



Breaking the Linguistic Norm in Mass-Media

The Limits of Neology

George IRIMIAȘ

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania
Department of Humanities
irimiasg@yahoo.com

Abstract. The paper argues in favour of adopting a whole-integrating perspective to fully understand the demand for a new eco-linguistics without rejecting neology as a manifestation of the live spirit of a language. Thus students will be in the position of handling the avalanche of media terms, whose prestige raises inversely proportional to the degree of instruction of the one who produces the news, either as an agent or as an actant.

We highlight the idea that beyond the journalistic value of the news as such, a more adequate selection of the linguistic support is required in more and more instances, especially into the audio-visual field. The inflation of weird or inadequate terms can compromise a piece of information or the news, either by being rejected by the receiver, or by altering the initial message. It is important to study this linguistic phenomenon, as in the case of non-native Romanian speakers, the impact is increasingly noxious since the novelty of innovation surpasses the language knowledge of an intermediate level speaker.

Keywords: communication, collocation, non-mother tongue, mass-media, neology, contextual inadequacy

The power and importance of mass-media lies in the “knowledge” with which it operates on the level of significance. In Roland Barthes’s terms (1968: 64), the process of signs multiplying is accomplished by the appearance of a secondary series within the area of signification, which – on the one hand – can be assigned to connotation, and to myth, on the other hand. Connotation covers, at large, the area of the subject, and *myth* signifies objective, conceptual values. If we agree that *myth*

attributes to the world conceptual values originating into the language of those particular societies, we will also agree with the fact that news is, in modern society, creator of myths. Obviously, the term must be re-assessed according to the use, frequency and duration of **press/media novelty**. Considering these circumstances, we can fully justify the observation of one of our students, who equals the Romanian language to “the language of ‘manele’”. Witnessing such constructions as “a face o aroganță” (“to make an arrogance”), “să facem o concluzie” (“let’s make a conclusion”) (Sport.Ro 02.04, Realitatea TV 26.03.)¹, highly repeated on some TV sports programs, the above-mentioned attitude is fully justifiable. The student proved to be only a keen observer. What kind of conceptual value is implied by a text of the type “produsele îți trăgeau cu ochiul de pe rafturile pline” (“the products were peeping over to you from the full shelves”) (ProTV Știri/ProTV News, 04.03.), where information intermingles not only with subliminal advertising, but also with faint traces of a badly perceived nationalism by bringing into light some paremiological constructions totally inadequate to the communicative situation. Only by adopting a whole-integrating perspective will we fully understand the demand for a new eco-linguistics, which – without rejecting neology as a manifestation of the live spirit of a language – will be in the position of handling the avalanche of terms. Its prestige raises inversely proportional to the degree of instruction of the one who produces the news, either as an agent or as an actor.

Deviation can function both as style and as a sign of a certain linguistic strictness, which is to be implied for the correct functioning of media-institution. The fact that some bilingual speakers consider this institution as one of the most important (if not the most important) ways to check the accuracy of their language, the necessity of some normative clearing up on several levels of the language becomes vital. Beyond the journalistic value of the news as such, a more adequate selection of the linguistic support is required in more and more instances, especially into the audio-visual field. The inflation of weird or inadequate terms can compromise a piece of information or news, either being rejected by the receiver, or by altering the initial message. For non-native Romanian speakers, the impact is increasingly noxious since the novelty of innovation surpasses the language knowledge of an intermediate level speaker. Volosinov’s “multi-accent phenomenon” (1973: 47) refers to the ability of signs to contain an “evaluative accent” together with the concept and a sound/sonorous continuum. This evaluative accent refers to the fact that the sign has not an internal fixed signification, but rather a signification potential, which can be directed or stressed on a certain signification. Consequently, the problem of *false friends* is a fully real one. The structure: *Are decât o posibilitate*, taken from the English *They have but a choice*, is more and more frequently used both in the media and in other language

¹ Romanian television channels.

instances. In all normative studies the adverb “decât” is exclusively used in Romanian in negative constructions together with the negation “nu”, but this rule is not obeyed in some communicative instances and it is inadequately used. The prestige of the user of a particular construction functions as an influential factor in making some other speakers use that particular structure. The situation becomes complicated when that particular word already exists in language, but with another signification: *punctual, aplicație, determina*, etc.

