OCCURRENCE OF SOME MODIFIED IDIOMATIC PHRASES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract: *The present paper is a pragmatic approach of a phenomenon consisting in modifying collocations in contemporary social discourse. A comparative research based on texts which are "traces" of political discourse and media discourse aims to explain the causes of this phenomenon and the typology of the changes that occur during this process.*

Key words*: idiomatic phrases, political discourse, media discourse, context.*

1. It is a real fact that many idiomatic phrases, modified or not, are used in contemporary journalistic or political discourse, both of them being generic systems of a whole named social discourse. The most interesting aspect of this phenomenon consists in modifying these phrases which are considered to be fixed and inseparable groups, so it must be impossible to dissociate them, semantically, morphologically and syntactically.

As this phenomenon exists and can be noticed the research should answer to at least two questions: which are its causes and its consequences? And how does the device that is responsible for these modifications work?

If we accept the hypothesis that any political communication act has no other purpose but persuading the audience about the speaker's truth, the great number of idiomatic phrases in political actors' speech and in media discourse, broadly, can be explained because these facilitate new information transmission, but, more than that, these expressions belong to a shared informational ground where the new element is easily integrated. Besides, by using these idiomatic phrases which are specific to colloquial style and/or slang, the speaker wants to be considered "one of us", "a common/simple guy", as his ultimate goal is to establish a special relation between him and receiver, a relation based on trust and adhesion to a shared set of values.

The contemporary political declarations, as well as the articles in media, abound in phrases specific to the spoken, nonliterary language. Their choice is contextually conditioned by the receiver type, both in journalistic text and in political one. As political actor addresses to a collective receiver, not homogeneous from many points of view (socio-professional category, education, age, sex), whose votes are wanted even if the elections are away, he uses those vocabulary areas which are accessible to any member of broadly extended linguistic community. Journalists' main purpose is not informing the audience, in many situations, but determining a certain opinion, inducing it to an enlarged audience, so not homogeneous under many aspects. In order to convince you have to gain the other's benevolence, to create a reliable relation and this purpose governs the linguistic means choice. One of the most efficient in creating an image of "one of us, a reliable guy" displayed in front of the majority consists in selecting those elements which are specific to colloquial style.

Political and journalistic discourse rely to a great extent on the context, depend on that for the processes that produce at the speaker's pole as well as for an

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efficient receiving; as there was noticed that the receiver and the context exert an influence on the speaker's activity, the concept has been detailed and the discourse has been considered interactive and contextualized. "Understanding an enunciation means not only relying on a grammar and a dictionary, but also mobilizing various knowledge, advancing hypothesis and reasoning, building a context which is not something stable and pre-established."[1]

The media discourse speaker intends to convince the receiver to do something or to believe something about facts related to the present (not strictly understood as the speaking moment, but as a period which includes this moment) and his language is governed by the conative function. One of the means by which the speaker focuses on a certain aspect of the present reality, expressing also his opinion regarding this, materializes in modifying a number of idiomatic phrases. These are brought into present, related to "here" and "now" so that the receiver should be more interested and oriented to a more often negative perception of the subject.

Legile nescrise ale Bisericii ***au fost călcate în picioare de cizmele militarilor*** *din...* (AC, 05.05.10)

De pe culmile politice *pe care s-a cocoțat, dl. C.G. vede...* (CD, 01.11.2004)

Cei care ne tot ***agață de coadă tinicheaua extremismului*** *(*CD, 26.10.2004)

2. Idiomatic phrases can be ironically paraphrased by adding determiners, so their modifying means development.

Cel care ***l-a băgat pe dracu' ideologic în casa lui B.*** *a fost chiar...* (JN, 24.05.10)

Ultima şansă a lui B de a nu părea ***întors cu cheia*** *de la Cotroceni* (AC, 31.05)

Cel redevenit, ***pe o mare sezonieră de lapte şi miere****, preşedinte* (JN, 25.05.10)

Praful de pe toba unei campanii *electorale* (CD; 23.09.2008)

Faceți planuri de viitor pentru agricultura românească, dar uitați să le precizați agricultorilor că acestea sunt valabile doar ***pe hârtia ministerială****...* (CD, 30.06.2009)

Băsescu este ***cu un picior în groapa*** *falimentului* (RTV, 07, 2009)

One of the conditions for a group of words to be considered a phrase is that the nouns which become elements of it should lose their capacity of having determiners, so their inflexion capacity; in fact, those elements which become parts of a phrasal unit lose their semantic, morphological and syntactical autonomy. Adding an article to a noun in a phrase or another determiner, this noun gains again its morphological and syntactical autonomy, but its meaning is also implicitly reinterpreted. Thus, this device leads to an opposite direction than the abstracting one undergone by the whole group. If in the phrase *cu un picior în groapă* the denotative meanings which send to a real referent are canceled, the modification operated by adding the determiner *falimentului* reactivates them, as the restrictive selections can not be otherwise satisfied.

