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Power and politeness in political discourse. Analysing humorous and ironic comments in a Romanian parliamentary debate

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The article analyses the use of humorous and ironic comments in relation to enacting power relations and politeness strategies in a Romanian parliamentary debate preceding the vote of investiture for a new Government after the 2004 general elections. Without aiming at making clear cut distinctions between humour and irony, the chapter discusses the overlapping nature of both concepts and includes humorous ironies (Dynel 2014, Gibbs et al. 2014, Yus 2013) in the analysed examples. A similar overlap is noticed at a functional level. Using the taxonomy of the functions of humour proposed by Hay (2000), the demonstration examines power games in parliamentary speeches along with the uses of humour as manifestations of politeness and group solidarity. When irony is seen as "a miscommunication design" (Anolli, Infantino, and Ciceri 2001), an ironic comment can be recognised either as a manifestation of power or strategically dismissed for the sake of preserving face.

Key-words: *power, politeness, humour, ironic comments, parliamentary debate*

1. Power and politeness in institutional settings

Power and politeness are key concepts in relation to institutional discourse, especially in relation to what linguists term 'talk at work' (Drew and Heritage 1992). When analysing the power and politeness strategies that are part of the communicative continuum of typical professional interactions, Holmes and Stubbe (2003, 3) notice that "effective management of workplace relationships takes account of the face needs of colleagues, as well as the objectives of the organisation and the individuals involved".

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From a sociological or psychological perspective, the concept of power includes both the ability to control others and the ability to accomplish one's goals. This is manifest in the extent to which one person or group can impose their own will at the expense of the will of others. From a more anthropological perspective (Gall 1995), language becomes the means of doing power and an important component in the construction of reality. A social constructionist approach views every interaction as the action of people who seek to enact, reproduce and sometimes resist institutional power relationships by means of coercive or collaborative strategies (Crawford 1995, Dwyer 1993, Fairclough 1989, Holmes and Stubbe 2003). Another dimension of power in institutional settings is brought into focus by a Critical Discourse Analytic approach (e.g. Fairclough 1995, van Dijk 1998). Such a framework construes the power of those in authority as 'oppressive' (Fairclough 1995) and focuses on ways in which it is exerted in both spoken and written discourse (Lee 1992, Talbot 1998).

While the concept of power may legitimize the use of relatively overt 'coercive' discourse strategies, Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 5) argue that "most workplace interactions provide evidence of mutual respect and concern for the feelings or face needs of others, that is, of politeness". Politeness is one important reason for modifying the blatant imposition of one's wishes on others (Brown and Levinson 1987, Goffman 1967). It can be linguistically manifested in many ways, both by more powerful participants concerned with building good workplace relations and maintaining collegiality (Holmes and Stubbe 2003, Spencer-Oatey 2000), and by subordinates whose self-interests are better served by a polite and deferent attitude towards their superiors. A very interesting means of exercising politeness is accounted for in situations in which subordinates challenge, contest, undermine or subvert power and authority. Holmes and Stubbe (2003, 7-8) note that

> challenges to authority were typically expressed not with direct and confrontational strategies, but rather in socially acceptable or 'polite' ways, such as through the use of humour, including irony and sarcasm. […] Humour provides a 'cover' for a remark which might otherwise be considered unacceptable in the work context.

As the theory suggests, politeness may also be political, since treating others with consideration is more likely to result in the cooperation which assist the participants in achieving institutional goals (Watts 1992, Holmes and Stubbe 2003).

In any institutional setting, participants seek to achieve two main types of goals. The first one is transactional, corresponding to the needs of the

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organisation (e.g. to make things work, to solve problems, to make decisions), while the second is social, tending to the face needs of all those involved in interaction. The balance between 'doing' power (i.e. achieving transactional goals) and politeness (i.e. minding social relationships) ensures cooperation and success in institutional talk.