The explanations given by the Romanian Explanatory Dictionary (DEX) for these words will constitute a disturbing factor rather than a useful instrument to learn and use the language for non-native speakers of Romanian, as in the example below:

punctual = ~ă (~i, ~e) 1) Care manifestă grijă și corectitudine în realizarea datoriilor și promisiunilor; cu responsabilitate și exactitate. 2) (Adverbial) Care are loc la momentul prestabilit; produs la timpul fixat. [Sil. -tu-al] /punct + suf. ~al²

Another aspect of the semiotic implications in studying “media” is that signification will never be found inside the sign or the text. Signification will be the result of a dialogical interaction between the speaker/text/discourse and the listener/reader/viewer. “Each of the significant elements that can be perceived in an assertion, but also the assertion as an indivisible entity, is mentally translated/transposed into another context, active and capable of producing a response. *Any effective comprehension is dialogical by its nature.* Comprehension represents, for an assertion, what a dialogue dash/line represents for the following assertion.” (Volosinov 1973: 102)

The concrete way in which mass-media renders and reproduces the world mainly depends on both the nature of signs and the combination rules that generate signification. Without re-discussing the nature of the sign, we have to underline the arbitrary feature of the relation significant-signified, highlighted by Ferdinand de Saussure and the extremely useful distinction between pairs (sound/image) as long as it performs the opposition inside the system: “Their pervading characteristic is that they are what the others are not.” (Saussure 1998: 117) If the native speaker experiences a rejecting reaction due to the inadequacy between significant and signified based on his already mastered knowledge, the speaker belonging to another linguistic community is provided a fake reality, this time by means of language. We will analyse some theoretical aspects, which may offer a

² In English: “punctual” – 1) One who manifests care about and correctness in achieving one’s duties and promises; with responsibility and exactness. 2) (adverbial) something that takes place at the pre-established moment; produced at fixed time. Further on, the word is shown as separated into syllables, and its morphological construction (editor’s note).

comprehensive image of what media should represent as a unifying factor of a culture, and what it represents now, especially from an informative point of view, for the area of the contemporary audio-visual.

“News: newly received or noteworthy information, especially about recent events, presented or assimilated as new information; a broadcast or published report of news; informal information not previously known to (someone); a person or thing considered interesting enough to be reported in the news” (Oxford English Dictionary)

If we carefully consider this definition of media, we will understand that it is not the news that represents the event valuable as such. The value is given by “the act of reporting or accounting the event” (Hartley 1999: 21). Consequently, the news discourse will be made up of signs that combine on the basis of some codes, which will generate signification. The news behaves like any other “semiotic object”, since “the relationship between the observer and the observed gets the first place, becoming the only thing that can be observed... Consequently the true nature of things may be considered to be grounded not on facts as such, but on the relations we build and then perceive among them.” (Hawkes 1977: 17)

It follows from here that the world the way we perceive it represents a result of the language, seen into two complementary aspects:

- a. become real by means of language
- b. understood as real by means of language

News discourse exhibits, like any other discourse type, a conventional structure at a global level, which is able to direct both the discourse production and, mainly, its reception by the press consumer. The directing of the discourse production and reception depend on some constant elements such as explanation, forecasting, interpretation and evaluation. If the linguistic source is over-filled with terms or constructions/structures insufficiently selected, the constant elements cannot perform their function optimally any longer. With respect to this phenomenon, Adriana Stoichitoiu-Ichim clearly observes that “Our option to approach the English terms that appear in the news register from a perspective that should be predominantly normative, is based on our conviction that press represents not only the fourth power in the state, but also an important cultural and educational factor...” (2001: 85). “Linguistic education”, as identified by the author, due to mass-media prestige, can be both a cohesion factor, but it can also become a source of an imprecise, ambiguous way of expression, in the worst case, by its inadequacy to the communicative situation. For instance, *a suporta* (to

sustain, to bear, to tolerate, to endure) is an “aloglot” term – taken from the English *to support* –, with no connection with the pre-existing meaning in Romanian, because its constant use in mass-media leads to an assertion like: *Dl. profesor vă suportă foarte mult* (*The teacher tolerates you a lot.*), which totally alters the message (instead of *The teacher supports you a lot*³).

Titles/headlines of news or stories express the most important information, being more relevant and “shocking”. They summarise and simultaneously interpret the events or actions from the point of view of the journalist or of the journal. The title’s essential function is to gain attention, by suggesting the topic(s) that might be of interest for a possible reader. The headline may often appear fragmented into a main title and one or two sub-titles or a super-title (chapeau). From a grammatical point of view, titles are often elliptical sentences, with nominal structures, without determiners, mostly followed by localization (circumstance) of the particular event. If the title contains one or more foreign terms, insufficiently adapted to the language system, distortions in receiving the message will happen:

“Dacă ministrul nu are *agrementul* partidelor, nu este votat” (TVR 1, 02.07) (If the minister does not have the parties’ *amusement/diversion*, he won’t be voted for.”)