A phrase which seems to be preferred in media discourse, maybe because of its meaning rather than its metaphorical origin, *praf în ochi*, is "brought up to date" in the election campaign. Political opponents do not resume to asserting that their

[1] D. Maingueneau, *Analiza textelor de comunicare*, p.18.

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"enemies" make false promises, which are "dust in eyes" and trouble the citizens who have the right to vote, their perception of reality, but particularize the "deceived" aim and the type of *dust* which they throw with.

Strategiile guvernamentale împotriva secetei sunt de fapt doar ***praf electoral aruncat în ochii agricultorilor***. (CD, 10.06.2009)

Nu a fost altceva decât ***praf electoral în ochii maghiarilor***. (CD, 30.06.2009)

Praf de cauciuc în ochii organelor de control. (CD, 30.06.2009)

The result sometimes becomes almost ridicule because, while *praful electoral* still keep the noun's meaning in the abstract sphere, the determiner *de cauciuc* materializes it and render it ambiguous. Besides, the noun *ochii* which, by the selective restriction [+animate], requires combination with a noun with the same feature, belong to *organelor de control*, a cliché which may get an ironical reading in this group.

Noticing the examples where this way of using the phrases is evident show that a corollary of this transformation may be personification in some sentences:

Fosta Secu ***i-a suflat în pânzele ascensiunii***. (CD, 30.06.2009)

Sistemul sanitar românesc este ***întors din drumul său*** *spre normalitate*. (CD, 30.06.2009)

3.1.Replacement of a component may represent another means of bringing idiomatic phrases in the speaker's time and space. The new element, the "intruder", gives the speaker the possibility of expressing a nuance which is thought to be relevant, absolutely necessary, and the ironical intention is graphically marked by a sign corresponding to a pause in speech, to speaker's distance towards the voice that asserts the propositional content of the sentence. The difference between the replaced word and the replacing one may be minimal at the form level, just a derivative affix, but, at the semantic level, the presence of this affix triggers the whole phrase reorganization.

Dragoste cu de-a ***sigla*** *în PD-L* (AC, 02.02.10)

Decât un car de minte, mai bun un ***pentagram*** *de noroc* (AC, 13.01.10)

Demnitar aflat în avansată ***stare de etate*** (AC, 26.05.)

După ***alegeri*** *– potopul!* (JN, 25.05.10)

Din 1990 încoace, economia se află în ***chinurile...refacerii*** (CD, 30.06.2009)

Până în... penultima clipă (CD, 23.06.2009)

Replacing one of the elements which belong to a collocation with a high stability by a contextual synonym represents an aspect of individual creativity, but the efficiency of the communication decreases if the new expression becomes unclear to the receiver. From *a pune în practică (o serie de măsuri, de proiecte)*, an action with a result that could be called also *operă*, when its value is recognized, the speaker may get to *a pune în operă*, a phrase with a literal meaning "to include something in a work", but this is not possible in that context. So, the receiver makes an effort to retrieve the initial phrase and to attribute its meaning to the new phrase:

Când anunţatele măsuri vor fi şi ***puse în operă*** (CD, 23.06.2009)

The receiver's effort seems to be more difficult when the substitution is double:

Va veni şi timpul ***să spălăm aceste traume****, pentru ca morţii revoluţiei şi mineriadei din iunie să se odihnească în pace.*(CD, 24.06.2008)

When modifying the phrase *a-şi linge rănile* for the sake of a more strict "hygiene", replacing the verb *a linge* by the verb *a spăla (rănile)* the transparency of the initial meaning is preserved, but when the noun *traumă*, a partial synonym of *rană*, replaces it, the whole structure becomes semantically opaque. The co(n)text is able to offer a possible significance of the phrase, that is "to bring justice", excluding the

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ironic intention by the solemn meaning implied. But the involuntary comic appears due to the substitution and association between a verb in the basic vocabulary and a neologism used strictly in the medical vocabulary.

This device of decomposing the group of words which is more or less stable may apply to others with less stability, although they are frequently used in contemporary social discourse, such as *termen (de garanție) expirat*, which becomes:

Termene de tranziție expirate (CD, 30.06.2009)

3.2. By preserving a part of a phrase, that part which is considered to be semantically relevant, the speaker manages both to make the receiver interested and to transmit his ironical attitude towards the discussed realities.

