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Use of vague quantifiers as an involvement face-saving strategy in political discourse: a case of presidential speeches

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The main focus of this article is to show how vague language categories can function as an involvement face-saving strategy in political discourse. The observations made in this article are based on the analysis of one category of vague language, that is vague quantifiers. The data used for the present investigation have been obtained from the website of the Romanian presidency and consist of 19 randomly selected political speeches delivered between December 2014 and November 2016 by Klaus Werner Iohannis, the President of Romania. The analysis of the data suggests that vague quantifiers as a face-saving strategy are used when involvement is expressed.

Key-words: *vague language, vague quantifiers, political discourse, involvement face-saving strategies*

1. Introduction

This paper aims to show that the use of vague language (hereafter VL) can be a face-saving means in political discourse. The analysis of the data is based on one particular VL category, namely vague quantifiers identified in a corpus of political speeches. In the literature, this category of vague language has been defined as "non-numerical expressions used to refer to quantities; they answer the question *How much*?" (Ruzaite 2007, 158). The other focus of the analysis is on how the use of these vague quantifiers appears to be an involvement face-saving strategy. In this line of thought, there is evidence in the literature to suggest that involvement, as one of the two sides of "face" is "concerned with the person's right and need to be considered a normal, contributing or supporting member of society" (Scollon and Scollon 2001, 46) and can therefore be treated as a face-saving "device".

In what follows, I first discuss the concept of VL which has received and continues to receive a good deal of attention in the work many linguists interested in the investigation o both written and spoken discourse (see Cutting, 2007; Zhang, 2011). An example often used is the seminal work of Channell (1994, 193) who states

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that"[a]ny social group sharing interests and knowledge employs non-specificity in talking about their shared interest". To equate "non-specificity" with vague language, the author affirms that an expression or word is vague if (a) it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition, if (b) it is purposely and unabashedly vague or if (c) the meaning arises from intrinsic uncertainty. Her analysis of vague expressions shows that "their meanings are themselves vague", that "speakers share knowledge of how to understand them" and that "it is apparently impossible to describe their meanings independently of consideration of context and inference" (pp. 196–8).

Secondly, as previous research shows that vague language can function as a strategy of politeness and since the theory of politeness relies on the notion of "face" as one of its most important aspects, I here deal with this in some detail. The term of "face" was introduced and defined by Goffman (1967, 5) as the positive social value claimed by a person for him/herself. From a similar perspective, Brown and Levinson (1994, 61) define face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself".

Scollon and Scollon (2001, 45-6) take the view that *"Face is the negotiated public image, mutually granted each other by participants in a communicative event"*(emphasis in the original). By claiming that "[f]ace is a really paradoxical concept', the authors state that there are two sides to face and these are: *involvement and independence*. Since involvement as an aspect of face which is of importance in this study, this is further discussed below.

According to Scollon and Scollon (2001, 46-7), "involvement" describes the participants in communication who use language in order to project an image of normality and willingness to contribute in the communicative encounters they find themselves in. To make their discussion of involvement more specific, the authors list discourse strategies by means of which language users show they are involved in interaction with their interlocutors: "paying attention to others, showing a strong interest in their affairs, pointing out common in-group membership or points of view with them (…)" (2001, 47). And if such strategies are exemplars of what can be called "relational discourse", then *involvement* as a face-saving strategy is related to *face-saving*, which Goffman (1967, 12-13) calls "the traffic rules of social interaction." Furthermore, as face can be threatened throughout the whole process of communication, face-saving activities are commonly viewed as basic for all human interaction.

In this article, involvement is discussed in relation to political discourse (more specifically political speeches) which is discussed in the literature with respect to power differences. For example, Scollon and Scollon (2001, 52) treat "power" as "the vertical disparity between the participants in a hierarchical structure". They also argue that the hierarchical politeness system is one where "the participants recognize and respect the social differences that place one in a superordinate position and the other in a subordinate position" (2001, 55). This type of system is asymmetrical and thus participants are expected to use different face saving strategies. The authors also state that involvement strategies are used by the participants in the

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superordinate position, whereas participants in the subordinate position use independence strategies. In the data whose analysis is reported here, involvement is investigated only from the angle of the speaker who holds the high status of president of a country and is engaged in delivering political speeches from his superordinate position.

