

ELEMENTS OF PRAGMATICS IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

OCTAVIA RALUCA ZGLOBIU¹

ABSTRACT. *Elements of Pragmatics in Political Discourse.* Politics is about “language in context.” Put simply, there could be no political discourse outside a political context and without the support of language. Seen from this perspective, pragmatics plays a decisive role in the process of political communication. Still, the most interesting part is to detect these elements of pragmatics in political discourse and to analyse if they are used properly, that is, in accordance with pragmatic laws. Of course, the speaker may be or may not be aware of all these pragmatic rules, most of them “squeezed” into discourse at the well-nigh intuitive level of common-sense, but if we detect that they are broken too often, we might talk about cases of linguistic manipulation.

Keywords: *pragmatics, political discourse, language in context, speech-acts, cooperative principles, legitimating function.*

REZUMAT. *Elemente de pragmatică în discursul politic.* Politica funcționează prin limbaj în context, spus simplu, nu ar fi posibilă existența discursului politic în afara contextului specific al acestuia și fără suportul instrumental al limbajului. Din această perspectivă, pragmatica joacă un rol decisiv în procesul de comunicare politică. Partea cea mai interesantă în această poziționare este aceea de a detecta aceste elemente pragmatice din discursul politic și de a analiza dacă sunt folosite corespunzător, mai precis în concordanță cu legile pragmaticii. Bineînțeles, vorbitorul poate fi conștient sau nu de aceste reguli pragmatice, majoritatea apărând în discurs la un nivel natural, aproape intuitiv al vorbitorului, însă dacă se detectează încălcarea acestora cu o frecvență sporită, poate fi vorba de instanțe de manipulare lingvistică.

Cuvinte cheie: *pragmatică, discurs politic, limbaj în context, acte de vorbire, principiul de cooperare, funcție de legitimizare.*

¹ Assistant Professor, Babeș-Bolyai University, Department of Specialised Languages, Email: octaviatzglobiu@yahoo.com

Elements of Pragmatics and Their Position within Political Discourse

Politics is about “language in context.” Put simply, there could be no political discourse outside a political context and without the support of language. Seen from this perspective, pragmatics plays a decisive role in the process of political communication. An attempt to define pragmatics, on the other hand, is not that easy. It is about “language in context” as well, but the status of pragmatic theory is not clear: “Of course, this situation is to be expected when we recognise how many disciplines are directly or indirectly engaged in the study of <language in context>, as we intuitively may characterise the domain of pragmatics” (Teun van Dijk; 1981: 27) From this point of view, the “concept definition” assumed in the present article will be that of “language in action.” More specifically, the communicative motivations for the selection of linguistic forms, as “language is inseparable from other aspects of our life and the selection of linguistic form should be explained in terms of authentic human communicative needs (i.e. social, interactional, cognitive, affective needs). This position is compatible with and inspired by insights from a number of different sources, including anthropology, cognitive science, functional linguistics, psycholinguistics, philology and sociology” (Weiyun He: 2003).

The dominating pragmatic features in political discourse include the following:

- **Context:** the correlation between the political context and the linguistic context – as linguistic choices are not made arbitrarily but, rather, are systematically motivated by contextual factors (*ibid.*), in the case of political discourse there appear to be two types² of factors combined in the SPEAKING³ acronym (Hymes: 1974): Situation (setting, scene), Participants (addressor and addressee), Ends (goals and outcomes), Act sequence (message form and message content), Key (tone, manner), Instrumentalities (channel, form of speech), Norms (norms of interaction and norms of interpretation), and Genres (text types).

- **Rhetorical goal:** rhetorical structures of information

- **Speech Act:** Speech Act Theory (Austin 1962, Searle 1969, 1979) in the acceptance that language is used not only to describe things but to do things as well

A) Make political requests (*directives*)

² Linguistic factors and political factors.

³ An influential model to describe context: the range of parameters that have to be taken into consideration when characterising context.

- B) Political promises (*commissives*)
- C) Political apologies (*expressives*)
- D) Political declarations (*declaratives*)
- E) Political truth claims (*representatives*)

F) *Felicity conditions*: utterances cannot be assessed in relation to truth and falsity, but in relation to the necessary and sufficient conditions for their accomplishment: “politically relevant speech acts may include complex conditions such as the power or status of the speaker, the institutional location, the holding of an election, and the style of language used” (Chilton: 2004)

G) *Level of utterances*: the literary level (*locutionary act*), the implied level (*illocutionary act*), and the consequences of the implied level (*perlocutionary act*)

- **The Co-operative Principle**: The Gricean Paradigm postulates the assumption that human rationality incorporates an *a priori* commitment to being co-operative in communication. The truisms: Maxim of Quality, Maxim of Quantity, Maxim of Relevance and the Maxim of Manner

Maxim of Quality: “Seek to say that which you know to be true and, do not say that which you know to be false, or for which you lack adequate evidence” – in political discourse, this Maxim is often broken due to the fact that language, in this instance, is used to defend a “political face,” it carries ideological connotations and the concept of “false facts” becomes relative.

