Persuading the reader through language

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Résumé: Paradoxalement, les commencements de la communication moderne prennent leurs sources de l'Antiquité. L'art de persuader, appelé par les grecs *la rhétorique,* représente le support théorique et pratique de ce qu'on appelle aujourd'hui *la persuasion.*

Le langage ne représente plus depuis longtemps une simple modalité de présenter la réalité environnante, celui-ci étant utilisé principalement dans le but d'influencer les autres. De tous les instruments de persuasion, le langage représente la forme la plus spécifiquement humaine, son évolution étant étroitement liée de l'évolution même de la société humaine. Si le langage peut-être considéré un simple «instrument de travail», «un outil pour convaincre», il peut aussi se transformer dans une véritable «arme» quand il est utilisé dans le but de manipuler.

Mots-clés: langage, persuasion, communication, agent persuasif, récepteur.

1. Introduction

If we start from the assumption that any communicative act involves persuading the reader we might arrive to the conclusion that any speaker's purpose is to convince the hearer/reader of something using different kind of methods. However, what nowadays we call *persuasion* was known centuries ago. The Greeks called it *rhetoric* and considered so important that they studied it in schools and used it on a large scale for introducing democracy

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into their cities. For Aristotle rhetoric represented *the ability to discover the available means of persuasion* in any type of discourse[1]; the success of the persuasion depended on the capacity of the speaker to adapt his/her speech to the hearer's needs and expectations. For the same author rhetoric was a mix of three modes of persuasion: ***ethos*** (the speaker's honesty, the credibility of source), ***pathos***[2] (the hearer's emotions and imagination) and ***logos*** (facts related to the speaker's discourse).

Closer to our days, Larson defines persuasion as *the co-creation of a state of identification or alignment between a source and a receiver that results from the use of symbols* [Larson, 2003:26]. Thus, of vital importance is the co-operation between the source and the receiver, as persuasion cannot be done without the receiver's participation.

Although persuasion can be achieved through various methods, we are going to focus on *language*, for this is one of the most important ways used by humans in the highly complex process of influencing the other. Our educational system, our cultural patterns, our behavior rely almost entirely on language. *Language* is, as M.A.K. Halliday points it out, „what a person can do in the linguistic sense, that is what he can do as speaker/hearer, is the equivalent of what he *can mean*" [Halliday, 1979:27-28].

2. The persuasive dimension of language

Persuasion can be negative (advertising, some selling person trying to convince us to buy something we do not really need), but fortunately it can be positive too (health organizations are trying to make consumers aware of the importance of healthy food). As Richard M. Perloff says, *persuasive communications*

[1] Aristotle considers that among the three elements which form the discourse – the speaker, the subject of discussion and the hearer – the key role is held by the last, as the goal of any type of discourse is to change, or at least modify, some of the hearer's beliefs.

[2] *Pathos* represents more than just emotions; it determines the hearer not only to respond emotionally but also to identify with the speaker's ideas and feelings, thus it refers to the hearer's sympathies.

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have been used by good people to implement change. Social activists have used persuasion to change attitudes toward minorities and women.

The relation between the majority and minorities (especially the Roma minority) has been a problem for a long time. News about their negative character had spread quickly and became difficult to change; as a consequence the Roma minority suffered constantly prejudiced behavior from the majority's part. From this point of view, two of the most important roles of the media[3] are: a) to develop positive attitudes about minorities; b) to favour the interethnic dialogue by providing the reader with enough positive examples in order to support a change of attitudes. And how do media do this? Among other things media do this through the use of language. Humans, as members of society, develop their personality through language. The importance of language is highlighted by M. A. K. Halliday, who introduces *the concept of language as behavior*, which is „a form of interaction between man and man, is turned around, as it were, so that it throws light on the individual: the formation of the personality is itself a social process, and language – by virtue of its social functions – plays the key part in it." [Halliday, 1979:15]

A clear example of positive persuasion we find in the following article:

> *I know too well its truth, from experience, that whenever any poor Gipsies are encamped anywhere and crimes and robberies, etc, occur, it is invariably laid to their account, which is shocking; and if they are always looked upon as vagabonds, how can they become good people? I trust Heaven that the day may come when I may do something for these poor people.*

[3] For van Dijk the main role of the media is to report social events and the intermediary role is to reproduce other types of public discourse. Thus, media have a huge role in „prevailing discourse and attitude context for thought and talk about ethnic groups", which means changing the existing stereotypes or replacing them with positive thoughts.

