Ethnic stereotypes and prejudices in the Romanian newspapers

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Résumé: Dans les relations avec les autres il y a souvent des stéréotypes et des préjugés qui n'ont pas une liaison directe avec une personne ou avec un groupe de personnes, mais qui, à l'origine, ont des croyances et des opinions sans fondement logique. Dans leur qualité de formateurs de l'opinion publique et d'éducateurs, média devraient éviter les formulations qui renvoient, directement ou indirectement, aux stéréotypes et aux préjugés. Les Roms font partie des minorités ethniques soumises longtemps aux injustices. Malheureusement, l'analyse de la presse écrite de Roumanie nous montre que de telles formulations sont encore présentes dans le discours médiatique, avec des conséquences profondément négatives pour les récepteurs.

Mots clés: roms, stéréotypes, préjugés, minorités ethniques, récepteurs.

1. Introduction

In our everyday life we often confront ourselves with prejudices and stereotypes, mostly when it comes to a certain ethnic minority. This happens because, as Bourhis R. and Leyens J.-F. point it out, in our relation with *the others* we seldom "base our perceptions on information which refer to a person as a part of a certain group, rather than the person itself." (Bourhis, R., Leyens, J-F, 1997, p.97).

Why stereotypes and prejudices? Simply because nowadays, as Teun van Dijk points it out, "subtle forms of prejudices, dis-

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crimination and ethnicism occur among all groups and institutions of our societies."[1]

Our research aims to analyse how the Roma minority is reflected in central newspapers as the best manner to understand the relation between the majority and this ethnic minority. Newspapers are a *mirror* of the society offering a brief image of the major facts that took place at a certain moment, as well as the minor aspects o the daily life. The main purpose of the newspapers is to inform, but they also educate and provide access to "the others" culture and customs. The national newspapers often publish articles about different minority groups, communicating the opinion of the dominant group members in a highly persuasive way. It is a fact that ethnic stereotypes and prejudices about the Roma minority have always existed. Although, theoretically they must have disappeared they can still be found in a more dangerous form, as they are carefully dissimulated and there for more difficult to detect. Thus, stereotypes and prejudices affect the intergroup relations and interactions guiding to certain social representations.[2]

A *stereotype* is defined as (1) *a conventional, formulaic and oversimplified conception, opinion or image*[3] or as (2) *a simplified and fixed image of all members of a culture or group (based on race, religion, ethnicity, age, gender, national origin)*[4]. A related term is *prejudice*, defined as (1) *a negative, unfair opinion about a person or a group, usually based on limited information experience* or (2) *an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics.* While stereotypes can be either positive or negative, prejudices are always negative.

[1] Van Dijk, Teun, 1987, *Communicating Racism*, Sage Publication, Inc., California, p. 8.

[2] The term *social representation* was introduced by Serge Moscovici in 1961 and it is defined as the collective elaboration "of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating".

[3] http://www.thefreedictionary.com/stereotype.

[4] http:// the_english_dept.**triped.com**/stereo2.htm.

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Although stereotype[5] was used before it was the American journalist Walter Lippmann that introduced the term with its actual sense into the social and cultural vocabulary of modern life in 1922, defining it as "a picture in our heads" deeply rooted into our traditions and education.

Our corpus is made from articles published in different Romanian newspapers, focusing on those articles where either the headline or the content (or both) guide the reader to a certain interpretation, through the use of implicit and / or explicit stereotypes and prejudices.

Our research addresses: 1) the characteristics of the headlines, namely: a) the role they play in guiding the reader's interpretation; b) the shared cultural and historical context which they evoke. 2) the analysis of the article's content, namely: a) the identification of linguistic feature relevant for our research; b) the use of rhetorical devices and highly emotive words.

Our study aims to draw up attention on the fact that stereotypes are dangerous both for the reader and the members of the Roma minority.

