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Manipulating the interpretation of political discourses

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Discourses usually convey their messages embedded in layers of meanings, which need decoding. Although everybody can understand the meaning, few see the power beyond the choice of words, sentence or discourse structure, and how easily interpretation can be manipulated according to the interests of the speaker. This paper aims to show how linguistic choices can lead to manipulation of emotions and attitudes according to social, cultural, and political contexts. By analysing two discourses from two different countries, Romania and UK, during the Covid pandemic, we concluded that in order to persuade people to obey the rules and maintain social distancing, the speakers made appropriate linguistic choices to manipulate feelings of trust, responsibility and national pride.

Key-words: discourse, manipulation, linguistic choice, shared values

1. Introduction

Effective communication is the aim of all speakers; however, achieving it depends very much on how their speech is built. A good speech is not only meant to inform but to trigger a reaction from the audience, be it in advertising or in politics. Therefore, speakers tend to use structures that empower their words and divert the attention of the audience very smoothly towards items they want to emphasize, thus manipulating the power of their statement.

Pragmatics has shown that there is meaning beyond words through speech acts (Austin 1962; Searle 1975) and that grammar choices can change or emphasize meaning (Halliday and Hassan 1976). Critical discourse analysts (Fairclough 1995, 1989; Jaworsky and Coupland 1999; Fairclough 1989) agree that language reflects and shapes the society and culture in which it is produced, thus being invested with social and cultural beliefs. In other words, linguistic choices are not only manipulative; they also reflect the beliefs of the society in which they occur.

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Therefore, the analysis of a discourse (micro level) can reveal social and cultural aspects (macro level) (van Dijk, 1985, online). The linguistic choices can be at graphic, syntactic or semantic level, their purpose being to attract attention, emphasize, change meaning, persuade, etc. According to Johnston (2002), these choices reflect the speaker's attitude towards the claims he/she makes regarding the knowledge status, the actions, actors or events in a particular situation. In this way, they can reflect a way of thinking, a view of the world.

In this context, discourses on similar topics produced in different societies should differ according to the culture and beliefs of that society. This paper aims to analyse the structure of some political discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 in order to find out to what extent they abide to the theories mentioned above. We started from the premise that the aim of both discourses would be the same: to persuade people to avoid contamination. Another premise was that there would be differences in the structure of the discourses according to the society where they were delivered so as to reflect their cultural and social beliefs.

We decided to focus our attention on two discourses from two different countries: Romania and UK. We expected to find similarities in terms of the imperative tone, for instance, urging people to obey the rules imposed so as to reduce and eventually stop contamination, but also differences, reflecting the society's attitude in this special pandemic context.

2. Case study

According to the above-mentioned theories, language influences and is influenced by the social and cultural beliefs of a society. The discourses chosen for analysis were selected randomly from many speeches on tv in the month of May 2020. They belong to the Romanian president Klaus Iohannis (Thursday 7 May 2020, 6 pm: https://www.presidency.ro/ro/presedinte/agenda-presedintelui/declaratia-de-presa-sustinuta-de-presedintele-romaniei-domnul-klaus-iohannis1588864499) and the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson (Sunday 10 May 2020, 7: 19, https://www.itv.com/news/2020-05-10/boris-johnson-s-speech-in-full-as-lockdown-restrictions-are-updated-in-england). We only used the scripts of the speeches for our analysis in this paper, further studies will include body language, tone of the voice, setting etc. Our intention was to catch a glimpse of the social issues the two countries were confronted with during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper provides an analysis of the linguistic choices in the two discourses at syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic level, drawing on the cultural aspects the language used entails.

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At ***syntactic level***, the part of speech most frequently used in any type of discourse to claim that the information presented is true (Johnson, 2002) is the verb *to be*, especially in its present form. Passive voice and impersonal expressions are also used to show the speaker's objectivity towards the claim they make, thus aiming to gain the trust of the audience (see Figure 1). The general objective of both discourses is to persuade people to obey the rules set by the authorities as regards social distancing and personal protection, to take responsibility for their actions and eventually reduce the spread of the virus. As opposed to advertising (Berariu et al., 2017), where most often people are urged into action by the use of the imperative, in these two discourses the imperative form of the verb appears only once, probably to avoid the dictatorship tone and not to cause possible uprisings. In the British discourse, however, modal verbs are widely used to motivate and persuade people to take action, from 'must' to 'should' and 'can', from obligation to suggested options, while in the Romanian discourse, only the equivalent of the modal 'must' is used (see Figure 1).