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These lines were written by Queen Victoria in 1836 – wise words from a young girl. And just by writing them she had already done something for those "poor people". The loyalist thugs responsible for the hate campaign against the Romanian Gypsies in Northern Ireland might perhaps heed the words of the great-great-grandmother of their present Queen.

Queen Victoria drew attention to what is still the nub of the problem: that wherever Gypsies go they arouse suspicion. They look different, often with dark skin and wearing unusual clothes, they speak a different language, do not understand local customs and make little effort to integrate.

As soon as suspicion is aroused, local population are inclined to jump to the wrong conclusions and innocent people may suffer. I too have been guilty of overhasty judgments. While in Romania some years ago my passport disappeared and I assumed that it had been taken by Gypsies living in a slum that I had been visiting. I returned there and asked for my passport. They assured me they did not have it. I told them that I would have to go to the police. They begged me not to: local people and the police would be furious with them, they said, for having shamed them by stealing from a foreigner. I decided to go to the embassy in Bucharest and apply for a new passport. On my way I called in on friends with whom I had stayed earlier. They handed me my passport. I'd left it on a bedside table.

Since that time I have become found of the Gypsies, or "Roma", as they are often known, and I have spent many years living in a village in Romania where most of the inhabitants are Gypsies. …The accepted view is that the Gypsies left areas in northwest India about 1,000 years ago and headed westwards, passing through Persia and Armenia and arriving in the Balkans in the 14th century. From there many continued farther west.

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> …There is nothing new about Gypsies travelling around Europe, nor of them being made unwelcome. What is new is the scale of the migration and the reasons for it. …Most Gypsies are not permanently nomadic and are longing to work at home in Romania.
>
> ("The Roma: Why we shouldn't fear the Gypsies", *The Times*, the 1st of July 2009)

As Larson points it out there is a strong connection between language and the use of symbols, the efficiency of the persuading process arising from their combination. Queen Victoria[4] is by far the first symbol we come across in this text. Queen Victoria's words about the Roma people, at that time known as Gypsies, are clearly meant to "touch" the reader, to influence his/her emotions and we may say that these words are relying almost exclusively on what the Greeks called *pathos* (*and if they are always looked upon as vagabonds, how can they become good people*?). Another persuading strategy consists in associating two antagonistic terms, *vagabonds* versus *good people*, in order to stress the differences and raise some questions. Of course, one may not deny here the role of *ethos*, which is, as we have said before, the main symbol of the story. One other way for persuading the reader is bringing one common problem into the reader's attention – *whenever any poor Gipsies*[5] *are encamped anywhere and crimes and robberies, etc, occur, it is invariably laid to their account* – in the same time involving the reader in finding the answer to the key question mentioned above.

One other persuasive strategy is the identification of the source with the common stereotypes until facts and strong arguments determined a change of attitude – *I too have been guilty of over-hasty judgments.* In fact, arguments themselves represent a key condition for language to convince the reader [*cf*. Ardeleanu

[4] Queen Victoria was Queen of Great Britain and Ireland from 1837 to 1901 and Empress of India from 1876 to 1901. Queen Victoria's name is associated with a long period of industrial, economic and artistic progress.

[5] According to the Macmillan English Dictionary both spelling ways are correct – *Gipsy* or *Gypsy*.

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& Rață, 1997:189]. One may argue that the story which follows is built exclusively on emotions and this cannot be denied. But we may not forget that people like happy ending stories and this is exactly the intension of the message, to convince the reader that negative rumours might not always be according to the reality. We completely agree with Stanley Baran, who considers that „Our stories help define our realities, shaping the ways we think, feel and act. Storytellers have a remarkable opportunity to shape culture. They also have a responsibility to do so in as professional and ethical way as possible." [Baran, 1998:16] So, the article above not only persuade the reader in a positive way, it does more than that; it rises questions and convinces the reader to find an answer, in the same time providing the reader with key information regarding the history and customs of the Roma people.

3. Conclusions

In the XXIst century the terms *Gypsy / Roma* may still raise certain reactions. However, some messages are able to change this perspective. The power of language lies in three major facts: it is an instrument of interpreting the whole world; it offers us the opportunity to express our opinions as active speakers; it gives us the major chance of accepting or refusing the persuasion process. In order to convince language makes use of symbols, which are considered by Lippmann „an important part of the machinery of human communication." [Lippmann, 1991:12]

However, from a functional perspective „language it is what it is because of what it has to do" [Halliday: 1979:19]. This is why we consider that the persuasive dimension of language lies, in fact, in its multiple roles.

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