Ever since the publication of Brown and Levinson's theoretical model (1978), researchers have been studying the face demands specific to various institutional encounters, including healthcare (Locher and Schnurr 2017), workplace (Holmes and Stubbe 2003, Schnurr and Chan 2009), legal settings (Archer 2017), and political encounters. These institutional contexts display similarities. Still, in discussing facework and (im)politeness in political exchanges, Tracy (2017, 741-745) identifies six features that are poignantly different from everyday talk:

(a) In political exchanges one or more parties have concerns about their social group's face as well as their own personal face.
(b) Much political talk is designed for overhearing listeners even more than the actual party addressed.
(c) Rudeness and insults are expected, even valued, parts of political talk.
(d) Marked face-attack is often accompanied by politeness moves.
(e) Traditional politeness moves can be used to insult or challenge a political person.
(f) 'Backstage' is an elusive place for political communicators.

Hoinărescu (2015, 38) demonstrated that in Romanian political discourse, rudeness in general proved to be a defensive strategy meant to rebuild "the credibility ethos" especially in media contexts. In particular cases, lying has been analysed as an important rhetoric device employed by Romanian politicians as an *in absentia* impoliteness strategy or as an anti-branding strategy. Politicians' relational identity as well as their collective one are exposed in these acts of impoliteness and determine the adoption of strategies that minimize their social impact. Among these strategies, the most efficient one is laughter which takes mainly aggressive forms like: irony, joke, sarcasm, and persiflage. (Hoinărescu 2015, 42).

The present research explores the relationship between power and politeness in a particular context of political institutional discourse, that of Romanian parliamentary debates. The importance of context and of the community of practice in analysing (im)politeness strategies was tested by Harris (2001) in relation to the highly confrontational scene of the British Parliament. A previous study of how Romanian members of the parliament

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(henceforth MPs) managed dissent and interpersonal relations was conducted by Ilie, with a focus on two distinctive interactional practices: "the institutionally ritualised discourse" and "the individually tailored discourse" (2010, 202). Parliamentary interactions are confined to the specific institutional procedures, while the MPs tailor their speeches to their communicative purpose and to the face needs of the participants. Power and (im)politeness strategies adopted by MPs challenge current theories (Harris 2001) and employ new means of manifestations. In this chapter I will examine how Romanian MPs 'do' power and (im)politeness by means of humour and irony during a common session occasioned by the vote of investiture of a new Government.

2. Irony and humour – a theoretical preview of two overlapping constructs

The theoretical review on irony follows a short passage from the traditional, rhetoric perspective to the communicative one. From a rhetoric perspective, irony is considered a semantic inversion between the literal or primary meaning and the nonliteral or implied one. From a communicative perspective, on the other hand, irony cannot be viewed only as a comment or remark at a linguistic level but also a complex interaction between interlocutors, depending on contextual constraints and opportunities.

From the perspective of pragmatics, irony can be understood through the cooperative principle, maxims and implicatures, being defined by Grice as a particularized conversational implicature triggered by an overt violation of the first maxim of quality. It is also important to consider the speaker's intended meaning. According to Grice (1975, 124), "I cannot say something ironically unless what I say is intended to reflect a hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt".

According to the Relevance Theory (henceforth RT) approach, ironic meaning does not require any special inferential processes because it is explained through the principle of relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1986). In fact, this is a meta-representational ability that can be explained as a variety of an implicit interpretive use, more precisely, the echoic use (Sperber and Wilson 1989; Wilson and Sperber 2004). Ironic utterances are echoic because the speaker transmits an attitude of dissociation from the echoed opinion. Researchers supporting Relevance Theory argue that to consider an utterance ironic precisely depends on its being echoic.

Ruiz Gurillo and Alvarado Ortega express their view that "irony cannot exclusively be treated as a kind of echo that brings mockery. The analysis of this phenomenon should cover other issues, e.g. the effects caused or the tacit agreement established between speaker and listener, amongst others." (2013, 2)

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The Pretence Theory proposes an alternative explanation for irony. The ironist "is pretending to be an injudicious person speaking to an uninitiated audience" (Clark and Gerrig 1984, 21). Pretence must necessarily be complemented by the echoic mention (Wilson 2006, 1740), because prototypical irony cannot be treated as pretence, even though simulation or imitation may be present in the so-called 'impersonation irony,' – so frequent in literature, where the speaker adopts a persona in order to criticize or make fun of those who speak or think in similar ways (Wilson 2006).