Verbs		**Aim**
Passive Voice	Covid alert level will be determined.	➢ present facts, trustworthy information ➢ gain trust ➢ show objectivity
	S-a dovedit 'It has been shown'	
Present Simple	There is a strong resolve, we have a plan, we take measures	
	se departajează, pregătesc, respectă, se unesc 'they select, prepare, obey, unite'	
Impersonal expressions	It is a fact that	
	Este evident 'It is obvious'	
Present Continuous/ Future Simple	We are establishing a New Covid Alert System. We will increase the fines.	➢ show hope ➢ show concern ➢ show involvement, action
	Vom ieși din această criză, vom continua 'We will come out of this crisis, we will go on'	
Imperative	Work from home if you can.	➢ Urge people to take action ➢ Persuade people to obey rules ➢ Encourage people to take responsibility
	Le cer să înceteze. 'I am asking them to stop'	
Modal verbs	We must stay alert. You should avoid public transport. You can sit in the sun […] you can play sports […] but only with members of your own household	
	Trebuie 'must'	

Figure 1. Linguistic choices at syntactic level: verbs

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Another part of speech that brings credibility to the facts stated is the numeral. Inserting numerals in the discourse is a good technique of manipulation, although there are always people ready to spread disbelief as regards the reliability of the information: “We have the R below one, between 0.5 and 0.9” (British discourse). In other cases, however, the numerals are used for an emotional impact: “There are millions of people who are fearful”, ‘hundreds of thousands of people’, the latter being also present in the Romanian discourse. Another use of the numeral is to attract attention. The Romanian president mentions two enemies, the virus and the opposing political party. He further elaborates on both, but gradually focuses on political aspects, thus drawing the attention of the audience towards a subject that should not have been the topic of the day. It is true that in the context of the virus spread the much-blamed party continued its usual activity, vehemently opposing or publicly debating rules and regulations instead of showing solidarity in the fight against the virus. But this is a cultural aspect to be mentioned further in the article.

In both discourses, deicitics are widely used, mostly personal or indefinite pronouns, to get closer to the audience, to create a feeling of belonging to a nation: we/our/us appear all throughout the British discourse as in ‘we must’, ‘we said’, ‘our new system’, ‘all of us’, ‘everyone’. Though not as numerous in the Romanian discourse, we have encountered some, nevertheless: ‘each and every one of us’, ‘our nation’, ‘all of us’. Manipulation goes on when the audience is empowered by the use of the personal pronoun ‘you’ and ‘your’, in an attempt to raise their awareness on the idea of responsible action: ‘your freedom’, ‘your area’, ‘your efforts’, ‘for you’, ‘you know’; these are very frequent in the British discourse as opposed to the Romanian one.

A step further into manipulating people’s emotions is through the use of adjectives in their comparative or superlative form: ‘stricter’, ‘tougher’, ‘stronger’, ‘better’, ‘more generous and more sharing’ or ‘the most vicious’, ‘the most critical’ (British discourse), ‘much more energy’, ‘a more extensive program’, ‘much more visible’, ‘very contagious’ (Romanian discourse). The emotional impact is even greater when these forms are combined in repetitive structures:

(1) I believe we can be stronger and better than ever before. More resilient, more innovative, more economically dynamic, but also more generous and more sharing.

Both speakers extensively use nominalization to emphasize an idea or to try to persuade the audience. In both discourses, it is often combined with other manipulative techniques, such as the use of the deictics mentioned above:

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(2) a. It is thanks to your efforts […] that […]
b. Because you understand that as things stand […] it's the only way […]
c. And it is because of your efforts […]

(3) a. *Numai respectând aceste măsuri vom putea să ne reluăm activitățile […]*
'Only by obeying these rules will we be able to start again our activities [...]'
b. *Profitând de faptul că […], PSD a lucrat în Parlament.*
'Taking advantage of the fact that […], the Social Democrat Party has been active in the Parliament.'
c. *Surprinzătoare este, însă, perspectiva […]*
'Surprising, however, is the perspective [...]'