Piciorul în prag *ar constitui o piedică*. (CD, 30.06.2009)

Şi atunci revin, „România – the country of choice!". Doar a doamnei ministru. Dar important e să fii la guvernare şi ***cu cuțitul*** *în mână pentru nişte contracte grase.* (CD, 30.06.2009)

The intended ambiguity of the noun taken from the phrase *a fi (a avea) cu pâinea şi cuțitul în mână*, meaning "to have power to decide", is confirmed by the presence of an adjectival determiner, *grase,* which may be considered metaphorically, but its denotative meaning becomes dominant in a context where the noun *cuțit* is used denotatively. A grotesque image of the person in the opposite party, minister and "butcher of contracts", results out of this phrase.

4. Free redistribution of the components in the context, another means by which the speaker changes the phrase, offers to him freedom to criticize his opponents, accusing them without making an explicit reference to certain persons or events, exploiting the semantic ambiguity of the terms taken out of the phrase.

Actualii deținători ai puterii vor arunca sume imense ***în stânga,*** *pentru a-şi consolida privilegiile* ***de dreapta*** (CD, 30.09.2008)

În aceste ***ape tulburi****, amplificate mediatic de la zi la zi şi chiar de la o oră la alta, atât PSD, cât şi PD-L ar fi dorit* ***să pescuiască*** *„peştele cel mare" pe 30 noiembrie...slabe speranțe de reuşită.* (CD, 13.10.2008)

Singura sa preocupare fiind aceea de a contempla nocturn ***vrajba pe care a semănat-o*** *în ultimii ani* (CD, 23.06.2009)

Vlădica *jefuieşte,* ***opinca*** *plăteşte* (JN, 31.05.10)

This game of splitting and redefining semantic values of the terms in the phrase is sometimes denounced by the speaker: *parlamentarii* ***trec peste*** *criză* ***fluierând, la figurat,*** *în timp ce pensionarii* ***fluieră la propriu*** *în fața Guvernului* (RTV, 13.05.10). Sometimes only the context where a certain expression is placed deconstruct its semantics, showing that one of the components activates its denotative meaning, previously inactivated in the stable group of words.

Oameni care ***au deschis uşa cu capul şi au închis-o cu imunitatea în buzunar*** (AC, 05.05.10)

Li ***se bagă pe gât*** *măsuri de austeritate şi li se cere* ***să le înghită*** *din solidaritate*(JN, 31.05.10)

5. This phenomenon that acts towards decomposing and reinterpreting phrasal units in the colloquial language can apply to certain **groups of words** which are not considered collocations but are frequently used in the media and/or conversational style. Fragments of texts well known to the contemporary receiver (songs, slogans, the text transmitted in the underground in Bucharest), which have become topoi of contemporary social discourse, represent a basis for a transfer along which there appear changes in journalist's article or in politician's speech.

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Nesimțirea a devenit ***detergent universal*** (JN, 25.05.10)
Dosare ***curate şi plăcut uscate*** (JN, 27.05.10)
Cod portocaliu *de sărăcie în România* (RTV, 30.05.10)
Prima casă *de neretrocedat* (AC, 26.05.10)
Atenție, se deschid *dosarele,* ***cu peron pe partea*** *portocalie.*(AC, 02.12.09)
Adriane, nici nu ştii, ce penal începi să fii (AC, 02.12.09)

This change made by the speaker gives him the possibility to express an ironical, depreciative attitude, thus contributing to a negative perception of the members of the opposite party.

That seems to be one of the most important speaker's goals and it is also evident in **paraphrasing other expressions**, this time not colloquial ones but kwon enough to the receiver so that he should be able to decode the message. *Pariul cu agricultura* becomes a stable group of words and allows paraphrasing by determiner substitution, if the memorable feature and the recognition proved by a certain frequency in every day use of language are added to the general features of phrases defined in the linguistics studies. It has already been noticed the fact that " the political discourse and, extending the sphere of the concept, the historical event may give to certain groups of words, frequently used without being created *ad-hoc*, a certain celebrity or a memorable character, developing new, figurative meanings."[1]

A famous example for this type of phrase change cut out of a political discourse is *iron curtain,* used by W. Churchill to signal the socialist countries separation from Western Europe, from a political and military point of view. In Romanian public space, political discourse after 1990 offered a series of "memorable expressions" that were used in journalese and then in everyday language. The element that renders these expressions famous, such as *lumina de la capătul tunelului, reformă pe pîine, pariul cu agricultura*, consists in the authority and celebrity of the source that created them, but mass media role in their selection and promoting can not be ignored. The variations produced inside their structure (*luminița din capătul tunelului, pariul cu reforma/ România/Europa*) prove speakers' interest in these groups with a variable degree of stability, their expressive power and their impact due to their celebrity.