“Lionel Jospin declară că Franța *este determinată* să sprijine România” (Antena 1, 03.11) (Lionel Jospin declares that France is *persuaded/convinced* to support Romania”).

“Organizațiile umanitare încearcă să-i *acomodeze* pe refugiații din Kosovo” (PRO TV, 13.06) (Humanitarian organisations are trying to *accommodate/adapt/conform* the refugees from Kosovo”).

Preambles offer the concise summary of the events, by specifying the time, place, circumstances, the most important participants and the essential action(s). More specifically, the preamble may contain the essential results and consequences of the debated action, together with the main reactions of the actors. Both the title and the preamble constitute “the favourite place/space of the implicit option” (van Dijk 1972: 14).

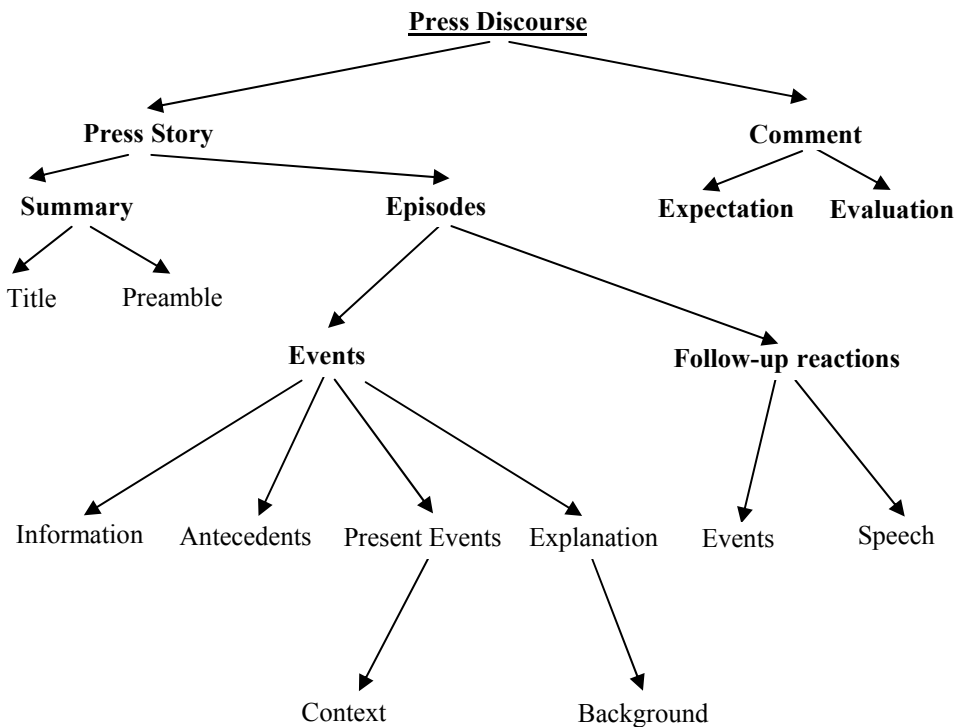
We are not particularly interested in this area since here some other categories also operate – categories that exhibit an ad-textual feature and generate what we will name, generically, ideology. This topic was approached when I analysed the language of totalitarian systems (Irimiaș 2003: 126) and I described the way in which the ideological selection was structured. Here is one example of that moment:

³ Editor’s note.

“Noi, reprezentanții studenților din capitala RPR întruniți în adunare publică ne exprimăm deplina solidaritate cu lupta dreaptă plină de vitejie și eroism a popoarelor din Asia și Africa, împotriva *odiosului jug colonial pentru libertate și independență*, pentru o viață mai bună.” (“We, the representatives of the students from the capital of the People’s Republic of Romania, gathered in this public meeting, express our total solidarity with the right fight full of bravery and heroism of the peoples from Asia and Africa, against the *odious colonial yoke, for freedom and independence, for a better life.*”) (*Scînteia tineretului* nr. 3612/ 25 Dec. 1960)

Approximately the same mechanism can be found in advertising industry by “hiding the alternative options” (see Eco 1982).

Following the two constant elements presented above, “the body of the press story” appears. **The press story** is not governed by a temporal, conditional or causal ordering, but rather by *levels* or *strata* referring to the degree of generality and specificity (important event/detail). It results that the “press story”, opposed to other types of discourse, contains a *category of the event*, which determines its intrinsic value guiding both the previous information and the following one.



In news “corpora” there are some constant factors that individualise it from some other types of discourse, that have no ambition to direct the events towards a desired/programmed course of action, elements such as **explanation, forecasting, interpretation, evaluation**. The components of the press discourse, together with its pragmatic dimension are clearly presented in the following diagram presented by Teun van Dijk in his *Textual Structures of News in the Press (working notes)* (1981).

