persuade we produce communicative acts in different modalities – written texts, graphic advertisements, words, intonation, gestures, gaze, facial expression, posture, body movements: we make multimodal persuasive discourses, that is, we plan and perform complex plans of communicative actions for achieving communicative goals.

Any discourse can be analysed as a hierarchy of goals [11]: a communicative plan in which each (verbal or non verbal) communicative act aims at a specific goal. Each goal may aim at one or more supergoals in turn: further goals for which the first goal is a means. If I say “*Are you going home?*” my literal goal is to ask you if you are going home, but through this I may aim at the super goal of asking for a lift. Two or more communicative acts may have a common super goal. For example, saying “*I am here with this face*” plus saying “*this is the face of an honest person*” may aim at the super goal of implying “I am an honest person”.

A (unimodal or multimodal) discourse is a sequence of communicative acts that all share a common super goal. For example, in a discourse before elections, all the sentences, gestures, face and body movements aim at one and the same common super goal: “I ask you to vote for me”. In a persuasive multimodal discourse, not only sentences, but also gestures, gaze, head movements and other signals may pursue, through their literal goals and their intermediate and final super goals, a *logos*, *ethos* or *pathos* strategy.

3 SHOWING DISINTEREST

The persuasive route to influence is characterized by some features that are typical of a particular kind of speech act: advice. In fact, *suadeo* in Latin means “I give advice”. And like advice [12], persuasion is characterised by the following features:

1. A pursues social influence through communication, i.e. he not only tries to induce GA in B, but he also makes clear to B that he wants to do so;
2. A leaves B free of either pursuing or not the goal GA proposed by A, thus differing, for example, from threat;
3. A aims to do so by convincing B (making him believe with a high level of certainty) that GA is in the interest of B.

Of course, even if both communication and persuasion are means for influence, and persuasion necessarily exploits communication, not all communication is persuasive. If thief A, holding a gun, tells robbed B “your life or your purse”, or if captain A orders soldier B “shoot them”, they aim at influencing B, but not at persuading him (they do not leave him free to comply or not). If A asks B “*Can you pass me the salt?*”, he is using communication to influence, but not to persuade (it is not in B’s interest). In sum, to *persuade* B to have GA as a goal of his, A must convince B that GA is worth pursuing – it is a goal of high value – since it is a sub-goal to some goal GB that B already has.

But if A wants to convince B that he is working in B’s interest, a useful subgoal of this is to argue that the goal GA that A is proposing B to pursue is *not* in the interest of A: that A is *not interested* in B’s pursuing of GA.

In this work we analyse some cases of this argument: *showing disinterest*.

4 THE HIERARCHY OF GOALS OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE

We analysed some fragments of electoral debates of two politicians, Ségolène Royal, candidate for President in the French elections in 2007, and Romano Prodi, candidate for Prime Minister in the Italian elections in 2006, in terms of their hierarchy of goals, in order to detect the use of the strategy of showing disinterested.

Figure 1 shows the analysis of a fragment of one minute drawn from the political show “*A’ vous de juger*”, in the studios of the French channel France 2, where Arlette Chabot interviews Mrs. Royal after the first electoral round, when she came second after Nicolas Sarkozy. The host Chabot interviews her about her political vision and projects for France.

“Voilà, je n’ai aucune revanche à prendre, je n’ai aucune revendication, je n’ai pas d’enjeu personnel dans cette affaire, je ne suis liée à aucune puissance d’argent, je n’ai personne à placer, je ne suis prisonnière d’aucun dogme, et au même temps je sens que les Français ont envie d’un changement extrêmement profond. Et mon projet c’est eux, ce n’est pas moi, mon projet. Mon projet ce sont les Français et aujourd’hui le changement que j’incarne. Le changement, le vrai changement c’est moi”

(Look, I have no revenge to take, I have no claiming, no personal stake in this affair, I’m not bond to any financial power, I have no one to place, I’m not prisoner of any dogma, and at the same time I feel that the French people desire an extremely profound change. And my project is them, my project is not myself. My project is the French people and the change I embody today. The change, the real change, is me).

To analyse a fragment in terms of its hierarchy of goals means to figure out what are the communicative intentions of the Speaker. You segment the verbal discourse into its speech acts (in italics), you write down their literal goals and intermediate supergoals (i.e., the inferences each communicative act aims to induce, numbered as G2, G3 etc.), you single out the final goal of the fragment (G1), and represent their means-end relations by arrows.