The emotional implication is measured by the linguistic choices at ***semantic level***, especially as regards the choice of adjectives (Johnston, 2002). Discourses usually appeal to grading adjectives that gradually escalate to manipulate emotions. In these two discourses, given the serious crises faced by the whole world, the adjectives are already at the top of the scale: 'vicious', 'tragic', 'fearful', 'devilish', 'awful' (British discourse), 'drastic', 'treacherous', 'invisible', 'damaging', 'terrible', 'critical' (Romanian discourse). They are all strong, powerful adjectives with negative connotations. However, adjectives with positive connotation come to restore the balance: 'strong', 'tough', 'alert', 'safe', 'robust' (British discourse), 'honest', 'thorough', 'long-lasting', 'responsible', 'brave' (Romanian discourse). Similarly, powerful adverbs are frequently used: 'rapidly', 'sharply', 'overwhelmingly' (British discourse), 'clearly', 'fully responsible', 'certainly' (Romanian discourse).

The degree of emotional involvement can also be achieved by the choice of nouns. Just like in the case of adjectives, there are nouns with strong negative connotations, meant to raise people's awareness on the seriousness of the epidemic context and to persuade them to be supportive and cooperate with the authorities. Thus, the Covid context in the British discourse starts from 'disease' or 'illness', it goes to 'epidemics' and 'threat', soon escalating to 'catastrophe'. The Romanian discourse mentions 'pandemic', 'crisis', and 'emergency situation'. Both discourses are very direct as regards the consequences and do not avoid the word 'death'.

Using personifications and metaphors is another way of drawing closer to the audience and appealing to emotions. The virus is personified, it is an 'enemy' for Romanians so it can be stopped, and a 'killer' for the British, therefore one can 'control', 'beat' or 'defeat' it. Eventually, the 'invisible killer" will be destroyed by a metaphor: 'the light of science'.

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The choice of verbs appeals not only to feelings but to reason as well, conveying the idea of hope, of control, enhanced by the presence of the verb 'to know' as in "I know/you know' present in both discourses, clearly showing confidence towards the claims they make. The choice of nouns with positive connotations also encourages people to hope: 'challenges', 'consensus', 'resolve', 'progress' appear frequently in the British discourse, while the Romanian president promises the 'resetting' and 'development' of the country.

These nouns underline the idea of an optimistic future built by people of character: the British are invested with patience, fortitude, bravery, and kindness and the Romanians are praised for their solidarity, strength of character, and resilience, which are but a few of the characteristics of a good citizen in the pandemic context.

At the ***pragmatic level***, the most widely used technique of manipulation in both discourses is the repetition. It does not only draw attention to the message, it also keeps people's attention to it and increases its emotional tone:

(4) We will come back from this devilish illness. We will come back to health, robust health.

In this example, there is double repetition: the repetition of an entire sentence and the repetition of the noun 'health'. The strength of the message is increased by the use of opposing notions of negative/positive connotations: 'illness' versus 'health', 'devilish' versus 'robust'.

(5) *Sunt […], românii care respectă restricțiile […], sunt specialiștii care lucrează […], sunt guvernanții care au luat măsuri […]*
'There are […] the Romanians who obey the rules […], there are the specialists who are working […], there are the government representatives who have taken measures […]'

In the example above, the repetitive structure includes the main verb, 'to be', as well as the nouns that follow it, which are different every time, thus emphasizing the idea they carry: 'the Romanians', 'the specialists', 'the government representatives' being the model Romanian citizens behaving appropriately during this pandemic.

Cohesion is another rhetoric device of great impact on the audience. The British discourse abounds in sentences linked by the conjunction 'and', very often accompanied by repetition and nominalization:

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(6) And it is thanks to your efforts […], and it is thanks to you […], and so I know […]

When accompanied by 'though', it gradually increases the tempo as well as the expectations of the audience:

(7) And though different parts of the country are experiencing the pandemic at different rates, and though it is right to be flexible in our response, I believe that […]

The Romanian discourse, however, is less persuasive from this point of view. It uses common cohesive devices without unusual emphasis on any particular item. The sentences are long and elaborate, the paragraphs are well structured, but the discourse lacks the emotional impact given by an efficient use of cohesion as a rhetoric device.

In terms of reference, however, it is in the Romanian discourse that we found special emphasis through nominalization and a detailed explanation of what the pronoun 'they' entails.

(8) *Ei, adică PSD și acoliții săi, sunt cei care […]*
They, namely the Social Democrat Party and its acolytes, are those who […]

In the British discourse, reference is closely related to the context in which it is produced and decoding it requires focus and a good understanding of the language. For instance, in the example below, the 'invisible killer', namely the virus, forms an anaphoric chain with both cases of 'it'.

(9) We are shining the light of science on this invisible killer, and we will pick it up where it strikes.