2. Negative stereotypes and their undesirable implications

Although, as mentioned before, stereotypes can be either positive or negative, we shall focus on the latest, as they represent, in our opinion, a subtle manner of manipulating the receiver and perpetuating a problem which requires for a better approach. More than ever nowadays we intend to erase stereotypes from all media, including newspapers. However, this is not an easy task for at least two reasons: stereotypes are most of the times hard to recognize and they can't be easily changed, as they are fixed beliefs. Consciously or not some articles present the Roma in words which, at a closer look, are nothing else but the old stereotypes used for centuries when referring to this ethnic group. In the

[5] The term *stereotype* derives from the Greek word *stereos* (firm , solid), and *typos* (impression); so the meaning is *solid impression*.

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last years they are called *Roma people* (this is the official term), but for centuries they were known as *Gypsies*[6]. The Romanian newspapers use both terms and in many cases *Gypsy* does not have any negative meaning nor is used as a stereotype. However, as we are going to point out further, these situations have not disappeared completely.

On 2 September 2010 *Adevarul* publishes the article entitled *Ghettos for Gypsies, in Hungary*. Sometimes an intelligent headline is "the key to the readers' heart". According to Sorin Preda in some cases readers like intelligent headlines because they give them the false impression that they are well informed, and therefore they do not need to read the entire article. One may argue that this isn't true, that on the contrary, good headlines are those which force the reader to read the entire article, and thus they sell the newspaper and this is exactly what the author points it out further. An intelligent headline shocks the reader and this is done almost entirely through *words*; the main power of words lies in their symbolic force. The same word provides for each reader another meaning according to his / her life experience and social and cultural background. Doina Rusti considers that *the power of a symbol stays in its capacity of urging interpretations and releasing the readers' secret resorts.*[7] Another important matter is the order of words. According to Jean Claude Abric "the words' order can play a major role in assigning significations."[8] The first words are more than the following ones, as they guide the reader to certain expectations; the last words are more important than the previous ones, as they remain longer in the memory of the reader.

[6] According to the Oxford Dictionary a *Gypsy* is *a member of a travelling people with dark skin and hair, traditionally living by itinerant trade and fortune telling. Gypsies speak a language (Romany) that is related to Hindi and are believed to have originated in South Asia.*

[7] Rusti, Doina, 2005, *Mesajul subliminal în comunicarea actuala*, Tritonic, Bucuresti, p. 62.

[8] Abric, Jean-Claude, 2002, *Psihologia comunicarii. Teorii si metode*, Polirom, Iasi, p. 27.

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In our case the noun *ghettos*[9] leads the reader to a negative interpretation which comes mainly from its association with poverty, maladjustment, crime and discrimination. Thus the journalist chooses to present a reality in a manner which reinforces a stereotype; back in the history this form of *integration* of the Roma minority has been either tried or discussed. The problem of discrimination becomes more acute when the reader finds out that these *ghettos* are intended to shelter the Gypsies, an ethnic minority which faced such problems several times since their arrival in Europe. *However*, it is worth mentioning that the last words, *in Hungary*, somehow create a distance between this *problem* and *us*.

…The Hungarian Radical Party Jobbik proposed that people who trouble the public order, mostly Gypsies, to be moved in special areas outside the cities, where they must be kept under police's surveillance, writes Mediafax, quoting MTI. The first "area of public order", which means a marked area where people would be registered and kept under surveillance by the local police, should be established in the north-eastern city Miskolc, explained Csanad Szegedi, European MP of the party mentioned above. The suggestion has as objective "the isolation of the criminal elements", in order to force them in the same time to "integrate", declared Szegedi…[10] (*Adevarul*, 2 September 2010)

Certain linguistic items draw up the reader's attention, such the following ones: the *ghettos* are built for the *people who trouble public order, mostly Gypsies*. Moreover these *ghettos*

[9] A *ghetto* is a part in a city, especially a slum area, occupied by a minority group or groups.

[10] Partidul radical ungar Jobbik a propus ca persoanele care tulbura linistea publica, mai ales tiganii, sa fie mutate în zone special din afara oraselor, unde sa fie mentinute sub supravegherea politiei, scrie Mediafax, citând MTI. Prima "zona de ordine publica", adica o suprafata delimitata unde locuitorii ar fi înregistrati si tinuti sub supraveghere de jandarmi locali, ar trebui înfiintata în zona orasului nord-estic, a explicat Csanad Szegedi, europarlamentar Jobbik. Propunerea are ca obiectiv "izolarea elementelor infractionale", pentru a le forta în acelasi timp sa se "integreze", a declarat Szegedi.