In the fragment, Royal explains to the electors that she has no revenge to take (Speech Act SA1), any personal claim or benefit in this affair (2, 3, 5), nor is she bound to any financial power (4), thus implying (G4) that she does not work in her own interest; and the only reason why she runs for President is for the sake of the French who wish for a change (SAs 7, 8), that aim at G5. By implying G4 and G5, she aims at projecting an image of *benevolence* (G2), which makes part of an *ethos* strategy. Meanwhile SAs 6 and 9, (“*I’m not prisoner of any dogma*”, and “*I am the change*”), implying G6 and G7 respectively, provide an image of flexibility, novelty, intelligence (G3): the *competence* side of the *ethos* strategy.

In her persuasive structure, Royal identifies the French people’s desire for an extremely deep change (SA7) and she hooks her own goal of being elected to this goal, by communicating, through inference or explicit words (SAs 8 and 9) that *she* is the change: so voting for her (G1) is the means to their goal of bringing about change.

The fragment in Figure 2 is taken from the political discourse delivered by Romano Prodi, the Italian Democratic Party’s candidate, during a debate with Silvio Berlusconi, in April 2006, broadcasted by the Italian TV channel Rai 1.

“E io questo credo di poterlo fare, proprio per la libertà che ho, per il ruolo che ho in politica anche per la libertà dei partiti e anche per i 4 milioni e 200 mila voti che sono stati dati alle primarie e anche perché vedete io ho fatto il presidente del Consiglio ho fatto il presidente della Commissione Europea e non... non ...cerco più nulla dalla vita ma voglio soltanto fare le riforme che sono necessarie in questo paese fare riprendere la corsa al paese dare una speranza ai giovani e poi posso mm...posso finire mm... Non ho altri interessi ma qui occorre qualcuno che in modo disinteressato e forte eh...rida questo senso di unità e questa speranza alle nuove generazioni.”

(And I believe I can do this, thanks to the freedom I’ve got, thanks to the role I’ve got in politics, thanks to the freedom of the parties and also because of the four million and two hundred thousand votes I received during the elections, and also because of the fact that I was the Prime Minister and the Chair of the European Commission and I don’t...I don’t pretend anything more from life, but all I want is to do the necessary reforms for this country, make it competitive again, give hope to the youth, and then I can...I can...finish it all...I don’t have other interests, but here someone is needed, someone who in a disinterested and strong way gives back this sense of unity and hope to the youth).

In this fragment, Prodi explains to the electors that his unique desire is to make the necessary reforms for the country (S8), make it competitive again (S9), give hope to the youth (S10), and then he can finish it all (S11). He has already had many satisfactions in his life, he has been the Prime Minister, the Chair of the European Commission (S6), and now he is not in search of glory, but all he wants is to help his country. He doesn’t have any other interests (S12), and Italy needs someone who in a disinterested way gives hope to the youth (S13): thus he implies he is the one that people need (G8).

By arguing that his goal is to work in the interest of the Italians (G6) and not in his own (G7), he implies that he is benevolent (G3). Thus the final goal G1 (Vote for me) is pursued by soliciting positive evaluations about himself.

The strategy used by Prodi in this fragment doesn't make so much an appeal to *logos*, but mainly to *ethos*, the reliability of the Persuader. More specifically, with the intermediate goals G6 and G7 Prodi aims, respectively, to argue that it is not in his own interest (G6), but in the interest of the Italians (G7) that he is proposing himself as a Prime Minister. So, G6 and G7 are oriented to the *benevolence* side of *ethos* (G3). Goal G4, instead, pursues more of an *ethos competence* strategy: he argues that he will be able to really work in the interest of Italians and also explains the reasons why. But by SA6 (*"I have been the Prime Minister and the Chair of the European Commission"*), at the same time he pursues both *ethos-competence* and *ethos-benevolence* goals. On the one side he reminds that he was in charge of important public roles, to demonstrate his already proved competence and to imply, also through SA5, that Italians already credited him their trust (G5); for this reason, as well as because he is able to produce change (G4), he is competent (G2). On the other side, SA6 supports SA7: since he already had many satisfactions, he does not *"pretend anything more from life"* (SA7), he is disinterested (SA12): thus through G6 (he does not work in his own interest) and G7 (he only works in the interest of Italians) he points to an *ethos-benevolence* goal (G3). Finally, in SA13, *"here someone is needed, someone who in a disinterested and strong way gives back this sense of unity and this hope to the youth"* Prodi describes someone who closely resembles the portrait he gave of himself in the preceding SAs, thus implying he is just the kind of man Italians need (G8), hence aiming at the conclusion that they should vote for him (G1). He thus clearly adopts a "goal hooking" device: your goal is to have as Prime Minister a person who has got all these attributes; I've got them all; hence, your subgoal is to vote for me.

