Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 10 (59) No. 2 – 2017

References to national identity, history and cultural heritage in political discourse

Mădălina MATEI[1]

The extent to which political discourse can be deemed successful is measurable by the positive response of its recipients not only to the issuer himself/herself but also to the political ideology that they embrace, to the cause that they defend or to the aim that they envisage. Political discourse is commonly permeated with contextualized or recontextualized references (see Linell, 1998) to various facets of national identity (i.e. history, cultural heritage, ethnicity, etc.) in such a way as to secure a more subtle and profound connection with the audience. More often than not, addressees resonate with a type of discourse that is global and local, international and national at the same time. This paper aims to conduct an analysis of several instances of political discourse (i.e. political speeches delivered by Romanian MPs and MEPs) from the perspective of the pragmatic and functional role of references to national identity made within them.

Keywords: *national identity, heritage, political discourse, communicative goals*

1. Introduction

According to Leith and Soule (2011), there are two contrasting forms of national identity, namely one that is strongly connected to democratic values and is thus oriented towards pluralism, openness, inclusiveness, and another which is grounded on "emotional belonging and ancestry" (Leith and Soule 2011, XII). Political discourse may draw upon both views of national identity in order to create a discursive balance which is beneficial to any democratic state.

Due to its complexity, the analysis of political speeches from the perspective of references to national identity and cultural heritage will resort to the methodological tools furnished by pragmatics, functionalism and critical discourse analysis.

We believe that all these reunited perspectives would ensure a more comprehensive view on the subject matter.

[1] Transilvania University of Braşov, m.matei@unitbv.ro

BDD-A28070 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:37 UTC)

2. Corpus

The research is conducted on a corpus of parliamentary discourses delivered in the Romanian Parliament (Chamber of Deputies, Senate) and in the European Parliament by Romanian MPs and MEPs. The corpus of political speeches was devised within the research project entitled *The Construction of Identity in the Romanian and European Parliamentary Discourse (PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-0056).*

Only the discourses of members of parliament who were both in the Romanian and in the European Parliament were included in the corpus and subjected to qualitative analysis whose focus was mainly on the discursive display of national and European identities by the same speaker.

3. Methodological approaches

This study relies on the methodological tools furnished by pragmatics, functional linguistics and CDA. From a **pragmatic** point of view, the fundamental assumption of political discourse is that individuals pertaining to a speech community have **procedural knowledge** about the most appropriate manner of construction and interpretation of either explicit or implicit meaning. Discourse practices, genres and socio-cultural contexts are also specific to the respective speech community (Hanks 1996; Ochs 1996).

Procedural knowledge would involve shared information on symbolic sign systems such as language or beliefs, on pragmatic principles and social actions such as the proper construction and use of verbal interaction patterns, on the physical, social and subjective worlds which constitute parts of culture and on the normative conditions regarding appropriate interaction (Fetzer 2013, 6).

The aim of this section is to justify the necessity of adopting a **functional approach** to the study of political discourse but also to revisit the theories connected to functionalism in linguistics and to define what a functional approach to political discourse would actually imply. Consequently, out of the many dimensions and theories of functionalism, only the theoretical aspects that are relevant for the analysis of political discourse will be debated.

In the first part of this section, the focus will be placed on functionalism and on the theories which are most relevant for a functional analysis of political discourse.

The main assumptions that lead the researcher to the conclusion that language is primarily a functional phenomenon have been put forward by systemic linguists who suggested four main theoretical claims (see Table 1) which are meant to assert the fact that language has a predominantly functional nature:

BDD-A28070 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:37 UTC)

The functional character of language (adapted from Suzanne Eggins, 2004, 3)	1. language use is functional;
	2. its function is to make meanings;
	3. these meanings are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are exchanged;
	4. the process of using language is a *semiotic* process, a process of making meaning by choosing.