Thirdly in this exploration of the theoretical concepts underpinning this study, I deal with political discourse. According to Van Dijk (2002, 225) "political discourse" is not primarily defined by a topic or style, but rather by who speaks to whom, about what, on what occasion and with what goals. In other words, political discourse is especially "political" because of its functions in the political process. In the view of Obeng (1997, 58), "political discourse is full of conflicts and synergy, contestations and acquiescence, praise and dispraise, as well as delicate criticism and unmitigated support". Moreover, the author puts forward the idea that the nature of politics itself appears to be rather tricky and sometimes even risky which gives power to the spoken words and leads political actors to sometimes communicate in an obscure, semantically dense, vague, oblique and rather "cautious" manner.

Gruber (1993, 1) deals with political discourse from the perspective of its vague features and claims that "[i]t is common sense to say that vagueness is a characteristic of political language. (…) According to the literature on political language, vagueness occurs most often in the area of (party) political external communication in which politicians communicate directly with the general public in order to convince them of their programs or ideas".

Another interesting issue worth mentioning here is that of the political discourse, i.e. the political speech, in which the speaker appears to be not necessarily the producer/writer of the speech itself (see below) or what Scollon and Scollon (2001: 102) call 'not the writer himself or herself who is superior to the reader'. Due to the type of data discussed in this article, i.e. political speeches published on an institutional website, the politician whose use of vague language is examined in this study may not be, in the words of the authors, the 'actual writer of the text' but the 'implied writer' and the reader, i.e. the person who decides to access the website, is 'the implied reader'. In what follows, I discuss deal with this in the description and analysis of the data.

2. Methodology: data description and analysis

The study presented in this article is based on a 34.209 word corpus consisting of 19 randomly selected political speeches whose texts were collected from 'Preşedintele României' - the website of the Romanian presidency: www.presidency.ro. The speeches in this corpus were delivered between December 2014 and November 2016by Klaus Werner Iohannis, the President of Romania. Political speeches seem to be a "special" type of spoken discourse, because spoken as they may be, they are by no means "naturally occurring" but most of the times well prepared in advance

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by either well trained advisers who are responsible for writing politicians' speeches or by these speakers themselves in consultation with their advisors.

The question I attempt to answer in this article was informed by Scollon and Scollon's (2001, 46) question: '[W]ho is the "real" person underneath the face which is presented in communication [?]'. Therefore, I ask: *'Who is the real person underneath the face which the President of Romania presents in some of his speeches between the end of 2014 and the end of 2016?'*

In order to operationalise this question, the present study aims to show that vagueness can function as a face-saving strategy. The analysis is based on one category of vague language, i.e., quantifiers, which, according to Ruzaite (2007, 158) 'can be defined as non-numerical expressions used to refer to quantities; they answer the question *How much?*'(emphasis in the original).

A distinction that is of importance in this analysis is the distinction between vague *multal* quantifiers (those that refer to large quantities) and vague *paucal* quantifiers (those that refer to small quantities) (Ruzaite, 2007; Elsik, 2014). This analysis encompasses two quantifiers identified in the corpus, i.e. the Romanian ***mult*** and ***puțin*** in their grammatical roles as adjectives or adverbs and as members of adverbial phrases. The English equivalents in the translation of data excerpts are *much/many/more/several/lots of* for the Romanian vague multal quantifier and *little/less/(at)least/a little/few/a few* for the Romanian vague paucal quantifier.

The other aspect on which the analysis aims to show is that involvement appears to be a face-saving strategy and the involvement of the producer of the discourse analysed here, i.e. the President of Romania, seems to be three-fold involvement:

(a) apparent non-involvement showing a certain detachment and distancing on the part of the speaker, here called non-involvement (NI),

(b) involvement as a representative of an institution (presidency and all the departments and members of the team), here called institutional involvement (IINV)

(c) personal involvement as *the* President of the country who is the leader of the aforementioned presidential team, here called personal involvement (PINV).