5 THE TWO CANDIDATES' BODY BEHAVIOUR

We now focus on the body behaviour of the two politicians in the fragments above, that we interpret following the analysis of multimodal communication proposed by [14].

A first difference is determined by the fact that Ségolène Royal is standing up while Romano Prodi is sitting at a table. This naturally determines a difference in that Royal is almost necessarily induced to keep an erected posture, thus giving an impression of more dignity, while Prodi can afford a more relaxed posture, thanks to the table he can lean upon.

Nonetheless, Royal alternates a somewhat rigid body posture with head-canting positions towards the interlocutor. Head canting is a tilting of the head aside such that the line connecting the centre of the forehead to the nose and the chin is not perpendicular to the horizontal line connecting the shoulders [7]; [6]; [5]. This head posture has been described as a gesture of submission [9], an example of power differentiation [8], a way to ingratiate or to be reconciled with the interlocutor by reducing one's overall height [6]. In this case the point of Royal's head canting is to show she is well-disposed and available to take care of the problems of the French, just as a mother cants her head while speaking to her child. This body behaviour showing availability is coherent with her idea of being disinterested about

acquiring political strength for herself, and with her entire leftist political vision: guaranteeing security and respect of the employees, social dialogue in the enterprise, the right to professional training, major facilities for fresh graduates to start their own activity, etc.

While saying: *"I have no revenge to take, I have no claiming, no personal stake in this affair, I'm not bound to any financial power, I have no one to please, I'm not prisoner of any dogma [...] my project is not myself"*, she accompanies all these verbal negations with head shakings, thereby emphasising the words' meaning. She uses head very much in her bodily behaviour: she often shakes her head while pronouncing negative sentences, and nods while uttering statements essential for her discourse, like *"The change, the real change is me"*. This confers her a more convincing image and more strength to her discourse, because it shows she is sure and convinced of what she's saying. She also performs beats of the head, for example while saying: *"the change I embody"*, thus underlining the essential part of her phrase.

In the other fragment, Romano Prodi, sitting at the table, while assuring he can do the things he is promising (SAs 1 – 5), leans forward with his trunk, thus symbolically going toward the audience, as if meaning he wants to do something for them.

After that, while expressing his being disinterested (SA6, *"I have been the Prime Minister and the Chair of the European Commission"*), he leans on the back of the chair: a relaxed posture transmitting he is serene and satisfied, he is not struggling for his own interests. His open hands with palms up mean "nothing", thus confirming the meaning of his next sentence: *"I don't pretend anything more from life"* (see Picture 1). But open hands with palms up may at the same time be seen as a sign of honesty, of showing that one has nothing to hide: thus pursuing a more general *ethos benevolence* strategy.

While reminding the two important public roles he has occupied, he has a flat intonation: he is not boasting, nor does he exhibit a proud posture, rather he gives the impression of a modest person, who is not in search of glory. This is coherent with his showing disinterest and not striving for political power or personal interests.

Instead, while saying that he wants to work in the interest of the Italians, he leans forward over the table again, expressing participation to the problems of Italians. While uttering the sentence *"I want to give hope to the youth"* (SA10), his leaning forward reaches the climax (see Picture 2). While listing the things he wants to do for his country (SAs 8 – 10, *"all I want is to do the necessary reforms for this country, make it competitive again, give hope to the youth"*), his speech and gesture become more and more energetic, full of life, his face expresses anticipated happiness about the changes he will cause: he wants to transmit enthusiasm and to inspire trust and confidence to his electors. So he also energetically shakes his closed right fist, while smiling, to communicate energy, strength [2] and optimism (see Picture 2).

6 MODELS OF PERSUASION AND PERSUASIVE AGENTS

We have focused on a specific strategy of the Persuader, his showing disinterest: a subgoal to demonstrating that what he is proposing the Persuadee to do is in the Persuadee's interest. By analysing two fragments of persuasive political discourse on the

side of verbal and body communication we have seen that the strategy of showing disinterest has much to do with one of the classical persuasive strategies proposed by Aristotle, the *ethos* strategy, and within this, particularly with that aspect of the Persuader's *ethos* that entails his or her moral rectitude: the "benevolence" side of *ethos*.

In the fragments analysed, both Royal and Prodi aim to win the elector's trust, first by saying directly that they don't have any personal interest and by stating that their project is the well-being of their people, and then by implying through various inferences that they are the right candidate for the peoples' goals. Moreover, their body and verbal behaviour are quite consistent in showing, either that the Persuader is disinterested, or that he/she is concerned with the Persuadees' welfare, or both.