Table 1. The functional character of language

The description of language as a semiotic process is correct since the production of meaning is not always semantically determined. Especially in talk-in-interaction in general and in the case of political discourse in particular, it is pragmatic meaning that we are dealing with.

As Simon Dik (1987, 83) remarks, the functional view presupposes that language is an instrument used by individuals in attaining goals which are to be found in the complex web of social interactions. In the functional view, speakers use linguistic expressions in such a way as to communicate messages that would manage to change the hearers mentally or emotionally, thus modifying their knowledge, convictions or feelings.

This broad perspective on the functional, social-conscious and goal-oriented nature of speech is essential for the study of political discourse.

The input of **CDA** in the analysis of political discourse is twofold. Firstly, it focuses on authentic everyday communication viewed as social practice (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997), and secondly it involves a

> dialectical relationship between particular discursive acts and the situations, institutions and social structures in which they are embedded: the situational, institutional and social contexts shape and affect discourse, and, in turn, discourses influence social and political reality." Wodak *et al.* (2009, 8).

4. Identity, history and cultural heritage

When it comes to the references to identity in political speeches, mention could be made of two types of identity:

1. Romanian identity which is mostly referred to in political speeches delivered in the Romanian Parliament;
2. European Identity which is invoked in political speeches uttered both in the Romanian Parliament and in the European Parliament.

BDD-A28070 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:37 UTC)

The discursive constructs of national identity are strongly connected to democratic values and thus oriented towards pluralism, openness, inclusiveness (Leith and Soule, 2011, XII), they are grounded on "emotional belonging and ancestry" (Leith and Soule, 2011, XII) and contain or entail cultural and political elements (Wodak *et al.*, 2009, 5).

The references to national identity are made according to **cultural coordinates**, namely references to history, literature, folklore, cultural productions, beliefs, proverbs, humour, traditions used for several discursive goals (persuasion, discursive construction of sameness and difference, etc.), and **political coordinates** which entail political (party) ideology legitimized by identitary references as well as socio-political goals and strategies attained by resorting to elements of Romanian or European identity.

4.1. Romanian and European identity

In this section we will analyse two political speeches delivered by two Romanian MPs and MEPs in the Romanian Parliament and in the European Parliament in discussing the identitary references made in them:

(1) **Mr. Adrian Severin (Social Democratic Party), 15.03.2005, Romanian Parliament, Chamber of Deputies (Corpus: AS_CD_15.03.2005)**
There is a famous phrase, in Roman Law or in the Roman period, that every Roman citizen could utter, when placed in a delicate situation while travelling across the empire: "civis romanus sum", "I am a Roman citizen", and by that they would feel under the protection of their country. Unfortunately, today, our Romanian citizens (a) cannot say: "I'm a Romanian citizen" and be assured that their country's Government protects them and that the protection of this Government echoes abroad. (b) That is why such an important law per se, is only empty-talk as long as the Government is unable to live up to the principles that the law professes. (c)

(a) The phrasing „our Romanian citizens" features an empathic address that implies the idea of „us", of national belonging and representation.
(b) In this section we are not only dealing with an assertive but also with a performative type of national identity. The latter's affirmation by a Romanian citizen should immediately lead to concrete measures of protection performed by government authorities.
(c) The goal of this political speech is to advocate for the enforcement of a law and the means to this end is the reference to national identity and to the necessity of protecting it within and outside the country's borders.

BDD-A28070 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:37 UTC)

(2) **Mr. Adrian Severin (Party of European Socialists), 12.11.2007, European Parliament, Strasbourg (Corpus: AS_EU_12.11.2007)**
Mr President, today I will try to forget that I am a Romanian. I will try to forget, even if people are deported, attacked and killed within the borders of the European Union, simply because they are guilty of being Romanian either ethnically or by citizenship. Today, I shall try to think as an Italian and as a European. If I were Italian, I would think that I should have the right to feel secure in the country of my ancestors. I would have been outraged by the miserable camps of miserable people around my country's wonderful towns. But, while looking for my security, I would realise that this is consolidated daily by the creative work of more than one million immigrants who are producing Italian goods, offering services in areas left by Italian labour, buying Italian merchandise and paying taxes to the Italian authorities. As a European, I would not allow one of the Member States – say, Romania – to become a ghetto for the Roma or a European Union Siberia where undesirable European citizens are deported. (…) I hope that the European Parliament motion for a resolution to be adopted on this issue will bring us together in defending European values and the future of Europe.

