Stylistic and rhetorical features in the Romanian communist discourse. General considerations

Livia FEIDAROS
liviafeidaros@yahoo.com
Ştefan cel Mare University of Suceava (Romania)

Resumen: La dictadura comunista en Rumanía implica un esquema particular de la manifestación del poder político, no solo a nivel histórico o social, sino también a nivel del discurso. El carácter atípico del discurso totalitario comunista es llamativo y estimula el análisis exhaustivo de los aspectos que determinan la forma en que el discurso socialista rumano adquirió una estructura tan rígida y estereotipada.

El análisis de las características pragmaestilísticas y retóricas representa un esquema analítico esencial que proporciona información objetiva y completa sobre el discurso del poder.

El alcance de nuestro trabajo consiste en establecer la génesis de tal modalidad de expresión verbal, pero también en la evaluación del impacto que el lenguaje estereotipado tuvo sobre el individuo y sobre las masas.

Palabras clave: *discurso totalitario, característica estilística, característica retórica, ritual político, comunismo.*

1. Preliminary Considerations

Due to its character, communist ideology, but also social mechanisms such as propaganda, censorship, control, coercion, and the strategies that affect cognitive and expressive conduct of the individual have represented part of the factors that even molded and restructured the linguistic level, thus determining particular moods of communicational reference of the individual towards the autocrat social environment. The totalitarian discourse, materialized, on the one hand, as a factor of regulation and accreditation of expressive modalities, and, on the other hand, as a representative of the integration of the specific *political ritual*, configures the representation of the *new man* at the level of the collective imaginary and captures the synchronic avatar of the communicational model, while culminating diachronically in an excessively stereotyped language, conceptualized by the term "wooden language".

BDD-A28756 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:18:40 UTC)

Romanian linguist Tatiana Slama Cazacu sees the wooden language as a sub-system of a language, referring mostly to lexical and phraseological elements, to clichés that receive their particular meaning within the context of a certain 'authority', as she puts it. In her opinion, such linguistic elements are stereotyped and dogmatic, imitated and imposed and then disseminated by repetition by the media, thus annihilating the thought of the masses. The purpose of this type of discourse is to impose authority either by the secrecy or the prestige of the code, or by technocratic knowledge; it blocks any other form of thought and masks any unfavorable reality (Slama-Cazacu, 200: 71).

The utopian project of communism is not limited to sociopolitical changes, but implies changing the communication paradigm between social participants, as it concerns the implementation of new discursive rules, i. e. stereotypization and excessive schematization, redundancy and informational entropy that are incompatible with free expression, linguistic creativity, aesthetics, poetics and, at times, logic of expression.

Researching the communist discourse aims to point up not only its linguistic particularities or the functional aspects, but also its pragmatics, which operates multidisciplinary intersections that approach the linguistic act from various perspectives, such as socio-psychological, cognitive-behavioral, philosophical, informational, etc. The syntagm *wooden language* emphasizes, at a conceptual level, a set of features and characteristics acting at the discursive level in correlation with certain socio-political factors. The necessity to define such a rigid and stereotype linguistic manifestation has determined the forthcoming of numerous syntagms that express in a suggestive manner the defining features of this type of discourse: *oak language*, *propaganda language*, *dead language*, etc.

Viewed by certain authors as a jargon subclass of the natural language, as it manifests all the features of a specialized language, the excessively stereotyped discourse of the communist era shows some differences as compared to the above-mentioned stylistic category, at such levels as morphological, syntactical, lexical and functional. Therefore, the necessity to re-conceptualize it is obvious, as extrapolating the *wooden language* concept outside the totalitarian framework is justified by emphasizing the same mechanisms and rules that illustrate the same discursive format. The fact that this concept defines and regards mainly the communist totalitarian language is due to Sovietologist Françoise Thom, who popularize it within the academic world in her work *La langue de bois*[1], even if earlier, in 1963, Roman Jakobson had described the wooden language from the viewpoint of the functions of language, of the contemporary political discourse, in his *Essais de linguistique générale* (Jakobson, 1963) and in the '70 the same concept appears in Gilles Martinet's book entitled *Les cinq communismes : russe, yougoslave, chinois, tchèque, cubain* (Martinet, 1979). A few years later, in 1985, Patrick Sériot analyzes the Soviet political discourse from the perspective of its ideological function, of its lexical particularities and its relation with the extra-communitarian space (Sériot, 1985) and in 2004, Henry F. Carey edits a compendium of works regarding the Romanian communist era, contributed by numerous authors whose papers concern various aspects of the totalitarian régime (Carey, 2004).