From all this it results that showing disinterest is crucial in a notion of Persuasion as a type of influence that implies respect for the other's free choice, and hence aims to demonstrate that the goal proposed is in the interest of the Persuadee.

How can this work be of use in the construction of Persuasive Agents? We think it could be usefully taken into account both in setting their general architecture and at the generation of verbal and body persuasive behaviour. On the side of the general architecture, the central idea of persuasion put forward here, i.e., accepting that the Persuader wants to convince that the goal proposed is in the Persuadee's interest, obviously implies the need for: 1) an inference engine to discover the means-end relations based on which the Persuader can hook the proposed goal to the Persuadee's goals; 2) a detailed and sophisticated User Model that keeps track of the Persuadee's idiosyncratic goals, in order for an effective use of the goal-hooking device.

On the side of the persuasive message generation, the analysis of multimodal behaviour in persuasion can contribute to repertoires of persuasive signals for the construction of Embodied Persuasive Agents; while the analysis of this specific persuasive strategy, showing disinterest, once expressed in formal terms, could be added to other persuasive strategies and argumentation schemes for Persuasive Systems.

But here one could object: sometimes, a User interacting with a Persuasive Agent – just because it is not a human – might take for granted its being disinterested; in this case there would be no need for the Agent to show disinterest. This leads us to approach the issue the other way around: the question is no more "what's the use of a theoretical model for the construction of Persuasive Agents", but "what's the use of Persuasive Agents for the construction of a theoretical model of Persuasion". Actually, in the perspective of simulation seen as a source for empirical evidence, by carrying on evaluation studies with Agents the naturalness and effectiveness of the "showing disinterest" strategy within persuasive discourse could be tested.



Picture 1.



Picture 2.

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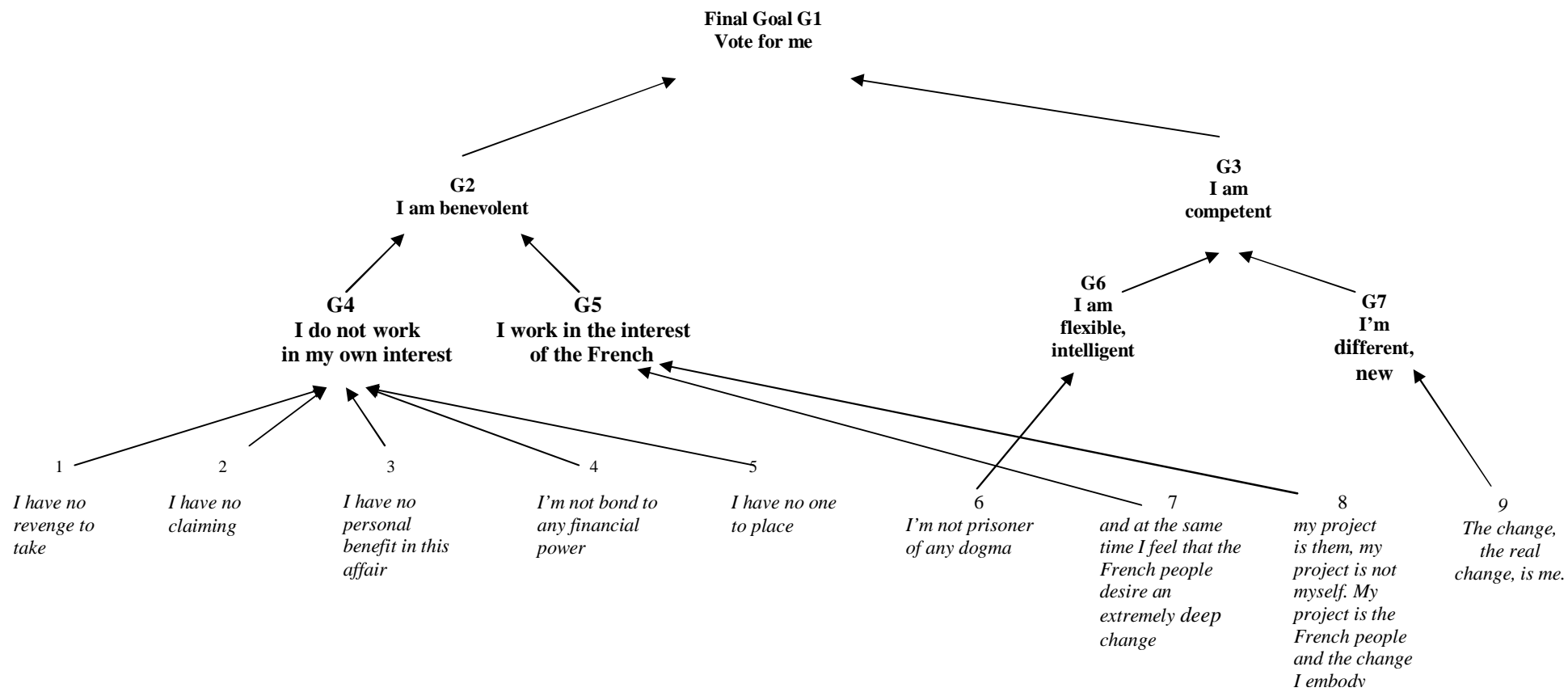