The discursive goal of the references to national identity are mainly focused on displaying objectivity and legitimizing the argument as well as on dismantling the "us - them" dichotomy by identifying oneself with other distinct nations within the EU and with the EU itself.

Due to the fact that the context of the speech is the European Parliament, assuming a primarily European identity means abiding by the discursive and political pattern of the respective setting. In this intervention, the speaker demonstrates his **procedural knowledge** of and conformity to the norm.

Moreover, in this political speech we are dealing two types of speaker involvement which Hübler (1987, 373) terms **attitudinal attachment** and **attitudinal detachment**. **Attitudinal attachment** means 'living one's involvement' and expressing it through language whereas **attitudinal detachment** is defined as an attempt to suppress one's involvement 'without trying to be entirely successful' (i.e. detachment is a manner of saying 'I try not to be involved' which inevitably and positively calls attention to the speaker's involvement).

(3) **Ms. Norica Nicolai (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe), 12.09.2012, European Parliament, Strasbourg. (Corpus: NN_EU_12.09.2012)**
I will not consider today's debate a debate about Romania, but I will see it as a debate about the state of the Union and of democracy within the European Union. (…) It's all about the principles and values that you (n. Ms.Viviane Reding) evoked, the ones that Romanians observe, and it is not only

BDD-A28070 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:37 UTC)

> Romanian politicians that do so, but also Romanian citizens. I would like to remind you of one of the fundamental obligations incumbent upon the leaders of the European Union and its citizens – namely to uphold democracy, cultural diversity and the organization of the public institutions of member states, at national level. (…)We will never be stronger if we favor our own ideology and political groups.

This speech is a reaction to Ms. Viviane Reding's alleged interference in the 2012 impeachment referendum of President Traian Băsescu. Even though the topic of the political speech is the sensitive political situation in Romania, reference to Romanian identity is made with the sole purpose of its identification with European identity. In this context, national identity is set in opposition to political ideology and presumed partisanship.

4.2. Us vs. Them, Heroes vs. Villains

If so far references to national and European identity have not been necessarily contrasted, the following parliamentary speeches display a marked opposition in this respect.

(4) **Adina Ioana Vălean (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe), 16.04.2014, European Parliament, Strasbourg. (Corpus: AIV_EU_16.04.2014)**

> Resolution after resolution we have shouted out loud our worries when Russia bluntly goes about annexing bits and pieces of Ukraine (a). At the same time, President Schulz is talking about EU-Russia common interests. **Well**, not all of us are willing to sell our souls for Russian gas. (b) It might be easy for some to talk that way – the ones who did not feel the destructive might of Soviet Russia – but it is insulting to all those people from Romania, Poland or East Germany who died fighting for freedom and democracy (a), and these are the values the Ukrainian people are fighting for today.

In sections marked (a) past and present historical events are evoked to support the politician's view on the subject matter. The cultural reference to the Faustian myth in (b) governs the central statement of the speech. Even though *well* might seem to function as an attenuation discourse marker, it only prefaces opposition to the previous discursive slot and it brackets a bald on-record statement.