In his work entitled *Des mots en politique. Propos d ' étymologie sociale* (Tournier, 2002), author Maurice Tournier investigates the way this syntagm entered the specialized languages in France and identifies several possible sources, while taking into account the diachronic aspect. Among the authors who brought to light not only the concept of the *wooden language* (*langue de bois*), but also the stylistic framework of discourse, its relation to the political authority or its manifestations and effects on the masses, we need to mention

[1] For the Romanian version see: Françoise Thom, *Limba de lemn*, Editura Humanitas, Bucharest, 1993.

BDD-A28756 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:18:40 UTC)

Alain Besançon, with *Court traité de soviétologie à l'usage des autorités civiles, militaires er réligieuses* (Besançon, 1976) and *Les origines intellectuelles du léninisme* (Calmann-Lévy, 1977), or Olivier Reboul with *Langage et idéologie* (Reboul, 1980).

Earlier on, during the '50, journalist and writer George Orwell spoke about the collapse of the English language due to a cyclical phenomenon determined by the relation between cause (political and economical) and effect (as an adaptive transformation of communication through language). The author captures certain characteristics of this new form of expression that are similar to the peculiarities of the *wooden language*, such as: dead metaphors, whose lexical elements are common and incompatible with their determinatives; use of verbal constructions built around verbs of a non-specific semantism, accompanied by nouns and adjectives with a higher degree of specificity; unjustified frequency of verbs in the passive voice; pretentious diction, pompous phrases and use of neologisms; incidence of words that are meaningless in the context or words that have become polysemantic and are subject to multiple interpretation (Orwell, 1946: 252-265).

The studies of Romanian authors focusing on the analysis of the Romanian communist discourse only become relevant after the decade of the'90, following the dissociation of the perspective of analysis from the communist limits, which would not allow an objective investigation.

From the viewpoint of a holistic complex analysis, but centered – methodologically and conceptually – on a linguistic approach, we need to highlight Rodica Zafiu's paper entitled *Beyond Monotony: Reading Codes of the Wooden Language* (Zafiu, 2009: 151-163), a study that possesses the highest degree of relevance for the investigation of the Romanian totalitarian discourse. The methodological complexity of corpus research represents a significant analytical basis in the activity of those who intend to study the wooden language. The analysis of the relation between censorship, as an element of control, and metalanguage, as a form of consolidating the integrative information, represents a pragmatic vision of the act of communication. Identifying the clichés is not only about those lexical elements called *keywords* by the author (or perhaps *emblem words*), but extends to certain stylistic elements such as *euphemism* (with an attenuation function), *allusion* (or the so-called "Aesopian language" as a strategy of adaptation to censorship), *emphasis* (implying the existence of a "contrary opinion"). The manifestation of authority through discourse and the decoding of the totalitarian message exist in relationship with the position of the receiver, one of obedience and vassalage.

The analysis of the morphosyntactic and pragma-stylistic features (nominal style, determinatives, binary structures, deontic modality, etc.) and of the lexical, rhetorical-stylistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic features represents an essential analytical scheme that provide objective and complete information on the discourse of power.

Our paper proposes a research of the totalitarian discourse of the Romanian communist era in a pluralistic approach, both from the perspective of the language sciences and that of psychology and sociology, which complete the pragmatic aspect of communication and contour the scheme of ideological representations within the collective imaginary. The scope of our research consists in establishing the genesis of such modality of verbal expression, but also in the evaluation of the impact stereotyped language had upon the individual and upon the masses. These extremely complex effects of a psycho-social nature (Kenneth, 2001) are actually phenomena with a linguistic cause, for any type of cognition possesses an internal form of verbalization that determine the adoption of a specific conduct; therefore, our research methodology will consist mainly of methods used in the study of language.

BDD-A28756 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:18:40 UTC)

The object of our paper derives from the relationship between linguistic expression and the manifestation of power, resulting in a complex register of discursive operations between the use of language as a functional vector of oppression and control and its manifestation as an illustration of obedience or vassalage. These two poles of the discourse possess not only functional or structural connections that are specific to language, but also inter-correlations of a pragmatic, psycho-social nature. Such a pluralistic approach can prove useful when the participants to the act of communication use the same discursive typology, choosing the same degree of specificity, and it becomes necessary to integrate the segment of discourse in its corresponding category.

2. Stylistic and Rhetorical Features

The pragmatic aspect of totalitarian communication does not reflect only at the level of the reaction of the individual (who develops a gregarious or recalcitrant conduct) in relation to the emitter, but also at the level of the social representations that form the collective imaginary of an ideology. But ideology is not only about its ideatic contents, but it can also represent an operational support for solving social problems such as class differentiation or the inequity between social participants, ideas that generated Marxism. Therefore, the identification and the investigation of the ideological content of the communist discourse represent a landmark in the detection of the keywords, which integrate a series of rules guiding this type of communication and develop a doctrinaire conceptual paradigm.

