ROMANIAN POLITICAL TALK SHOW: "THE WHIRL OF WORDS"[1] IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Motto:
"What is left of all that talk is the show: congested faces, harsh looks, gesticulating arms, papers fluttered to the camera, insults, ironies, chit-chat. [...] If politicians and journalists have to compete for a show with professional jesters, party singers, playboys and showgirls, then it's all over." (Popescu 2001: 156)

1. Introduction

The purpose of this work is to highlight *some cultural specificities of the current Romanian political talk show.*

The research starts from the overall finding that televised confrontations of political talk show genre, broadcast on Romanian TV channels, *take the form of polemic interaction based on a "play with words"*, which is facilitated by a host and aimed at a show whose argumentation is usually left unfinished.

More precisely, the work will tackle some elements of the Romanian imaginary about the *symbolic place of the discourse in talk shows* (elements relating to socio-cultural specificities of the context in which these shows are aired) such as: *conversational background* features in verbal initiatives; *polemic background* features in agreements and disagreements between participants; *argumentative background* specificities in persuasion strategies.

The theoretical framework of the research is *discourse analysis* (of French origin), and *conversation analysis* (of Anglo-Saxon type).[2]

In essence, it is accepted that the analysis of the communication that is currently performed by media outlets must take into consideration the following *ideas*:

[1]The metaphoric phrase "whirl of words" (*"beţie de cuvinte" – Ro, literally "inebriety of words"*) was introduced by one of the greatest minds of Romanian culture in the 19th century, Titu Maiorescu (1966: 11), in order to designate a phenomenon encountered in the press of those times, consisting in *excessive verbal pathos,* accompanied by the "diminution of intellectual functions and an inclination towards violence".

[2]See, among others, J.-M. Adam (2008), P. Charaudeau (1992), P. Charaudeau, Mainguenau (2002), Os. Ducrot (1998), D. Mainguenau (1991), R. Vion (1992), and W. Edmondson (1981), H. P. Grice (1975; 1989).

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– a predilection of today's TV communication for the *conversational genre* (conversation between interacting actors on the TV set where the viewer emerges as an interlocutor in a pseudo-dialogue created by the broadcast interaction);[1]

– diminished action of informative and expressive linguistic functions in favour of *conative, phatic and playful functions*.

The examples are extracted from the transcripts of talk shows broadcast on the Romanian TV station *Realitatea TV*.[2]

2. Political Talk Show: Key Features

In the pages to follow, we look at *talk shows* (on *political* topics), a media genre characterised by *lack of homogeneity* in all aspects, practising a *semi-institutional discourse* by combining rules and constraints specific to the institutional discourse (*a precise topic, a certain distribution of emitter's roles, venue, duration,* etc.) with the *typical spontaneity of regular conversation*.[3]

We consider as significant for this work the following features of talk shows:

– *talk show* is defined as a *special type of debate*, as a *confrontation/exchange of opinions* planned and more or less facilitated by *a host*, generally dealing with *topics referring to issues that concern the relationship between individual and society*;

– *talking is the main action* in a talk show;

– in this setting, *disagreement is programmatic* and represents the preferred structural type; each discourse combines variable shares of *cooperative structures* and *conflicting structures*;[4]

– the prototypical conflicting verbal behaviour features *superimpositions, interruptions, topic change* and others as verbal strategies instigating to classical argumentative actions, such as *challenge, refutation and riposte*, with a *context-dependent* weigh of different variables governing the strategic choice, as these are mutually endorsed by the participants in interaction.

However, we shouldn't ignore the fact that the previously listed principles acting in favour (or to the detriment) of participants in televised communication know large *variations in terms of situational, cultural and even individual application*.

Political talk show is a debate *on political topics*, whose main goal is to perform a *democratic act*, based on *freedom of opinion and of expression*, without ruling out the *theatrical* or *playful dimensions* involved in the persuasion/ manipulation strategies used both by *political players* and by *media*.

In *La parole confisquée. Une genre télévisuel: le talk show*, P. Charaudeau and R. Ghiglione (2005) highlight the findings of a survey conducted by four research teams from Italy, Spain, and France on talk shows aired in the respective countries (selected based on the *criterion of cultural and historical proximity*). The findings of these investigations were then regrouped around three descriptive poles: *structural variants*, looking at the mechanism behind these shows; *strategic variants*, indicating the exchanges of words there constructed; and *demonstrative variants*, sketching their visual make-up.

