

# Verbal Language – a Sign of Political Power in the Political Arena

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The twentieth century marks a return to the reflexive nature of language, opening new disciplines which consider it an object of research: linguistics, semiotics, pragmatics etc. The current is determined by the linguistic aspect, introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* which shifted interest to creating a theory of language. The option to analyse language from a semiotic point of view is based on our belief that semiotics, in its dual capacity as a methodology and as a metalanguage<sup>1</sup>, provides the researcher with the opportunity of a complex perspective on the studied phenomenon, in this case political language.

## 1. Political language – in search of identity

The existence of a language for politics is a truth which cannot be denied by anyone nowadays. Every person who has heard a politician's discourse must have noticed that he makes use of a variety of formulations, expressions, addressing specific issues, using a specific rhetoric, an appropriate voice, all meant to facilitate reaching his goals. The listener will immediately recognize this type of language, meaning that both at the level of content and of expression political language cannot be mistaken for other types of language, for example the one used by an artist, a scientist, a theologian, even if most of the time the politician uses specific structures.

This analytic approach has as objectives: the identification of the characteristic features of political language in relation to other types of language (religious, scientific, legal, philosophical etc.); the characterization of the relationship between ideology and language; underlining the specificity of political vocabulary and its peculiar mutations at a semantic level; the role of language in establishing power relations in the political arena.

According to Eugen Coșeriu, the relationship between politics and language can be interpreted from at least two perspectives:

the political perspective which sees language having a linguistic use specific to political activities ('language of politics', even of linguistic politics) and the perspective of language, inside which the political aspect is seen as an essential

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<sup>1</sup> The double aspect of semiotics is high lightened by Petre Botezatu in Botezatu 1973.

dimension of language itself, this dimension manifests itself –and determines– political attitudes and activities (“the politics of language”) (Coșeriu 1996: 10).

In this respect, the analysis of *language of politics* supposes the delineation of the vocabulary which is specific to the political field, the description of the way in which linguistic signs are used in a political discourse and last, but not least, the identification of a variety of specific processes. The second dimension of this approach focuses on the influence of the attitudes and political ideologies on the values and semantic mutations of words in political language, seen from the point of view of selection made by the ideology inside lexical paradigms and semantic nuances.

The reflection on the relationship language-politics gives birth to a series of questions such as: Is there really a language of politics or should we speak of languages of politics? Which are the criteria for making the difference between political language and other types of languages? What specific function does language have in the political field and what are its forms of manifestation in the political area? We start from the idea that politics uses various languages/systems of meaning (music, scenery, clothes etc.), adapted to personal or group needs, these languages being a sort of species of the same genus which is ultimately political language. Our attention is focused on verbal language as a means of legitimate access/maintain the speaker’s political speech power.

## 2. Relationship between politics and language

A special problem in the relationship between politics and verbal language concerns the legitimacy of political debate, because talking implies, above all, the right to speak. Linguistic changes express in different ways power relations between the participants in the act of communication, hierarchies inside the same political group, affinity to a dominant ideology. In *Langage et pouvoir symbolique (Language and Symbolic Power)*, Pierre Bourdieu underlines that politics reduces itself to a symbolic relation, while language is supposed to reflect these power relations on the political arena. In other words, the practice of using words means, on the one side, to have power and rights, on the other side, the exercise of power presupposes word domination. Only masters do have the right to speak, the others are left with silence, worship or terror, approval or silent denial. The relationship between word and power in this context becomes one of interdependence, thus having one means conquering the other. The powerful individual is not the only one who speaks, but the only one entitled to do it, the efficiency of a political discourse depending not only on the degree of transparency and intelligibility, but also on the status of the people mentioned. Rejecting all forms of analysis based exclusively on the internal nature of language, Bourdieu believes that:

le langage lui-même est un phénomène socio-historique, que l’échange linguistique est, au même titre que les autres, une activité pratique et courante, et que les théories linguistiques ne peuvent que pâtir de leur négligence de la dimension pratique et socio-historique du langage [language itself is a socio-historical phenomenon, just like linguistic exchange is a practical and common activity and linguistic theories cannot do anything else but suffer from their neglect of the practical and socio-historical language] (Bourdieu 2001: 11).