The communicative perspective on irony emphasizes the role of the ironic environment which includes the speaker's expectation, an incongruity between expectation and reality and the speaker's negative attitude towards this incongruity. According to Attardo (2013) verbal irony is displayed in various degrees of ironicity, some types of irony being more central than others. Therefore, it is important to examine irony processing as well as intentionality.

With regard to irony processing, Anolli, Infantino, and Ciceri (2001) argue that by means of an ironic remark, the speaker can lay the responsibility of the ironic value of the utterance on the intention ascription of the interlocutor. In their *fancing game* (or *irony situation*) model, Anolli *et al.* (2001) propose four elements or phases pertaining to the irony situation: i) a set of assumptions; ii) a focal event; iii) the ironic comment as part of a dialogic exchange; and iv) the ironic effect or the communicative output of the ironic comment. The target of the ironic comment may process and react to it in three different ways, corresponding to the manner in which the utterance is interpreted by the interlocutor: i) *misunderstanding* or "the failure to give the speaker's utterance an intention that is different from its linguistic decoding, so that the ironic meaning is not grasped by the addressee" (Anolli *et al*. 2001, 157); ii) *denying,* namely claiming to not understand the ironic sense of the speaker's comment, for convenience and interpersonal opportunity reasons, thus reacting only to the literal meaning of the comment, not to the implied one; and iii) *touché,* "when the ironic meaning of a comment hits the target, the addressee can recognize it and admit he/she has been struck" (Anolli *et al.* 2001, 157). Irrespective of whether the target is amused or offended by the witticism, the answer may be a smile if the irony was mild, or a fierce counterattack, in the case of sarcastic irony. This plurality of interpretations is a useful device in the hands of the addressee to recognize and ascribe an ironic intention to the speaker's utterance. To conclude this part, in a communicative perspective, irony aims to achieve an effective protection of interpersonal relationships, so as to give great leeway for managing both meanings and interaction.

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The theoretical perspectives on humour vary according to the field of interest of the researchers. The linguistic approaches to humour summarize the evolution of humour research in the field. *Script-based Semantic Theory of Humour* (Raskin 1985) (henceforth SSTH) stems from the notion of *script*. The script is a "cognitive construction, which implies a structured information area internalised by the speaker, and which represents the knowledge owned by that speaker about a part of the world" (Raskin 1985, 81).

The theory was improved by Attardo and Raskin (1991) who jointly proposed the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (henceforth GTVH). GTVH is founded on six *knowledge resources* which are initially applied to jokes and display a hierarchical relationship with one another (Attardo 2001; 2008): script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative strategy, and language. GTVH stems from the theory of the incongruity-resolution model, psychologically founded and proposed by Suls (1972) in order to explain humour (Ritchie 2004). A humorous text, i.e. a joke, is structured on three phases (the establishment phase; the incongruity phase; and the resolution phase). Following the *punch line*, the listener or reader is forced to resolve incongruity for one of the activated scripts so that the understanding of humour and, consequently, the achievement of the pursued effects is ensured. GTVH can be applied to texts from various registers, to different situations and to a variety of historical periods (Attardo 1994; 2001). Furthermore, the analysis deals with texts longer than jokes, such as novels, short stories, television *sitcoms*, movies or games. It takes into account criteria such as the linear nature of the text, the importance of beginnings and endings in humorous structures, the roles of humour in narration or the humorous plot, amongst others.

The incongruity-resolution model generates two main types of reviews: Cognitive Linguistics (henceforth CL) proposes a replacement for the mental space whereas RT integrates it in its view of the human mind as aiming at optimal relevance. CL suggests a creative use of language where humour, metaphor, metonymy, frames, etc. clearly reflect the structure of human experiences (Brône *et al.* 2006). RT additionally proposes a general principle of communication: the principle of relevance. Thus, humour comprehension must be considered as an interaction occurring between the perception and manipulation of the incongruous and the search for relevance (Yus 2004; 2013).