If we consider the levels/strata of the diagram above, we can identify some global and specific dimensions of the analysis. A stylistic variation appears in terms of lexical selection, topic or syntactic structures at the same time with different ways of approaching and using the written/printed/spoken discourse, as well as monologic/dialogic structures, etc. The different units, categories, dimensions, and levels, together with the rules that govern them, will be considered *textual structures*. It is obvious that the discourse and, consequently, the media discourse as well, cannot be considered a mere “linguistic object”, but the concrete accomplishment of the communicative phenomenon in a specific socio-cultural situation. The context of discourse production will decisively influence the structure of the *press news*, whose aim is to inform, entertain, stimulate, and arouse interest but also to indoctrinate and control the potential consumer.

We can study the general principles of the coherence of narrative structures and of style within the basic structure, or the contextually determined features in particular cases. The distinction between the “real” object and the “constructed” object is known. In the case of discourse this means that the real object sometimes appears as “incoherent, unfinished, meaningless, ungrammatical, etc. according to some more general rules and principles – but it doesn’t mean that it cannot, at least partially, be interpreted or function adequately.” (van Dijk 1972: 13).

In fact, the deviation regarding the construction rules can be, on the one hand, intentional – in order to fulfill some rhetoric or aesthetic purposes, and on the other hand it can be the expression of some social or cognitive characteristics specific to those that are using the language like “memory limitations, strategic aspects of discourse production, etc.” (van Dijk 1972: 17).

If we agree that the notion of “otherness” refers both to the way I perceive the one next to me, and to the way I am perceived by the other, it is obvious that the way the world is reflected in our languages will represent a reliable criterion in acceptance, rejection or avoidance. The closeness mentioned at the beginning of this paper between two lexical areas whose nature is not of the same calibre, can be partially justified by the ease with which the Romanian language accepts at present (as a reflex of its impoverishment or of the new Orwellian language) all sorts of new terms as “xénisme” (J. Dubois 1994: 512), which deregulate to a certain extent the Romanian lexical system, either by overlapping already existing terms, or by an inadequate fitting to the “spirit” of the language. Stoichițoiu-Ichim (2001: 85) observes in this respect: “If we compare the typology of semantic change in the

media of the last decade (...), we will see that denominative neology (motivated by the need to create a new referent) is not so powerfully represented as stylistic neology (subordinated to the expressive function).”

The need to surprise or patronise is much more visible than the need to “adequately refer to something”, both in mass-media and in some other types of languages: political, juridical, or even colloquial. This phenomenon is due to some psychological factors known as instruments for lexical selection. Consequently, it is more and more difficult to find the source of the “lexical innovation”, whereas the result will be directly proportional to its novelty. And finally, a few further examples in Romanian, which are both picturesque and inadequate in a communicative situation, but nevertheless relevant:

- a face diferența – to make the difference
- a-și face treaba – to do one’s job
- a face o aroganță – to make an arrogance
- a face o concluzie – to make a conclusion
- a declica – (no translation is available)
- a se risca – to risk oneself (?)
- a chestiona (o teorie) – to question/ examine (a theory)
- a tragediza – to tragedise (?)
- a dedica (un produs) – to dedicate (a product)
- a aplica – to apply
- capabilitate – capability
- suportativ – supportative (?)
- plăcubil – pleasurable (?)

References

- Barthes, Roland. 1968. *Elements of Semiology*. London: Cape.
- Eco, Umberto. 1982. *Tratat de semiotică generală [Treaty of General Semiotics]*. București: Editura Științifică și Pedagogică.
- Hartley, John. 1999. *Discursul știrilor [The Discourse of News]*. Iași: Polirom.
- Hawkes, Terence. 1977. *Structuralism and Semiotics*. London: Methuen.
- Irimiaș, George. 2003. *Structuri textuale ale discursului politic totalitar [Textual Structures of the Totalitarian Political Discourse]*. Cluj: Clusium.
- Saussure, Ferdinand. 1998. *Curs de lingvistică generală [Course of General Linguistics]*. Iași: Polirom.
- Stoichițoiu-Ichim, Adriana. 2001. *Vocabularul limbii române actuale [Romanian Language Vocabulary Today]*. București: All.
- van Dijk, Teun. 1972. *Some Aspects of Text Grammar. A Study in Theoretical Linguistics and Poetics*. The Hague: Mouton.

- van Dijk, Teun. 1981. *Textual Structures of News in the Press. Working notes*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, Department of General Literary Studies, Section of Discourse Studies.
- Volosinov, Valentin. 1973. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Seminar Press, (first issue in Russian, 1929-1930).