Language and politics intertwine and represent a mutual substance, while the permanence of this coupling leads to movement in history. Every power overtaking is the equivalent of the right to speak, while the loss of political power leads to the disappearance of discourse legitimacy (in this respect, an example is provided by totalitarian regimes). Beside language, politics uses symbolic backings which are extremely varied: images, music, objects, uniforms, architecture, emblems etc. Almost all products of human activity that are connected to it can be retrieved and recovered through political action. Therefore, the symbolic dimension of political life is not limited to language, but language plays a specific and privileged role among its other forms of expression.

Unlike other means of expression of political areas (music, clothes, scenery), verbal language requires interpretation, selection in the field of political meaning of the act by asking for its specific reading. Moreover, in order for the image or music to carry messages, it is required to decode their interpretation, language being the indispensable mediator to unravel polysemic ambiguity related to other means of expression. Language is the only sign system which is capable to translate other codes, thus having an inherent metalinguistic dimension. It may send information conveyed by other media than sound, thus proving its superiority over the other sign systems used in the political area.

The existence of a language of politics supposes the presence of selection criteria which individualize it among discursive events specific to human beings. Which are the features that give a speech or a discourse its political nature and how can we identify these characteristics? In this respect, Jean-Marie Denquin proposes three criteria of identification:

a) *The Transmitter Criterion* refers to the political discourse delivered by a politician. The transmitter criterion is not relevant as long as we cannot limit the usage of political discourse only to those people belonging to the political arena: the discussion between two persons that are outside the political domain may itself be political.

b) *The Content Criterion* seems to cause fewer problems than the first one, given the fact that not all words used by a politician belong to political vocabulary. The subject and the theme will determine the political character of language and not the nature of used words. „Tout langage politique véhicule un discours politique mais la réciproque n'est pas vraie” [Any political language conveys a political speech, but the converse is not true] (Denquin 2007: 21).

c) *The Context Criterion*. There are cases in which a speaker's discourse becomes political through its content, in other situations, the status of the speaker confers political status to a discourse whose content has nothing to do with politics (for example, a technical or economic argument). The concrete communication situation is another criterion for identifying political discourse, therefore a statement like "What a horror!", uttered by a politician while looking at his son's grade register has no political character, while, used on a television channel on the eve of protests of education unions, it is clearly political.

The specificity of political discourse in comparison with other types of language (legal, scientific, religious, philosophical etc.) is given by a series of peculiar expression features: the simplicity of vocabulary and syntax meant to

facilitate immediate learning to broad categories of public; the usage of various rhetoric figures having the purpose of capturing the receivers' attention (among these, metaphor has by far the first place); the intensification of speech through a powerful personal touch, by the interweaving of speech deictics with modalizing deictics; the usage of modal and performative verbs that underline the imperative aspect of the statement and its dynamic character; the usage of a large number of connectors, in order to have a coherent statement and increase the effect of plausibility based on the accumulation of construction; the preference for syntactic relations of coordination in the detriment of subordinate ones, etc. The characteristics of political language lie in the essence of political discourse, that of prescribing a general course of action and of inducing receivers to approve a certain form of social organization. The pragmatic component which is a priority for political discourse puts its fingerprint on the mechanisms of its production, but also on the transmitted content.

### 3. Political language functions

Politics needs a discourse to make its ideology known, especially to manifest its persuasive power. From a pragmatic perspective, political language becomes the support for expression of ideology and propaganda; according to Henrieta Mitrea Șerban, it has three specific functions: *the function of communication and socializing* (information, education, awareness, formation of opinions and attitudes which are favourable to certain political factors etc.); *the function of incitement and mobilization* of government leaders and political groups, political institutions and their decisions (Mitrea-Șerban 2006: 9). We consider that the inventory of functions performed by political language can be further completed, especially if we take into account the interpretative political discourse (the discourse of journalists, political analysts); *the function of explanation* (proposing a reading based on the political discourse seen as an object); *the function of mediator* (between different political actors and the public); *the function of demystifying* (of revealing *the form without substance*). A comprehensive analysis of language functions was also done by Petru Ioan, in *Modelul hexadic în politologie (The Hexadic Model in Political Science)*. By making use of Roman Jakobson's functions of language and applying the hexadic situational model, Petru Ioan distinguishes six functions specific to political language: projective, constructive, persuasive, evaluative, interpretative and explanatory (Ioan 2002: 117–118).