Various reviews of literature related to understanding irony and humour describe the overlapping nature of both concepts (see Dynel 2014, Gibbs *et.al.* 2014). Dynel (2014) proposes two inseparable hallmarks of irony: the *overt untruthfulness*, conceptualized as the flouting of the first maxim of Quality; and the *negative evaluation.* At the same time, Dynel argues that irony

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> should not be mistaken for humorous utterances by which the speaker means to poke fun at something or be otherwise humorous by *overtly not telling* (what he/she believes to be) the truth, or by which he/she means *to voice a witty negative evaluation of a given individual or entity.* (emphasis in the original) (Dynel 2014, 635)

Gibbs *et al.* (2014, 591) point out that "people's experience of humour in ironic discourse may not simply be a matter of individuals automatically feeling that some remark is funny and then laughing aloud as a result." The researchers also imply that humour is not

> a spontaneous and private affair" of the individuals, and that "there may be differences in the ways speakers intend their remarks to be understood and appreciated as being funny that in turn affect the ways listeners subsequently respond. (Gibbs *et al.* 2014, 591)

The humour in irony is not similar to that of simple jokes, and demands examination of a complex host of contextual factors not always considered in linguistic theories of humour (Gibbs *et al.* 2014). Laughter used as a signal of affiliation or as a result of a release of tension may not always be determined by a humorous comment, and correspondingly the negative evaluation included in an ironic comment does not always imply aggressiveness (see Gibbs 2000 for an account of "collaborative irony").

In this section, I explored the literature on irony and humour in order to account for their sometimes overlapping features. In the present research, the examples of humour and irony will be analysed either separately (when their individual features can be clearly distinguished) or in terms of humorous ironies, defined along with Gibbs *et al.* as the case in which "people understand the ironic meaning of an utterance and then humorously react to it given the release of tension they momentarily experienced during the interpretation process." (2014, 592)

3. Linguistic creativity in political interactions

Political discourse is enacted by its actors, the politicians, but has various recipients, such as the public at large, people from various socio-economic backgrounds, or citizens who have the right to vote (Chilton 2004). Professional politicians and political institutions make use of language to express power and to organize people's minds and opinions (Fairclough 1989; 1995). In order to respond to various communicative needs, depending on the given context, politicians "have

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adopted a personalized rhetoric of choice and life style values to communicate their political messages to citizens" (Simpson and Mayr 2010, 42-43).

Nowadays, most instances of political discourse are drafted by professional speech writers educated to produce persuasive language. Unlike the Westminster-type parliaments in which prepared speeches are not allowed and the dialogue has a more confrontational nature, in the Romanian Parliament, the interaction is regulated by procedures that clearly specify that the Presidents of the Senate and of the Chamber of Deputies act like chairs of the meetings and allocate the turns in political debates. Researchers argue that the speeches produced by Romanian MPs in parliamentary debates appear as a sequence of monologues (Săftoiu 2015) although the speakers display a certain dialogic attitude (Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 2012) in relation to their colleagues, the members of the government or other categories of overheareres representing the large public. When engaging in dialogic communication, politicians need to respond to various expectations from their recipients. Though regulated by clear procedures depending on the type of meeting and the participatory frameworks, parliamentary debates display a range of both formal and informal dialogic sequences. Apart from reading the already prepared written speeches, politicians engage in less formal dialogic sequences, even in exchanges that reflect their linguistic creativity and their ability to make use of it in a particular context. Instances of context-bound humour and irony are proof of such linguistic creativity.

3.1. Methodological considerations

The paper aims to identify humorous and ironic comments occurring in a Romanian parliamentary debate, to distinguish between the formal and semiformal use of irony and humour, and to identify their associated communicative functions. The distinction between the formal and semiformal uses of irony and humour has been employed for the purpose of this research, based on the discursive patterns identified in the Romanian Parliament. The debates are chaired by the president of the parliamentary chamber, and the turns and the duration of the speeches are established by means of an algorithm based on the percentage of the number of MPs from each party. The speaker prepares a formal, written speech, rendering the opinion of the party he represents. When it is their turn, the MPs from the opposition take several seconds to spontaneously respond to the previous speeches and then commit to reading the speech they prepared with regard to the theme of the debate. By formal use, I understand the ironic and humorous comments previously prepared by MPs and included in the written speeches as part of their argumentative strategy. The semiformal use of irony and humour

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preserves the formalism required by the institutional context, while considering the more spontaneous reactions of the MPs included in the preliminary remarks or in the interruptions of the random speeches.