An interesting aspect of the totalitarian discourse is the identification of the degree of concordance between the stylistic observations made by Françoise Thom and the peculiarities of the Romanian discourse. The analysis of such features as clarity, adequacy, invention and euphemism contributes to redefine the concept of *strategic manipulation*, which develops a particular character in relation with this type of communication. Furthermore, even though we can identify such aspects in the Romanian discourse, nonetheless we perceive functional discrepancies regarding adequacy and euphemization. Françoise Thom's stylistic vision upon the Soviet discourse provides a useful methodological strategy for the research of any type of excessively stereotyped language, but it needs to be applied in observance of the linguistic and cultural specificity of each society.

a. Clarity:

Since we have noticed before that in wooden language words represent an ideological code rather than an actualization of their natural meaning, the clarity of the discourse becomes a function of the internal code, the discourse reaches its goal in relation to the ability of the receiver to decode it. We can appreciate that only the formation of an ideological mentality is the key to the correct perception of the object of communication. Speaking of the *clarity* of the discourse, we see that the supracode will generate a specific mentality, a particular way of perception, and this is an advantage not for the reception of the information, but for the correct decoding of the intention of the emitter and of the function of the message. To this respect we can maintain that the political discourse in Romanian communism is destined to the masses that were educated ideologically and possess a higher degree of clarity of such discourse.

b. Adequacy:

In the Romanian communist discourse, communication is made from the power (speaker) towards the masses. If we speak about *adaptation*, it refers especially to the public,

BDD-A28756 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:18:40 UTC)

not the speaker, through the expression of the collective manifestations of affiliation in the opportune moments of the speeches, so the degree of *adequacy* of the discourse is determined by its efficiency to produce adequate reactions in the receiver.

Therefore, should we speak about *adequacy*, the only relation between the content of the discourse and its purpose is the reaction of the masses, so there is a certain degree of internal adequacy specific to one ideology.

c. Invention:

The Romanian communist discourse, in its specificity, manifests a series of elements that are incompatible from the stylistic or semantic viewpoint; this is due, on the one hand, to the necessity to focus communication upon the doctrinaire elements, and, on the other hand, to the determination to convey an aspect of greatness, of exaggerated importance of the importance of the information sent to the masses. We notice the "effort" of the emitter to artificially enhance the degree of complexity of the doctrinaire notions by constructing a prolix lexical frame around them, as opposed to simple and natural assertions, and by using certain specialized terms that do not belong in the context. Furthermore, the cumuli of repetitive cliché adjectives that are not specific to the features of the noun and are positioned as proclitics, the usage of collocations and lexical solidarities that are semantically incompatible, exaggerated referential or denominative structures, they all generate structures that lack an adequate content, but are impressive in their complexity.

From this perspective, *invention* is no longer a rhetorical process, but becomes a trademark of the wooden language, which manifests certain functions that are typical for this way of communication.

d. Euphemism:

Should we analyze the communist discourse from the perspective of the truths it conveys, we would appreciate that the discourse itself is a *euphemization easily confounded with lie*. But within the totalitarian discourse, at an ideological level, the linguistic taboo would have to express derailing from the doctrinaire route. From this viewpoint, we should not speak about euphemism *stricto sensu* in such a discourse, since it rejects in any way possible the allusion to realities that are not in conformity with the doctrine. So the process of euphemization can only refer to the dissimulation or attenuation of those realities that do not reach their full potential, even though they belong to the trajectory imposed by the system, i. e. the term euphemism is to be used with a broader meaning, rejected by certain authors (Seiciuc, 2010: 26).

To that extent, totalitarian language loses the plasticity that offers the individual the possibility to construct opinions. Practically, the compression of the notions and concepts and their encoding into rigid expressions restructure thought, based on interior verbalization, so that it becomes cliché bound.

3. Conclusions

What differentiates the totalitarian discourse from the political discourse in general is the degree of insertion of ideology to the advantage or at the expense of political assertiveness, meaning the authentic intention of political information about the strategies to solve the social dysfunctionalities. The totalitarian discourse, as a strategy, implies a distinction between social impact mechanisms and their adequacy to the social group they target. Thus, we have assigned such concepts as *education*, *influence*, *ideological formation* to the young individual, still in school, and those of *censorship*, *reeducation*, *constraint* and *control* to the

BDD-A28756 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:18:40 UTC)

adult individual. Undoubtedly, social groups are characterized by different features regarding information, culture, education, social environment, etc., but basically these strategies vary according to the specificity of each and every social component. One mechanism of the power, with an obvious strategic component, is *propaganda*, materialized in a variety of sectors, such as *The Propaganda Section of the Central Committee*, or other seditionist structures, such as *agitators* or *artistic groups*. Speaking about transmission of information, we can identify a content that is mainly doctrinaire and transmitted in a referential form. In comparison with the period of illegality of the communist party, in which this type of information was transmitted in an imperative-conative formula, lacking excessive stereotypization, we would rather associate *manipulation* with this type of discourse than with the stereotyped referential discourse after the instauration of the régime. Besides, we can assert that manipulation exists in the presence of an alternative, when the purpose is guaranteed by the degree of persuasion or influence on the masses, when the usage of imperative-affective formulas becomes necessary.