As regards ellipsis, it is the British discourse that makes most use of it, in the well-structured Romanian discourse there is none. In the example bellow, the structure 'we can be' is missing in the second sentence, placing emphasis on the repetition of adjectives in the comparative form and building the crescendo of the emotional tone.

(10) I believe we can be stronger and better than ever before. More resilient, more innovative, more economically dynamic, but also more generous and more sharing.

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Other rhetorical devices used in discourses are quotations, sayings or words of wisdom. According to Johnston (2002), incorporating other voices in a speech is a way of representing a view of the world. In both discourses, the sayings/words of wisdom draw on cultural aspects, on shared beliefs, the speaker identifying with the audience by shared knowledge.

All Romanians are familiar with the saying "Old habits die hard", used by the Romanian president; therefore, it wouldn't be difficult to infer that the speaker refers to the actions of the political party criticised throughout the speech. In the British discourse, the words of wisdom used "It is coming down the mountain that is often more dangerous" are meant to warn the people of the dangers still lying ahead, even after a possible peak in the number of infected people has been reached.

Identifying with the audience is meant to help create the idea of belonging to a group, to a nation. It can be achieved by deictics, as previously shown, as in 'our new system', but it is more obvious when clearly stated. In the British discourse we came across "we as a nation" or "the entire country" while the Romanian discourse made use of 'our nation' or simply 'Romania' or 'the Romanians'.

The idea of national pride appears in both discourses, but it is much more emphasized in the British one: 'our world-beating system', "it is a global problem but we must fix it".

Moreover, mentioning the shared values and habits will only encourage people to be optimistic and continue their life. Both the English and the Romanians are eager to resume their usual activities, to go to the parks, to see their children play in the sun, to meet their parents again. There is promise in both discourses for a better future. The British PM talks about the future of their children, while the Romanian president emphasizes on resetting Romania and a sustainable development.

Yet, there are certain conditions to be met: people must be responsible and obey the rules set by the authorities, thus maintaining the social distance required. It is acceptable to socialize, but only within the confines of one's home, or there would be consequences: an increase of the fines. This threat is, however, diminished by the confidence the speaker has in the British people, when he implies that rule-breakers are 'a small minority'. In Romania, on the other hand, although everyone would like to reunite with their family under perfectly safe circumstances, the whole idea of responsible behaviour is challenged, as some people find in difficult to comply with the rules or pay fines:

(12) a. *Aceste sancțiuni sunt discutabile.*
'These sanctions are debatable'.

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b. I have consulted across the political spectrum, across all four nations of the UK.

Once again, there is a political turn and the discourse abounds in political criticism. In contrast, in the British discourse politics is mentioned only in the context of a united nation.

3. Conclusions

The analysis of the two pieces of discourse confirmed the premises we started from. The first premise regarded the similarities in terms of linguistic choices, the aim being the same: prevent the spread of the disease by urging people to obey the rules imposed.

We demonstrated that the discourses shared the same objective: to persuade people to protect themselves and eventually reduce the number of contaminated people. In both cases, the linguistic choices were meant to manipulate feelings of trust, responsibility and national pride. Both discourses appealed to people's feelings of belonging to a nation, to the world as a whole, urging them to be responsible for themselves, as well as for the others. However, the style of the UK Prime Minister's speech appears to be more appealing to the audience due to its short sentences, numerous repetitions of various syntactic structures, and emotional tone. In contrast, Klaus Iohannis's speech is built of long elaborate sentences and well-structured paragraphs. Although various linguistic techniques are present to manipulate the attention and the emotions of the audience, similar to the British speech, they are not abundant and therefore, their power is diminished. Culturally speaking, Romanians are used to this kind of speech and it probably meets the expectations of the old generation; however, it is time the younger audience were taken more seriously into consideration and the style of speeches were slightly adjusted to meet everybody's needs.

The second premise referred to the different cultural approaches to the crisis as they were reflected in the choice of lexical items. While the UK Prime Minister's speech focuses on positive aspects achieved, praising people for the responsibility they have shown, hardly mentioning those who disobeyed and had to pay a fine, the Romanian president's speech is a harsh criticism of certain political actions that challenged the governmental punishments for disobeying the rules. Although perfectly entitled to such criticism, the message conveyed is probably not the one intended. While in the UK the idea of responsibility is not even questioned, in Romania it is a subject of public debate. In both countries there have been

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restrictions, people have been deprived of their freedom; however, this crisis in health and economy does not have to be political as well. The shift of focus on political issues only comes to demonstrate how different each nation is in terms of attitude to the same crisis.

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