The functions of political language are subordinate to ideological reasons as far as any political discourse has the imprint of an ideology, being a vehicle for its beliefs, representations and attitudes and claiming to be a critical and rational language. Ideology is a means to give meaning to events from the political field and to structure ways of action, impose one and the only reading of reality. Its role is to order reality, create world hierarchies according to the values conveyed. Being the expression of an ideology, political discourse becomes the palimpsest of previous speeches, developing the same thematic lines and operating the same selections at the level of expression.

In *Les discours de la politique*, Frédéric Bon analyses *ideo-systems* that organize perception of the political field, structuring the speeches of its actors, moreover, holding a vision of the world according to the political beliefs or having in view their formation. The author defines *ideo-systems* as „ces structures qui s’articulent sur les langues naturelles et surajoutent leurs propres règles de signification” (Bon 1998: 254) (“these structures hinged on mother tongues adding their own meaning rules”). In this respect, *ideo-system* is a synonym of *ideology*. Mother tongue allows the generation of an unlimited number of sentences from the point of view of generativist grammar, but within this vast ensemble, we identify subsets containing sentences built according to the rules of an individual ideology. While language takes action at the level of phrase, ideology first organizes content at the level of discourse deep structure. Thus, a linguistic analysis concerning the impact of ideology on discourse would have as an objective the isolation of structures which constrain the speakers, but at the same time would allow the expression of their adherence to the beliefs of a group.

Semiotic analysis of political language requires reporting all communication parameters of the situation and re-signified in terms of their. Constants at the level of expression cannot be explained by ignoring psychological, social, historical or political conditions that have produced discourse. The variety of advanced hypotheses does not manage to explain the extraordinary spatial dispersion or the deep temporal inertia of visions and representations of the world. The historians of mentalities provide an answer which underlines that mental structures suffer mutations in a long period of time:

La tradition survit longtemps après que sa véritable nature tombe dans l’oubli [...]. L’idéologie, qui naît un jour, cristallise d’une façon simple et forte toute une personnalité complexe en l’affirmant contre une autre. Cette idéologie dure aussi longtemps qu’un apport nouveau de populations, ou des modifications profondes des conditions de vie n’ont pas altéré, effacé la personnalité collective qu’elle symbolise [Tradition survives long time after its true nature has been forgotten [...]. Ideology, once born, crystallizes, in a simple and strong way, into a complex personality by affirming it in opposition to another one. This ideology lasts as long as a new coming of population, the deep transformation of living conditions has not altered, erased the collective personality that it symbolizes] (Bois 1971 : 363–364).

Such a perspective could explain the existence of a hard kernel of political vocabulary in time, therefore a comparison between the Romanian political vocabulary of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would not reveal deep differences regarding meaning, but the assimilation of a large number of words which are specific to other fields (medicine, sports).

One of the requirements of semantics is the description of the lexical structure of language, taking into account *ideo-systems* which generated clippings and imposed meaning. Thus, the problem of synonymy which, at first sight, seems to contradict the principle of economy in language, might be explained in terms of networking with ideology inside which a certain speech is built and proliferated. We start from Bloomfield’s assumption that there are not real synonyms in language, meaning that different forms of expression have a distinct meaning. Therefore, each selection generates meaning and underlines a certain vision. Political discourses

intensely exploit the synonymic possibilities of language, according to the requirements of the moment, to target public and the effects envisaged. The selection process is not deprived of constraints because not a single word is used for the first time and is innocent from the point of view of meaning. Every couple of synonyms bears the imprint of meanings given by other systems of thinking from previous eras, while every term carries the connotations of previous discourses.