The analysed debate took place on December 28th, 2004 on the occasion of a common session of the two chambers of the Romanian parliament – the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies – in which they debated and voted for a new government after the 2004 general elections. The transcript was published on the official webpage of the Romanian Senate and comprises 32600 words. The political context favoured particular tensions between the Members of Parliament. On the one hand, the former members of the government party (the Social Democratic Party, henceforth SDP) won the elections but were unable to form a political coalition and gain a majority for forming a new government. On the other hand, the former members of the opposition party (the National Liberal Party and the Democratic Party) formed a coalition (DA – *Dreptate și Adevăr* – Justice and Truth) which, although it came second in the general elections, found support from smaller parties to form the new government.

This particular context triggered a fiery debate before the vote of investiture for the new government. The dialogue was highly intertextual (alluding to previous speeches, speakers, and historical facts), humorous and ironic. The analysis targets the manner in which the MPs do politics by means of humour and irony in previously prepared speeches and in impromptu interventions that precede the official ones. Both irony and humour function as argumentative tools of a rational nature – in the strictly institutionalized dialogic exchange – and of an emotional nature – in the semiformal one.

While doing politics, MPs manage to perform complex identity work, focused on building and maintaining their personal, group, and institutional image. The most obvious identity displayed by the speakers is the *institutional* one, namely that of members of the Romanian Parliament gathered in an official context. As far as displaying their *group identity*, politicians appear both as colleagues in a political organisation and as political opponents. Arguably, the least visible identity in such formal contexts is their *personal* one. Most of the MPs censure their more colourful personality traits. Despite this, some of the MPs manage to build their political brands (see Săftoiu and Popescu 2014) while expressing their opinions and beliefs in institutional settings.

In the following sections, I analyse examples of humorous and ironic comments used by MPs to express power and politeness, and to build their various identities. The instances of humour and irony were labelled in Dynel (2014)'s terms as: i) *ironic comments*, in which people may speak ironically, and hope that listeners draw relevant inferences about what they imply without any expectation

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of the listeners responding humorously through laughter (as in a "*you're a real genius"* comment after a mistake someone made); ii) *humorous ironies,* i.e. ironic interactions that may be structured around speakers intending for listeners to specifically draw humorous reactions to what they said (as in the case of self-directed ironic comments), and iii) *humorous comments,* that bear the speaker's intention to make fun of something or "to voice a witty negative evaluation of a given individual or entity" (Dynel 2014, 635), as in blatantly absurd utterances that result in an instant burst of laughter.

The examples were selected from fifteen political speeches from the same parliamentary debate and are organised into two analytical sections, following their degree of formality and occurrence in the structure of the speeches. Thus, one section comprises the ironic and humorous comments displayed by MPs in semiformal speeches, as a reaction to previous speakers and apart from their written speeches, while the other consists of humorous and ironic comments included in the official written speeches, thoroughly prepared in advance and delivered by the MPs on behalf of the political party they represent.

3.2 Irony and humour in the preliminary remarks

The examples in this section were selected from semiformal speeches delivered by Romanian MPs as preliminary remarks, preceding the official written speeches. They are more spontaneous and context-bound than the official speeches, being delivered as reactions to other speakers.

(1) *Context*: The first speech from the debate following the designated Prime Minister's presentation of the governmental programme and the list of proposed members of the Government. Victor Ponta (Social Democratic Party), former member of the government and now a young MP, takes the floor on behalf of the opposition. This part occurs before the salutation formulas.

Ponta: *Mulţumim, domnule prim-ministru desemnat că ni i-aţi prezentat pe colegii dumneavoastră. Pe cei mai mulţi nu-i cunoşteam, i-am aplaudat, chiar dacă, atunci când am fost şi noi, la rândul nostru, în Parlament, nu am fost la fel de aplaudaţi de dumneavoastră. Sperăm că de acum încolo un mod mai civilizat de lucru în Parlament şi în relaţia cu Guvernul ne-ar avantaja pe toţi.* (Ponta_28.12.2004)

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> 'Thank you, Prime Minister-designate, for introducing your colleagues to us. We did not know most of them. We applauded them, even though, when we were also in this position, in the parliament, we were not as applauded as you were. We hope that, from now on, that a more civilised working environment in the Parliament and in relation with the Government will benefit us all.'