The existence of a doctrine perceived as a compendium of norms and principles implies a strategy to transgress it in collective perception. Ideology represents an accessible form of a doctrine, for it instruments not only the discursive-ideatic level, but also the symbolic one. From this point of view, the doctrinaire demarche is justified by the fact that ideology appeals to a particular cognitive scheme that possesses an archetypal component, capable of integrating universal values. From the viewpoint of archetypal values as predecessors of ethical ones, Marxist ideology was impeccable, as it aimed to eliminate the discrepancies between individuals and create a society based on absolute equality. The adaptation of Marxist elements to the Romanian specificity did not deprive the new ideology of its ability to create symbolic representations, albeit utopian. In order for this aspect to become functional at the social level it is necessary for ideology to be objectified through propaganda, a phenomenon that was fully justified before the instauration of the communist régime in Romania. After its instauration, propaganda loses its vector quality and becomes a strategy of constraint and coercion. Moreover, ideology, too, loses part of its axiological consistency due to the generalization and abstraction of certain doctrinaire elements that become concepts and are rendered inaccessible to the masses. The false congruence between the projections of the imaginary and objective reality destructures ideology as a secularized religion and converts it to a mere feature of the wooden language.

Propaganda activity has *censorship* as a complementary component. This mechanism has a restrictive-coercive character and brings a consistent input to the excessively stereotyped formula of the communist discourse. The discursive model that is political discourse and, more concretely, the speeches of the political leaders, affect censorship in that they provide a model accredited by the system from the viewpoint of its ideological content. Censorship plays an important part in the predetermination of communication forms from the individual towards the political power. The recourse to stereotyped formulas is but a form of trade between the affiliated individual and the political power, which guarantees his accreditation. Propaganda and censorship do not imply the reformulation of the paradigm of linguistic communication of the individual, which has the freedom of expressing in a plastic, expressive form (as in the literary works), as long as at the level of informational content there is concordance with the doctrinaire orientation.

The communist dictatorship in Romania implies a particular scheme of the manifestation of political power, not only at the historical or social levels, but also at the level of discourse. The atypical character of the communist totalitarian discourse is intriguing, and

BDD-A28756 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:18:40 UTC)

it stimulates the thorough analysis of the aspects that determine the way in which the Romanian socialist discourse would acquire such a rigid and stereotype structure.

Bibliography

BESANÇON, Alain, (1976), *Court traité de soviétologie à l'usage des autorités civiles, militaires er réligieuses*, Paris, Hachette.
BESANÇON, Alain, (1977), *Les origines intellectuelles du léninisme*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy.
CAREY, Henry F., (2004), (ed.), *Romania since 1989*, Lanham, Lexington Books.
GERGEN, Kenneth J., (2001), *Social construction in context*, London, Sage Publications.
JAKOBSON, Roman, (1963), *Essais de linguistique générale*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit.
MARTINET, Gilles, (1979), *Les cinq communismes : russe, yougoslave, chinois, tchèque, cubain*, Paris, Seuil.
ORWELL, George, (1946), *Politics and the English Language*, in "Horizon", vol. 13, no. 76, april, pp. 252-265.
REBOUL, Olivier, (1980), *Langage et idéologie,* Paris, PUF.
SÉRIOT, Patrick, (1985), *Analyse du discours politique soviétique*, Paris, « Cultures et sociétés de l'Est », no. 2, Institut d'études slaves.
SEICIUC, Lavinia, (2010), *Tabú lingüístico y eufemismo*, Suceava, Editura Universităţii.
SLAMA CAZACU, Tatiana, (2000), *Stratageme comunicaţionale şi manipularea*, Iaşi, Polirom.
THOM, Françoise, (1993), *Limba de lemn*, Bucureşti, Humanitas.
TOURNIER, Maurice, (2002), *Des mots en politique. Propos d'étymologie sociale*, Lyon, Tome 2, ENS.
ZAFIU, Rodica, (2009), „Dincolo de monotonie: coduri de lectură ale limbii de lemn", in *Limba de lemn in presă,* Bucureşti, Tritonic, p. 151-163.

BDD-A28756 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:18:40 UTC)