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[1] R. Haineş (2002: 63).

[2] See Sources.

[3] Acc. C. Ilie (2001) and L. Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu (2003).

[4] See, among others, R. Vion (1992: 121-122) and L. Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu (2004: 417).

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The conclusion reached is that, beyond the general features marking a *particular television genre* (defined as a mechanism for the *mise-en-scène* of a conflicting discourse or a deficiency meant to suggest a denouncing/r eadjusting truth about *social disorder*), each talk show category, belonging to one culture or another, *constitutes a distinct type of socio-cultural imaginary* and *produces a form of imaginary associated with democracy*.

Referring exclusively to issues related to *strategic variants* indicating the *exchanges of words*, we pick up the following from the cited survey (Charaudeau, Ghiglione 2005: 203-205):

– The French show *Ciel! Mon mardi*, for instance, illustrates an imaginary featuring „*the taste for polemic and rhetoric*"; it is always about a *word addressed* either to flatter or to hassle the addressee and it always comes up as an appeal for *shared understanding*, for *connivance* with the interlocutor or a third-party witness – a member of the audience or a viewer at home; the show displays a *split vision of the world* corresponding to a *conflicting imaginary paired with taxonomic rationality*;

– The Italian *Maurizio Costanzo Show* illustrates instead an imaginary featuring "*the taste for speech fluency"*; *the word is not addressed*; in this case, we are missing the addressee as it is all about *getting carried away by the flow of words*; the show displays a *fragmented vision of the world*, that of a puzzle (during the same show *various topics/ happenings* are being discussed).

3. Romanian Political Talk Show

A smoothly running public dialogue (aiming at *cooperation*) depends on a series of principles to be followed, such as: *the principle of adapting to the partner, the principle of coherence credit, the principle of pragmatic relativity.* Like in any type of dialogue, complying with *conversational maxims*[1] and *politeness maxims*[2] is essential; language-based manipulation resides precisely in breaking these rules cited as maxims.

Programmatic disagreement, representing the preferred structural type, the combination in variable shares – within each discourse – of *cooperative structures* and *conflicting structures*[3], the *spectacular nature* of talk show confer to this type of debate a *heterogeneous aspect* in terms of *content, finality, discursive forms, and language.*[4]

These *heterogeneous constituents* lead to more or less severe *dysfunctions* in reaching the goals of social dialogue: *cooperation* and its final purpose – *consensus.* Consequently, there can be *deviations in the action of the principles* underlying successful communication.

The scale – as time and interest paid by viewers at home – reached by *political TV debates* has resulted in more airtime on national TV programmes and even in the *launch of TV stations specialised* in this sphere of public life (see *Realitatea TV*, *Antena 2, Antena 3*, etc.).

Based on *a case study*, illustrative for the Romanian political talk show, we will further attempt to highlight a few of its specific features, starting from the coordinate proposed above (*the degree of adherence to dialogue principles* when choosing *strategic variants* indicating *exchanges of words*).

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[1] Formulated by H. P. Grice (1975).

[2] P. Brown, St. Levinson (1978) and G. Leech (1983: 131-139).

[3] The dominant type of discourse in the conflicting interactions to which we are referring is *verbal attack*, which, alongside *reproach, accusation, criticism, insult, innuendo, irony* and *sarcasm*, is a *gradable strategy* – in terms of intensity – *of updating impolite verbal behaviour* (Radu 2009: 379-386; Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 2010: 59-72; Radu 2010: 47-56).

[4] Acc., among others, L. Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu (2003: 417).

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The TV host is the prototype of the *„agent provocateur"* (Charaudeau, Ghiglione 2005: 75) that introduces the guests, manages their speaking time as s/he pleases, decides on who has the floor, stops or allows people to speak as s/he wishes, stirs one guest or another, cools conflicts, stays in charge of the topics to be tackled and allows himself/ herself to utter personal opinions and even to point his/ her finger at one guest or another. From the very beginning, we are plunged into a world of „criticism" and „polemic".

With the *tonality* s/he brings into play from the very start of the show (once s/he announces the topic: „Capital City Police management replaced after incidents at *Plazza Mall* involving police officers"), the host makes room for an *informal climate of communication.* This sets the basis for *breaking all the principles required for successful* cooperative *interaction*.