Although this device consisting in repeating and limited variation of such phrases comes from the journalese, the similar goal of political discourse determines its transfer. *Pariul cu agricultura* is contextualized and becomes *pariul European*, as the county has integrated in European Union.

Țăranul român şi ***pariul european*** (CD, 14.11.2006)

A whole sentence, if insistently repeated during a certain period, comes off the context it belonged to serve as a means to express irony about an alleged cheating. *Aici sunt banii dvs*., a text which used to be placed on some indicatory sheets along the roads which were not always in good condition, undergoes a semantic depreciation, by comparing the content to reality, as the roads should have been repaired using the money collected from the citizens. As *banii dvs.* seemed to be buried in the holes of the roads, like those treasures whose existence is uncertain, but fascinating, the meaning of this sentence slightly becomes ironical. Besides, the sentence undergoes a formal change which still does not cut off the link between the two voices, the first speaker's

[1] L. Groza, *Discursul politic şi sloganul publicitar – surse ale frazeologiei româneşti actuale* în „Limbă şi literatură", III-IV/1999, p.14.

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and the one of the speaker who repeats this sentence, modifying it and their difference bring about the bitter irony nuance.

Acolo sunt banii dvs**., ai tuturor celor care munciți cinstit[...] stat condus imoral şi deseori ilegal de o coaliție pusă pe jaful public.** (CD, 23.06.2009)

A double source may be detected for the expression *la bine şi la greu*, taken over and modified by adding determiners.

***La bine** pentru ei, **la greu** pentru cetățenii din Slănic!* (CD, 30.06.2009)

Like other collocations, this one represented the starting point of an electoral slogan which reached the majority of the audience and is still in the common shared memory. Thus, in the sentence *La bine pentru ei, la greu pentru cetățenii...* there can be noticed both the collocation source and the slogan ironically reinterpreted by the speaker. By this speech, he initiates a special type of dialogue with the voice that asserts the truth of the slogan and his attitude of distancing the other speaker is manifest in the partial change of the source sentence. The determiner *pentru ei* becomes a contextual antonym to the other one, *pentru cetățeni*, because of their association with the terms of the antonym pair *bine- greu*, and this ironic meaning of the sentence indicates the existence of three voices: the anonymous voice of the common sense encoded in proverbs, idiomatic phrases and collocations and the two voices of the political enemies who have a polemic confrontation even if they do not have a real dialogue.

A special situation may be noticed with the phrase *un pic mai bine(-le)*, both regarding its origin and its structure. Together with this form there can be noticed *mai bine(-le)*,which represents a part of an electoral slogan: *Mai bine pentru cei mulți!*. *Un pic mai bine* is also a part of a slogan, but an advertise one: *Un pic mai bine pentru dumneavoastră!* Both of them can be categorized as noun phrases because of their contextual distribution and inflexion behavior, even if their head is an adverbial converted into a noun.

*Partidele politice se avântă în a rosti cifre cu multe zerouri dedicate, toate**, **un pic mai bine-lui** populației* (CD, 07.10.2008)

*Ei dispun de resurse[...] pentru **mai binele** nostru.* (CD, 17.06.2008)

A semantic approach shows their equivalence; both of them could be substituted by the same noun, *bunăstare*, but such a substitution leads to a meaning that lacks the ironical, pejorative nuance, as the link to the source text is still preserved in their case for that receiver who is "assaulted" by the media discourse. The ironical distance between the second speaker and the first one, evident for an informed receiver, can render a meaning opposite to *bunăstare.*

There can be considered that a special type of inter-text appeared, where the assertion of the source is denied and these set of examples strengthen an idea that has been formulated in various forms (in pragmatics, text theory, discourse analysis, communication researches), but whose core stays the same: any new text enters an already formed texts web, connecting to the others in a way that may not be accurately described in an analytical approach but it is evidently perceived by the speakers.

In the contemporary social discourse puzzle one can recognize pieces that are taken over in a text from another, modified in their structure or in their meaning by placing them in another context. Each speaker, as well as the audience, should establish the limits of this game so that it should not become ridicule. As long as this strategy proves its efficiency in persuading the receivers about the truth asserted by the speaker, the latter keeps using it.

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CD: Camera Deputaților, declarații politice http://www.cdep.ro/pls/steno
AC: Academia Catavencu: http://www.catavencu.ro/
JN: Jurnalul National : http://www.jurnalul.ro/
RTV: Realitatea TV: http://www.realitatea.net/

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