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should be placed *outside the cities*, which is another dangerous stereotype[11]. One can easily observe the use of highly emotive words, like *area of public order*, *the isolation of the criminal elements*, *to force them to "integrate"*.

On 9 February 2011 *Jurnalul National* publishes the article entitled *Italian politician: "It is easier to train a dog than to educate a Gypsy"*.

"It is easier to educate a dog than a Gypsy child" – this is what the spokeswoman of the Italian political party "Futuro e Libertá" has declared, commenting upon the case of the four Roma children who died Sunday in a fire in Rome… "Dogs and children, once educated they remain educated. But if nobody educates them… they urinate on walls. My dog does not urinate on walls either" said the Italian woman. Maiolo has also said: "All the ethnic minorities are able to integrate, less the Roma minority." When asked why the Italian woman declared, among other things, that the Roma people "do not want to work", "they hate us and they only want to steal from us", "they do not have the sense if hygiene", "they have children only to send them to steal". [12]

For a politician such a declaration is completely unacceptable. Not to mention that it may represent the end of his / her political career.

[11] Since their arrival in Europe the Roma people have lived almost exclusively at the edge of the society. Except the cases when they lived on a landowner's property, their houses were built at the periphery of the villages or cities.

[12] "E mai usor sa educi un câine decât un copil tigan" – asta a declarat purtatoarea de cuvânt a formatiunii politice "Futuro e Libertá", comentând cazul celor patru copii de etnie roma care au murit duminica într-un incendiu la Roma. … "Câinii si copiii, daca îi educi, sunt apoi educati. Dar daca nimeni nu-i educa…fac pipi pe ziduri. Nici câinele meu nu face pe ziduri", a spus italianca. Maiolo a mai afirmat: "Toate etniile sunt integrabile, mai putin romii". Când a fost întrebata de moderator din ce motiv, italianca a afirmat, printer altele, ca romii "nu vor sa munceasca", "ne urasc si vor doar sa ne fure", nu au simtul igienei", "fac copii ca sa-i trimita la furat".

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In order to convince the reader and to increase its credibility the newspaper uses a simple strategy, that of quotation. One may argue that this title is too long[13], or makes excessive use of highly emotive language. With a minimal inspection we are able to observe that the beginning of the title, which as we have said before plays an important role in directing the reader to certain conclusions, is intended to place the stereotype's origin into another country, thus making this an *international problem*.

The analysis of this article reveals a case when we do not discuss a stereotype used by a journalist, but with a case when a representative of the media plays what Van Dijk calls "an intermediary role in the reproduction of other types of public discourse", namely a politician's discourse. This declaration shows that in daily life ethnic prejudices and stereotypes do not come "by accident" but they are the result of education. It is worth mentioning that they are easily spread through different forms of mass communication, and therefore are even more dangerous. The succession of reasons why the Roma people are not able to integrate, in Maiolo's opinion, represents a clear example of how stereotypes and prejudices can affect an entire minority group (*they do not want to work, they hate us and they only want to steal from us, they have children only to send them to steal*).

3. Conclusions

Most of the media are pretending to be against racism and discrimination. Their huge importance comes from the fact that they provide most information used by people in daily conversations. The media are for a long time not simply *social agents* but really *social institutions*, which is the reason why their importance is constantly increasing (*Cf.* Ardeleanu, Sanda-Maria, 2005, 29).

Van Dijk considers that "much of the news is not so much about the happenings or events, but about what other people, ty-

[13] Sorin Preda considers that there is no strategy for a good title. However, a title may not be neither too long, nor too short.

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pically the powerful and the elite, say or write."[14] In the cases examined above we have two politicians expressing their opinion in different ways, but creating the same social representations in the readers' minds. One wants to build *ghettos to educate them and force them to integrate*; the other considers that *all the ethnic minorities are able to integrate, less the Roma minority* – the only difference stays in *style*, in the way of saying it. Although, in these cases media do not provide negative opinion themselves one may argue that they offer the proper background for negative opinion to arise, giving more strength to stereotypes and prejudices.

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