Ideo-systems do not impose only the selection inside vocabulary, by indicating words and possible meanings in context, but they also operate restrictions at the level of syntax, where we remark the preference for coordination relationships, to the detriment of subordination ones or the abundance of nominal structures instead of verbal ones. From this point of view, ideology betrays itself at the level of discourse through a series of linguistic marks which allow the identification of the linguistic space where the speaker comes from, of the system of beliefs and representations which shape the discourse. Linguistic marks allow the researcher to identify the ideology uttered in speech, the political affinities, the attitude towards groups and actors within the political field.

Without being characterized by a special technical vocabulary, the political field makes itself noticed by an attempt of conceptualization which envisages the description and explanation of political phenomena. In addition to specific terms (party, political group, senate, parliament, government, presidential, election etc.), political vocabulary borrows from the fundamental vocabulary of the language a number of terms whose signified is enriched with new meanings. The process is bilateral, some terms specific to political discourse have entered colloquial language. From this point of view, to make a clear distinction of a lexical inventory characteristic to political language is a difficult task, if not an impossible one. The difference consists not in the words used, but in the functions they have:

On entendra par vocabulaire politique l'ensemble des mots et des formules élaborés non pour mettre le langage au service du réel mais aussi pour accomplir des fonctions spécifiquement politiques qui consistent à mettre le réel au service du langage, ou plutôt à mettre grâce au langage le réel au service de la politique [We understand by political vocabulary the words or expressions employed not for putting language at reality's disposal, but for performing functions specific to politics thus putting reality at language disposal, or rather thanks to language, putting reality at politics disposal] (Denquin 1997: 5).

A lexicometric analysis provides suggestive information regarding the relationship between ideology and vocabulary in a certain discourse. Lexical marks function just like logos: they allow ideologies to choose themselves and define their references, to show origins and kinship relationships, and, exactly like in the case of emblems, these terms pop up everywhere, often suffocating speech. Lexicometry underlines the frequencies of certain terms, but we must not neglect the analysis of terms *in absentia*, of words refused or suppressed, of negative specificity. Absence generates meaning in this case becoming a lexical mark of opposite ideologies. Through specific vocabulary, ideology tries to define itself, while through negative vocabulary (*in absentia*), it tries to show what it is not.

Political vocabulary is different from one country to another; each political culture has its own vocabulary, depending on its history, institutions and social life

parameters. Space and time factors determine lexical variation, for every epoch structures its vocabulary according to its own values, manifesting preferences for certain clichés, verbal structures. A particular problem is the meaning of words and the mutations suffered by terms in a diachronic perspective. Like any type of language, political language is based on the principle of conventionality, thus limiting the users' possibilities of expression. When they appear, however, they put to work the conative function of language, attracting the interest of the receiver through the fracture made at the level of usage.

#### 4. Conclusions

Being closely connected to the field of politics which depends mainly on the existence of a space of discourse manifestation, political language becomes a macro-sign of power relationships on the political arena and a means of identifying actors and actions in the social space. In this respect, through specific selections and semantic mutations, political vocabulary becomes an indicator of ideology shared by the sender of the political discourse, betraying values and beliefs which animate it.

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## **Abstract**

Starting with the Greek polis we notice an extraordinary preeminence of the language over the other instruments of the power. Language becomes the political instrument by excellence, the key of any authority in the state, the means of dominating the other. This power of the language (of which the Greek made a deity Peitho, the persuasion power) reminds of the power of the words and of the formulas in certain religious rituals. The word is no longer in this case a ritualistic word, an incantatory formula, but a place for debate, for discussion, for argumentation. We basically witness a desacralisation of the word meant, on the politics field, to win, to mould, to incite, to subdue. The word is expressed now in the discourse, it is moulded according to the necessities of the antithetic demonstration, being subdued to the oratorical art. Between politics and logos there is a relationship of reciprocity, the political art being essentially an art of the language, and the language in its turn gets a conscience of its own self, of the rules, of its efficiency through the political function.