3.1. ***Maxim of Quantity:***

The quantity of information given by the host is *insufficient* to build a coherent framework for debate (a simple unconfirmed and unsupported piece of news from *NewsIn*).

Guests' interventions evolve in the very same keynote of *information void*. At the level of phrasing, this information void reflects in *vague and imprecise phrases*:

> (1) ***Norica Nicolai****: [Not allowed] To talk about the incapacity and impotence of* ***some individuals who are currently in charge.*** *Instead, we need to talk about Becali, Popoviciu, Miss Băsescu and God knows who else.*
> ***Răzvan Dumitrescu****:* ***Is she by any chance a scriptwriter****? I* ***just*** *think that* ***a mechanism*** *has been set in motion* ***to synchronise some events*** *so that we don't talk about two very important economic issues. Well, it costs a lot of money and it's hard to believe that* ***someone*** *who is incapable of solving a tax problem can conscientiously and thoroughly plan an operation involving so many events. Or, Mr. Chirieac, maybe we are well-organised, but then we should also manage to do simpler things.*

(In order to understand what the host is talking about, you need to be familiar with the current political and economic background of the country and know that he refers to the *introduction of the lump sum tax* etc.)

3.2. ***Maxim of Quality***

The information given by the host (the Chief of the Capital City Police removed from office) is *uncertain* as there is no relevant proof to confirm it. The debate is embarked on starting from *suppositions and not from facts*: the very person does not know anything official about his dismissal.

> (2) *Quaestor Tutilescu has told NewsIn that* ***he has not been informed****...*
> **Răzvan Dumitrescu***: Well. We have a chain of events that started with the scandal at GDIIP* [The General Directorate for Intelligence and Internal Protection] *and arrests, Popoviciu scandal, hence Ioana Băsescu, apartment in Popoviciu's neighbourhood, Mircea Băsescu – harbour talk to journalists, Becali in custody, rumours about journalists being arrested, rumours about contractors being arrested,* ***you are the show's newsmaker.***
> **Adrian Năstase***: All I did was to make public...*
> **Răzvan Dumitrescu***:* ***To spread a rumour or a piece of information?***
> **Adrian Năstase***:* ***Something between rumour and information because it got to me as information but it is very likely to have been passed on to me as a rumour.***

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Uncertainty further derives from *the extent to which the speakers endorse the information*, which reflects in the great number of *inferential evidentials*:

– Reporting in the 1st person singular systematically implies the use of *epistemic or attitude verbs* (*I believe, I suppose, I understand, I suspect, I think that, I'm afraid that*);

– *The information source is,* in this case, *vaguely indicated* as the speaker stays reserved about what is being reported (see *impersonal verbs, passive forms, reflexive infinitive, vague phrases, epistemic modal adverbs and locutions*, used in parenthetical clauses).

> (3) **Adrian Năstase**: *Well. **I believe** that in the beginning **they wanted** one of the events, especially that regarding the breakdown of the internal protection service at the Ministry of Interior, to be somewhat wrapped in **an affair** that would not fling too much mud around. **They didn't manage** to do this and, **in my opinion**, that's what triggered all the problems. **I think** that, **indeed**, the fact that the Social Democratic Party wanted to take the reins of the Ministry of Interior, including the internal protection service, disgruntled Traian Băsescu a great deal. And this resulted in an action that **was obviously taken** in order to dislocate or break down this system, a battle for the archives of this service, and in order to **roll out** this operation that was one way or another linked to a few **matters**, including to Puiu Popoviciu...*

3.3. *Maxim of Relevance*

The information given by the host *is irrelevant* for a political debate with such high-profile guests – two vice chairs of major parties, a former prime minister and a renowned journalist.

In fact, the proposed central topic is just *a pretext* to comment on the general background of the current Romanian political arena:

> (4) **Răzvan Dumitrescu**: *Now, this is a **highly serious discussion**. **We are trying to find out for our citizens if politics reaches deep into the epaulette-wearing layer as well.***
> **Adrian Năstase**: *In order to have a **serious discussion**, we first need to listen to an official message from the Ministry of Interior, we need to learn who will replace Tutilescu or whatever his name is. Only then – after we gather some information – will we be able to comment. For now**, we are just giving our opinion.***

The guest's answer renders the host's *implying* strategy less ambiguous by labelling the ongoing verbal action as an exercise of „*giving one's opinion*".