2.1. Analysis

The analysis of the data in this corpus has revealed that vague quantifiers are used to save one's face. To see how the use of multal and paucal quantifiers seems to be an involvement face-saving strategy, examples of the most recurrent instances are discussed below. Let us consider the following instances in examples 1 – 6:

(a) non-involvement (NI) - apparent non-involvement showing a certain detachment and distancing on the part of the speaker

(1) **NI** *Pentru că aşteptări mari înseamnă* ***mai multă responsabilitate, mai mult efort, mai multă seriozitate şi mai multă muncă.*** (21.12.14)
[Because high expectations means **more responsibility, more effort, more commitment and more wor**k.]

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In (1) the speaker uses the vague multal quantifiers (in bold in the data excerpt) which together with the use of "aşteptări/*expectations*" as subject of this statement give the impression of the non-involvement mentioned above.

(2) **NI** *foarte mult despre plagiate, persoane publice şi* ***mai puțin publice*** *sunt acuzate că au plagiat*. (03.10.2016)
[One can hear very much about plagiarism nowadays, public and **less public figures** are accused of having palgiarised.]

Excerpt (2) contains an example of paucal quantifier introduced in this statement by a verb "Se aude" whose subject is not specified thus showing another instance of non-involvement.

(b) institutional involvement (IINV) - involvement as a representative of an institution (presidency and all the departments and members of the team)

(3) **IINV** *Suntem membri cu drepturi depline ai Comunității Europene, (...) iar* ***multe zone din*** *societate dau semne de însănătoşire*. (24.01.2106)
[We are a fully-fledged member state of the European Community (…) **and many areas o our society** show sign of recovery.]

(4) **IINV** *Dacă vrem o educație de calitate va trebui să avem şi unități de învățământ corespunzătoare, care să reflecte această calitate şi să asigure condiții* ***cel puțin decente*** *pentru elevi şi profesori*. (15.02.2016)
[If we want quality education we will have to have appropriate education institutions which reflect this quality and ensure **at least decent conditions** for students and teachers.]

Examples (3) and (4) show the use of a vague multal and paucal quantifiers which together with the verb in the first person plural seem to demonstrate involvement of the speaker as a representative of the presidential institution.

(c) personal involvement (PINV) - personal involvement as *the* President of the country who is the leader of the aforementioned presidential team

(5) **PINV** *<u>După cum spuneam</u>, politica externă a intrat într-o etapă nouă,* ***cu multe necunoscute****, dar şi oportunități*.(03.09.15)
[As I was saying, foreign policy has entered a new stage which offers both **many challenges and opportunities.**]

(6) **PINV** *Îi salut şi pe părinți! Ştiu că* ***aveți griji, şi nu puține.*** *Ştiu că vă gândiți la viitorul copiilor*, (…) (12.09.2016)
[My greetings go to the parents as well. I know you **have concerns and they are not few**. I know you are concerned about the future of your children, (...)]

Examples (5) and (6) seemingly demonstrate that the President is personally involved in the issues he approaches here (foreign policy and education) and uses both the multal and paucal vague quantifiers as an involvement face-saving strategy.

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3. By way of conclusion ...

The analysis of the data suggests that vague quantifiers as a face-saving strategy are used when involvement is expressed. In this line of thought, a possible answer to the question discussed above: *'Who is the real person underneath the face which the President of Romania presents in some of his speeches between the end of 2014 and the end of 2016?'* may be that the speaker/implied writer of the political speeches in this corpus appears to be involved in two ways in the issues he deals with (both as the "voice" of the presidential institution and personally in his capacity of President). The non-involvement detected in the corpus may be a strategy he uses to keep a distance from delicate issues.

The work presented here is however limited by the scope, in terms of space and resources, of a journal article. Further work using a much larger corpus for the investigation of a greater range of vague language categories should follow.

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