The language chosen by the MP bears a degree of formality specific to oral interpellations in Parliament. The speaker first addresses the Prime Minister-designate as an immediate reaction to the proposed programme and to the list of proposed members of the Government, and then reads the formal speech, addressed to all participants in the formal meeting. The speaker assumes a semiformal tone and a context-related content, an indicator of the fact that this part of his speech had not been prepared in advance.

The example alludes to previous behaviour of MPs from the governmental Parliamentary group who apparently had not applauded the previous government as loudly as the current opposition did for the proposed members of the Government. Although the truth of such a statement is difficult to prove, the negative evaluation appears obvious. The ironic comment is meant to reinforce the power position SDP once held and to reduce the distance between the governmental coalition and the opposition in the Parliament. The speaker appeals to politeness, though he uses an ironic comment to do so.

(2) *Context*: The first speech of the governmental coalition in support of the proposed Government belongs to Puiu Hașotti. This excerpt contains the opening statement of his speech, occurring before the salutation formula.

Hașotti: *Permiteți-mi ca, la început, să spun că discursul talentatului Victor Ponta mă face să spun că PSD-ul nu poate fi schimbat nici de tineri care au până la 30 de ani. (aplauze)* (Hașotti_28.12.2004_4.4)

> 'Allow me, in the beginning (of my speech), to say that the speech of the talented Victor Ponta makes me say that the SDP cannot be changed, not even by the youngsters under 30.' (*rounds of applause*)

The opening statement of the MPs from the DA coalition expresses a humorous irony. It echoes Ponta's references to the importance of young politicians for changing the way politics has been perceived in Romania, while the humorous intention is visible in the choice of the epithet *talented*, added to the politician's name. In this context, *talented* may have the meaning of skilful orator. Still, the

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meaning is contradicted by the next utterance in which Hașotti expresses his doubts about the political ability of young MPs such as Ponta. Another interpretation could be that of *a man of many talents* which displays an ironic comment targeted at the multiple identities displayed by Ponta in his speech – former Deputy, former member of the Government, Senator, the man entrusted to deliver the first speech of the opposition party.

This example favours irony as a means of doing power. The attack on Ponta's image is indirect, but effective. Once the parliamentary elections concluded, the power relationships are reconsidered and Hașotti's speech clarifies that. Interestingly enough, the comment also bears the arguments meant to build solidarity (Hay 2000, Holmes and Stubbe 2003) among the MPs in the governmental coalition and among a certain age group.

In this example and in many other cases, the audience broke into loud applause when a speaker said something that part of the audience especially approved of. Applause in essence functioned as a "double-sided face move carried out by legitimate overhearers" (Tracy 2017, 151). Often these moments of applause followed a statement that attacked the view of the opposing group. They supported the speaker's claim to be reasonable and they implied that the opposing other was unreasonable and amiss. They may also be an indicator of the use of humorous irony.

(3) *Context*: The first speech of a representative of the Democratic Union of the Hungarians from Romania (DUHR), a non-governmental organisation at that time and the only party which was part of the former Government and of the present coalition. The example alludes to Victor Ponta's speech.

Hunor: *Când un senator visează cu Ciociolina, nu mă miră faptul că discursul lui rămâne la nivelul pornografiei politice.* (*Aplauze din partea puterii, sala se amuză.)* (Hunor_28.12.2004_4.39)

'When a senator dreams about Ciociolina, there is no surprise that his speech remains at the level of political pornography.' (*Applauses among the members of the power alliance, amusement in the hall*)

Example (3) illustrates the way MPs establish power relations by means of sarcastic irony. As a member of both the old and the new governmental coalition, the MP opens his statement by echoing Ponta's two previous references to Ciociolina in a sarcastic manner. The direct face threatening act targeted Ponta's institutional identity and it was to be expected in non-cooperative or competitive situations. According to Kienpointner (1997) a parliamentary debate is an obvious place where

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strategic rudeness could be expected. At the same time, in political exchanges, marked face-attacks can sometimes be accompanied by politeness moves (Tracy 2017).