(5) a. **Corneliu Vadim Tudor (Non-Inscrit), 12.09.2012, European Parliament, Strasbourg. (Corpus: CVT_EU_12.09.2012)**

> I love my country and I am really worried. I am not involved in this ridiculous quarrel. I do not agree either with Mr Băsescu, or with Mr Ponta,

BDD-A28070 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:37 UTC)

but it is obvious that in Romania, all the elections are stalled. Trust me, because I was one of the finalists of the presidential elections in 2000. But the mafia reversed the results. Another great fraud is being prepared today for the general elections of 9 December and the machine of this robbery is created by the secret services and the CIA. Romania is an American colony. What democracy, what human rights? Please, will you help us with international observation of these elections?

b. **Romanian Parliament, Senate (Corpus: CVT_SE_17.05.2006)**
Foreigners do not respect you unless you defeat them.

In the US vs. THEM dichotomy that this politician usually resorted to, the latter term stands for the mafia, Romanian and American intelligence agencies, foreigners, etc., whereas the former stands for Romania and Romanians.

The discursive purpose of most nationalist political speeches made by this politician is the biased vilification of 'the Other' and exaggerated praise of the Romanian nation which has been, in his view, a permanent target of conspiracy and injustice.

Another aim that the reference to history and cultural heritage targets, is the creation of humorous verbal effects. The following example of a political speech uttered by Corneliu Vadim Tudor illustrates the manner in which a reference to myths and popular culture generates humor:

(6) **Corneliu Vadim Tudor, European Parliament, Strasbourg.** (Corpus: CVT_EU_22.11.2010)
It is a good thing that the Berlin fell but it is a pity that it fell on our heads, on the heads of the people of Eastern Europe. In December 1989 (n. Romanian Revolution), some major thrill-seekers awoke Dracula from his slumber. Now we do not know how to get rid of him.

The humorous tone of the reference to historical events is intensified by the reference to Dracula thus turning the speech into one with a poignantly humorous note.

5. Conclusions

References to national identity, history and cultural heritage can mark political discourse and be directed towards such discursive goals as showing support or empathy, legitimize actions and opinions as well as marking opposition. Another poignant feature in evoking history and cultural heritage would be to create humorous discursive effects by resorting to shared cultural schemata. The recipients perform a correct interpretation of the reference due to their shared knowledge of cultural elements.

BDD-A28070 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:37 UTC)

In the analyzed political speeches, the reference to identity could not possibly be isolated from the references to the other two aspects, namely history and cultural heritage, due to the fact that they are part and parcel of the greater concept and idea of identity.

A possibility of future research would be to analyze the response (follow-ups) to the analyzed political discourses, given by other politicians or by the public opinion.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research and Innovation, CNCS - UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-0056.

References

Dik, Simon C. 1987. "Some principles of functional grammar". In *Functionalism in Linguistics*, ed. by Rene Dirven, and Vilem Fried, 81-100. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Eggins, Susan. 2004. *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics*. Second Edition. New York/London: Continuum.

Fetzer, Anita. 2013. *The Pragmatics of Political Discourse*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Hanks, William F. 1996. "Language form and communicative practice". In *Rethinking Linguistics Relativity*, ed. by John Gumperz, and Steven Levinson, 232-270. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hübler, Axel. 1987. „Communication and Expressivity". In *Functionalism in Linguistics*, ed. by Rene Dirven, and Vilem Fried, 357-380. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Leith, Murray, and Daniel P.J. Soule. 2011. *Political Discourse and National Identity in Scotland.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Linell, Per. 1998. *Approaching Dialogue. Talk, Interaction and Context in Dialogical Perspectives*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Ochs, Elinor. 1996. "Linguistic Resources for Socializing Humanity". In *Rethinking Linguistics Relativity*, ed. by John Gumperz, and Steven Levinson, 407-437. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wodak, Ruth, and Norman Fairclough. 1997. "Critical Discourse Analysis". In *Discourse as Social Interaction*, ed. by Teun A. van Dijk, 258-284. London: Sage.

Wodak, Ruth, Rodolf de Cillia, Martin Reisig, and Karin Liebhart. 2009. *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*. Second Edition, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

BDD-A28070 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:37 UTC)