3.4. *Maxim of Manner*

The host's wording is *unclear,* intentionally *ambiguous* to create confusion, *opaque* to stir puzzling-out debates, *prolix, inferential.*

Discussion subtopics are constantly reiterated like a *leitmotiv,* through *successive repetitions of nominal, elliptical, intensifying elements,* which makes the debate even more *spectacular*. *Play upon words, figures of speech, rhetorical questions* or *suggestive clichés* from *familiar language* are sometimes used.

> (5) **Răzvan Dumitrescu***: But we have to see how all this is linked, for example, to Becali's arrest, to the Mall scandal, to Becali's case from January 27 investigated a week ago, with his car being seized for investigation, with men in suit.* [...]
> **Răzvan Dumitrescu**: ***GDIIP, arrests, Popoviciu, scandal, business, land, Ioana Băsescu, apartment**...*
> **Adrian Năstase**: ***To shoot at a pigeon and kill a crow**.*

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Răzvan Dumitrescu: ***Mircea Băsescu - land plus talking down to journalists, Becali in custody, rumours about journalists being arrested, rumours about contractors being arrested, Becali and Vadim on the [electoral] lists. All these in just two weeks...***

Norica Nicolai: *Why? Because some of the money was on loan; it came from the World Bank.*

Răzvan Dumitrescu: *I reiterate, this has become an international matter as far as effects go. Could a whole chain [of events], **such a mechanism be set in motion by someone, designed only to cover up a public discussion on taxes?***

Adrian Năstase: ***You know what?** This is quite a simple matter. It is **the snowball effect**...*

In TV debates, *social distance* (determined by the interlocutors' social-professional status and the formal setting for communication) is currently conferred low-key values, *the (assumed) status of TV show participant levelling out the person's established social attributes*; this entails *typological changes in the polite linguistic behaviour associated with public communication.*

„Tele-familiarity" is cultivated as a preferred form of expression. Guests resonate with the host, using *the same informal, expressive, and laidback communication style*.

(6) **Răzvan Dumitrescu***: In other words, you swap your professional with their professional – and I need to have a professional reason for that – and that's when a miracle takes over the market.*

Adrian Năstase*: If you know more than me, please tell me.*

Răzvan Dumitrescu*: I don't. I am asking you if **that's how things work.***

Adrian Năstase*: I don't know **how things work**. I suppose sometimes **certain policemen are not that nice** due to some things they did in the past.*

Răzvan Dumitrescu*: Or which they didn't do.*

Although *context predetermines expectations of use*, *the modes of address* employed for Romanian political players are negotiable between interlocutors, while the marked option leads to situations such as *taking an equal stand with the addresser*, *minimising* or *maximising discursive distance* (the names are not preceded by *deference appellatives*: *Mircea Băsescu*, *Becali*, *and Vadim*), manifesting discursive power (**Răzvan Dumitrescu**. [...] *you are the show's newsmaker*. / **Adrian Năstase**: *All I did was to make public...* / **Răzvan Dumitrescu**: *To spread a rumour or a piece of information?*), persuasive intentions called into play through a strategy of positive politeness, *getting ironical with the interlocutor* (**Adrian Năstase**: *If you know more than me, please tell me*.), etc.

The violation of conversational maxims generates *implicatures*, additional contextual meanings to which interlocutors have access as a result of *inferences* which are made based on shared contextual knowledge.

(7) **Răzvan Dumitrescu***: Are these facts, clues or just an indirect events-based analysis?*

Adrian Năstase*: I have certain... so, obviously, I know things from the time when I was prime minister, [...]. And, considering this, I think that what followed was actually caused by that decision to break down the management...*

All the speakers agree that the various actions that have recently taken place on the Romanian political scene are the result of a political will and that they are given the spotlight with an eye to manipulating the public opinion, shifting public's attention from different

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unpopular socio-economic reforms towards minor, short-lived events propagated in the form of *rumours or scenarios*:

> (8) **Răzvan Dumitrescu**: *Becali on Vadim's lists, changes in the Capital City Police. All these events involved prosecutors and policemen. Is it a simple sequence of events or something well-planned?*
> **Adrian Năstase**: *Well. I believe that in the beginning they wanted one of the events, especially that regarding the breakdown of the internal protection service at the Ministry of Interior, to be somewhat wrapped in an affair that would not fling too much mud around.*

Sometimes, *implicatures* are *less dependent on an actual context* and more *generic*:

> (9) **Răzvan Dumitrescu**: ***Mircea Băsescu - land plus talking down to journalists, Becali in custody, rumours about journalists being arrested, rumours about contractors being arrested, Becali and Vadim on the [electoral] lists. All these in just two weeks.***
> **Norica Nicolai**: *Almost a month.* ***So, this is the first time during Traian Băsescu's term when four events of this kind, that give rise to massive scandal because certain people and institutions are involved, rapidly succeed one another within one month. Why? Because the end of the term is near, because there are no solutions to the ongoing crisis, because we are not allowed to talk, to tell how the budget actually looks like, how revenues look like, what the prognosis is for unemployment with the social issues going on in this country, how the economy is doing****...*
> **Adrian Năstase**: ***To talk about the lump sum tax. Of course.***
> **Norica Nicolai**: ***True, to talk about the lump sum tax, to talk about the 90% tax on salaries over RON 8000, to talk about copy rights.***
> **Răzvan Dumitrescu**: *We will talk about all these tonight.*
> **Norica Nicolai**: *To talk about the incapacity and impotence of* ***some individuals who are currently in charge.*** *Instead, we need to talk about Becali, Popoviciu, Miss Băsescu and God knows who else*.

4. Final Considerations

Based on the analysis carried out in the previous pages, we can pick up some *general characteristics of Romanian political talk show*:

Communication behaviour in talk show mirrors the two cultural trends that mark the current phase of Romanian public communication:

A trend of „globalisation", of anchoring into modernity.

In this regard, the show closely follows the *pattern of European talk shows* (Charaudeau, Ghiglione 2005: 201-211) which is to be seen as „attainment of direct democracy or its myth" (Charaudeau, Ghiglione 2005: 168), falling – in terms of typology – somewhere between the French talk show and the Italian one (corresponding to an *imaginary that blends the taste for polemic and rhetoric with the pleasure of speech fluency*). „Wanting to reveal at all costs and bring everything to light, this discourse emerges as a *pure meaningless signifier*" (Charaudeau, Ghiglione 2005: 120).

A trend of „adjusting" models with local „substance", generated by Romanian behavioural patterns.

The Romanian Balkan temperament fully relates to this kind of television genre.

The speakers are inclined towards *rumour and gossip*, generators of *enigma and mystery*, attitudes that are semantically sustained by *vague and imprecise phrases*, *generic formulae*, *impersonal verbs*, and *inferential evidentials* like the *presumptive* verb form.

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The linguistic structure of verbal exchanges is in accordance with the Romanian communication urge for *empty talk, or „whirl of words"*. This is a sign of *dislocated orality*, which we hear in lively conversations among several interlocutors, consisting of *incomplete sentences, repetitions and numerous redundancies, anticipations and syntactic superimpositions* (including for the host).

In conclusion, we can say (in accordance with Charaudeau, Ghiglione 2005: 207) that these *structural, strategic and demonstrative differences between various types of communication in talk shows* are managed according to a principle of coherence based on how TV journalists portray the picture of direct democracy.

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ROMANIAN POLITICAL TALK-SHOW – THE „DRUNKENNESS OF WORD" IN THE 21ST CENTURY

(*Abstract*)

The paper aims to highlight some cultural-specific aspects of the *current political talk-show in Romania.* Research begins with the general conclusion that political talk-show, a televised debate, at the Romanian television stations, takes the form of *polemics*, based on „playing with words" directed by a moderator, having as its objective a show usually incomplete in its argument.

Specifically, the paper will refer to some elements of *Romanian ideality*, symbolic place of discourse in talk-show (items related to the socio-cultural context, in which these programs are running) aimed at: interlocutiv space features of verbal initiatives; the traits of polemic space consisting of agreement and opposition between participants; specificity of the argumentative space of *persuasion strategies*.

The theoretical work is the *discourse analysis (DA)*(French essence). The illustrative material is extracted from the transcripts of broadcasts, talk-show type, presented by Romanian television station *Realitatea TV*.

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