In the following lines of his speech, Hunor is doing politeness and collegiality by means of further ironic comments:

(4) *Context*: Continuation of Hunor's speech.

Hunor: *Acum doi ani şi jumătate, stăteam de vorbă cu câţiva politicieni din generaţia noastră, împreună cu domnul deputat Ponta şi vorbeam despre viitorul României. Credeam, şi eu cred în continuare, că generaţia noastră va face o altă politică, vom avea un alt stil, un stil mai elegant, un stil european. Discursul domnului deputat Ponta, astăzi, nu a fost nici elegant, nici european. De la simţul umorului până la băşcălie, drumul este lung.* (Hunor_28.12.2004_4.39)

'Two and a half years ago, I was talking to several politicians of our generation, along with Deputy Ponta about the future of Romania. We thought, and I continue to think that our generation will make a different kind of politics, we will have another style, a more elegant style, a European style. Deputy Ponta's speech today was neither elegant, nor European. It is a long way from having a sense of humour to banter(ing).'

Sharing memories is a strategic move of creating solidarity (Hay 2000). Example 4 is a case of 'reasonable hostility', as defined by Tracy (2010). The hostility is accompanied by small tokens of politeness obvious in the use of deferent reference forms ('Deputy Ponta'). These tokens of politeness convey to the non-affiliated others the fact that the negative sentiment was because of the person's position on a particular issue rather than being intended to embarrass the person. Words like 'our generation' or 'together with' aid the process of building collegiality and group cohesion around European values and interest for the future of Romania. The contrasting analogy with Ponta's speech is not flattering for the latter. The ironic contrast is skillfully hiding the direct criticism.

(5) *Context*: Continuation of Hunor's speech.

Hunor: *Mi-aţi dovedit, domnule Ponta, că aţi purtat o mască frumoasă, o mască pe care aţi pierdut-o pe drumul de la Palatul Victoriei până la Palatul Parlamentului, pe drumul scurt de la Putere până la Opoziţie.*

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Noi nu vom uita relaţia noastră, în aceşti patru ani, nu vom nega această relaţie fiindcă nu vi s-a părut împotriva naturii când aţi avut nevoie de voturile noastre ca să guvernaţi în linişte, dar acum vi se pare împotriva naturii că ministrul de stat este domnul preşedinte Marko Bela. (Hunor_28.12.2004_4.39)

'You have proved to me, Mr. Ponta, that you have worn a beautiful mask, a mask that you lost on your journey from Victoria Palace to the Palace of Parliament, on the short journey from power to opposition.
We will not forget our relationship, in these four years, we will not deny this relationship, because it did not seem unnatural to you when you needed our votes to govern in peace, but now it seems unnatural that the minister of state affairs is President Marko Bela.'

Example (5) is marked by the metaphor of the 'mask' in relation to the way politicians make use of people and hide their thoughts, as well as by the metaphor of the 'journey' which is illustrative of the political changes undertaken by Ponta after the past elections. The irony lies in the use of the word 'unnatural' which echoes Ponta's speech and characterizes his behaviour in relation to his former political allies. For an overhearing listener, the words 'unnatural' and 'not forget our relationship' may be interpreted in the semantic key of sexual allusions and, thus, it brings a humoristic note to the otherwise dull political debate. The statement concludes Hunor's preliminary remarks (as excerpted in examples 3 to 5), with reference to previous speakers and speeches, especially to Ponta's attacks.