Figure 1. The persuasive strategy of Ségolène Royal's political discourse

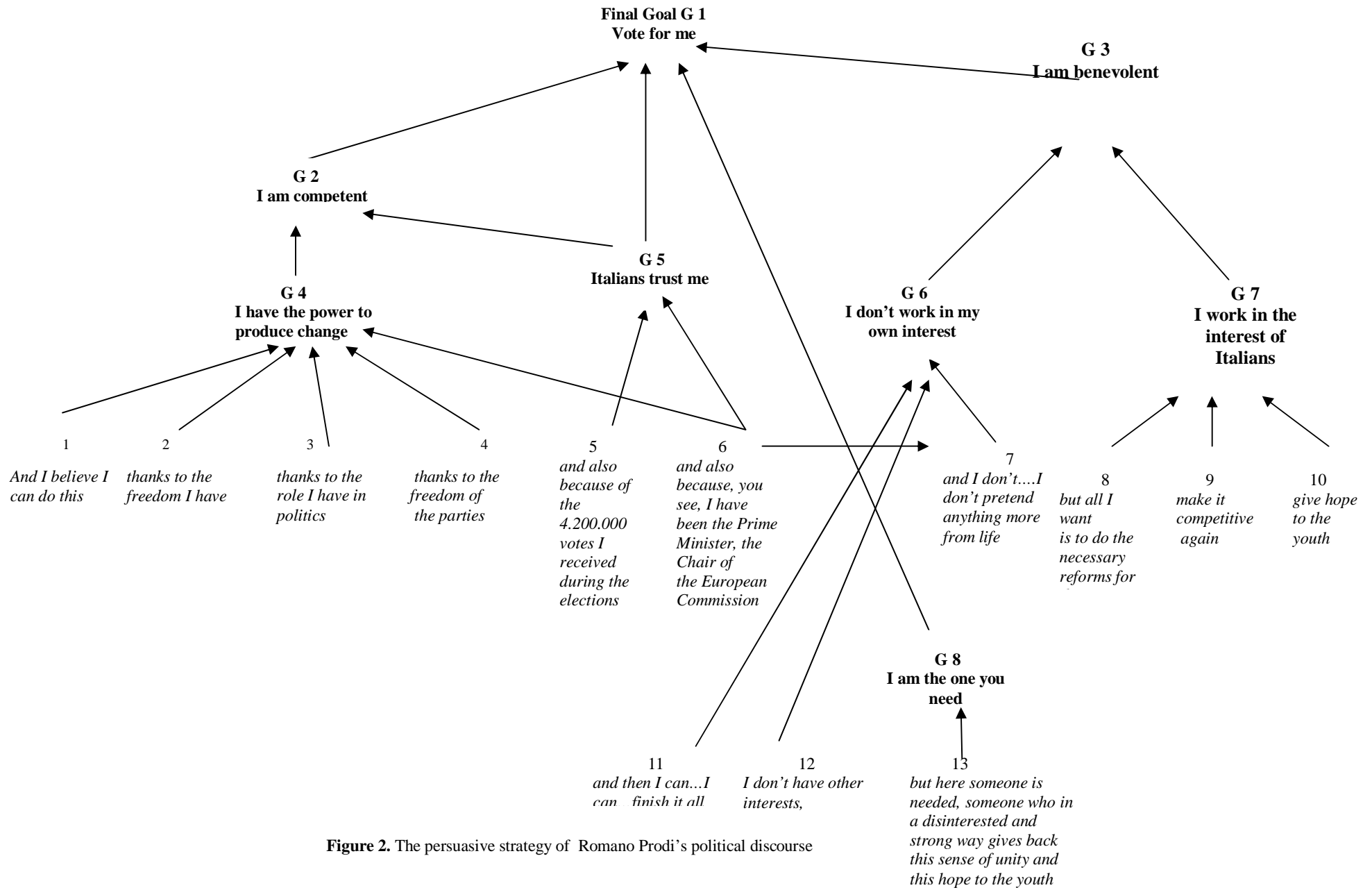


Figure 2. The persuasive strategy of Romano Prodi's political discourse