Maxim of Quantity: “Make your contribution as informative as, and no more informative than, is required for the purposes of the ongoing discourse” – often broken in circumstances such as “modular speeches,” or persuasion techniques, where rhetorical elements adorn political discourse to ensure the public adhesion.

Maxim of Relevance: “Be relevant” – most of the time broken because one of the most important aspects of political discourse is to legitimate a political group in order to access power and being relevant does not ensure gaining power; on the contrary, it might cause “adhesion damage.”

Maxim of Manner: “Make your contribution clear, and intelligible, brief, orderly, and not ambiguous” – broken because political discourse stakes on the prevalence of ambiguity, it is never “brief” (brief discourse lacks in persuasion), rarely “clear” (clear things do not need arguments, and political discourse is built on “manufactured” political argumentation).

- **Scripts and plans:** how the utterances will be processed in the head of the listener
 - **Referentiality:** how entities are referred to in utterances
 - **Topicality and thematicity:** the ways in which information is presented
 - **Sequential organisation:** the selection and interpretation of linguistic forms in a given utterance have a lot to do with the *sequential context* of the utterance (Weiyun He: 2003)
 - **Linguistic resources for Doing and Being:** especially how *institutional, professional activities* are carried out linguistically (roles and identities) (Weiyun He: 2003).

Pragmatics: Language as Action

In the case of political discourse, language is action because “neither conversational dialogue nor speech acts occur without the participants being assigned particular speaking and hearing roles which may involve a social and political ‘role’, or ‘place’, or ‘position’, in a broader sense. You may be ‘positioned’ as someone who speaks, gives orders, gives advice, or gives the ‘facts’; or you may be ‘positioned’ as someone who listens, takes orders, takes advice, or accepts the ‘facts’. Analysts of political discourse frequently find that pronouns and the meanings associated with them, give a kind of map of the socio-political relationships implicit in a discourse” (Chilton and Schaffner, 2002). So, the notion of speech acts is central to political discourse analysis, because it proves that language and action cannot be separated and they occur simultaneously. Without this positioning, the roles would not be identifiable, thus leading to the impossibility of a “power hierarchy construction.” The structure of power relationships determines a certain construction of the identity of a political group, on the one hand, and distributes the political duties within the group, on the other: “Positioning of this kind can be seen as serving a LEGITIMATING FUNCTION with respect to the leader’s authority within the party, but also as a delegitimising FUNCTION, since it draws boundaries between groups, one of which is claimed to be right and the other wrong” (*ibid.*).

Another important aspect of language as action relates to the “polite and the politic,” more specifically to the notions of *positive face and negative face* (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). The principle of positive and negative face postulates that in interpersonal communication, the interlocutors

“pay attention to, and have to achieve a balancing act between the positive need to establish a <common ground> and the negative need not to have one’s territory encroached upon” (Chilton and Schaffner, 2002:13). Brown and Levinson incorporate these motivations into the *face-threatening acts (FTSs)* which occur through speech acts: “They classified in great detail the linguistic formulations (syntactic and lexical) which speakers use in order to *mitigate* their FTAs. The effect of their mitigation strategies is a function of the relations of power and intimacy between speakers” (*ibid.*).

The last important aspect of “language as action” is that of the context. Political contextual features influence and determine elements pertaining to the linguistic structure of discourse: “However, the relationship is circular, or, rather reflexive, since texts themselves contribute to the constitution of context” (*ibid.*).

Conclusion

The present article has aimed to point out the role and position of pragmatic elements within political discourse. Whether we are aware or not, all these elements are present and, most of the time, they play a decisive role in “building up” the strong core of political discourse from a linguistic point of view. Far from being an exhaustive approach, the present paper delivers a key list of elements that have to be kept in mind in the case of an in-depth analysis on such a type of discourse. An elaborate sample of such an analysis would not fit within the limits of this paper, but it would nevertheless be an interesting approach for all those interested in “taking apart” the carefully built structure of today’s political discourse.

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