In the analysed parliamentary debate, the aim of the preliminary remarks is that of adapting the speech to the local context of communication. As most of the political speeches are previously prepared by communication professionals, in order to comprise the most efficient argumentation in a minimum amount of words, the preliminary remarks appear as illustrative for the linguistic creativity of MPs. Such statements are more spontaneous and context-bound, reflecting the speakers' beliefs and opinions in a more personal style. They are also indicative of the cultural background and the personality of the MPs, being a means of the expression of their personal identity and of the construction of their political image. In preliminary remarks, irony and humour function as means of doing power (Hay 2000), as well as of criticizing other people's opinion in a socially acceptable manner (Holmes and Stubbe 2003). Marked face-attacks are often accompanied by politeness moves to soften the impact of criticism and to contribute to building their common institutional identity. As Tracy (2017) puts it, "much political talk is designed for overhearing listeners even more than the actual party addressed".

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Many of the face-attacks respond to those overhearing listeners, while the politeness moves are meant to ensure mutual respect between MPs.

3.3 Irony and humour in official and closing speeches

Romanian parliamentary debates are organised in the form of official speeches that vary in length according to an algorithm which is established in the parliamentary procedures. Each party or parliamentary group is allotted a number of minutes, depending on its number of elected MPs or other rules of representation stipulated in the procedure. At the beginning of each session, the MPs confirm by voting the number of minutes allotted for the official speeches. As demonstrated in the previous section, the official speeches are sometimes preceded by semiformal, context-bound remarks that are less prepared and delivered more spontaneously than the formal ones. In this section, I will focus on the use of humour and irony in formal speeches which were prepared in advanced and read during the debate session.

The most obvious use of the ironic and humorous comments in official speeches is the argumentative one. MPs employ irony not only to influence the vote of their colleagues, but also to respond to the expectations of their constituency as overhearing listeners of parliamentary debates.

3.3.1. Irony as an argumentative tool

The following examples illustrate how irony functions as part of political argumentation, thus contributing to shaping power relations and identity of various political groups.

(6) *Context*: Victor Ponta referring to the contrast between the activists of the civic movement (which observe the political elections) and the politicians (who get involved in politics), the former being assumed to have been offered public positions in order not to interfere with the election process.

Ponta: *Măcar, aceşti politicieni au avut curajul să le ceară votul oamenilor, nu au stat pe margine, filozofând despre strugurii acri, care acum se pare că s-au mai îndulcit, de când cu posturile.* (Ponta_28.12.2004)

‘At least these politicians had the courage to ask for the people’s votes. They did not sit aside, philosophically pondering upon the sour grapes, which now seem to have become sweeter, since the (offering of public) positions.’

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The ironic comment echoes one of Aesop's fables, "The fox and the grapes". In the role of the fox, the MP places the members of the civic movement. Ponta implies that instead of being independent observers of the political campaigns, the members of the civic activists have been offered public positions to silence their critical voice. The public positions sweeten the "sour grapes" and change the ending of the fable. The moral of Aesop's fable places the fox in an inferiority position determined by its own failure to reach the object of desire. Ponta adds a comparative element. The contrast between politicians and activists consists in their attitude towards the people's votes. Politicians appear to have the courage to face people's expectations, while the activists merely discuss the election process, without getting involved.

The use of irony adds complexity to the argumentation of the speech. The irony also masks a direct face threatening act, as the speaker may hide under the mask of pretence. This strategy also comprises elements of building power relations. Every attack, even a masked one, is meant to reinforce the position of the speaker in relation to other parties. Here, Ponta scores points both against the activists of the civil society and against his party's political opponents.

(7) *Context*: Victor Ponta's speech, discussing the list of proposed members of the Government.

Ponta: *Am dori să-l întrebăm pe domnul prim-ministru desemnat Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu dacă aceştia sunt miniştrii cei mai buni pe care Alianţa îi poate oferi. Dacă nu, e grav, dacă da, e şi mai grav. Eu mai sper încă că e vorba de o farsă, un exerciţiu de imagine, o testare a atmosferei, şi că atunci când vom fi toţi supăraţi, va apărea adevăratul prim-ministru, domnul Traian Băsescu, cu adevăratul guvern, aşa cum ne-a promis la toţi.* (Ponta_28.12.2004)

'We would like to ask the Prime Minister-designate, Mr. Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu, if these are the best members of the government that the Alliance could offer. If not, it is bad, if yes, it is even worse. I still hope that this is a farce, an exercise (of image), and a test of the atmosphere and that when we are all upset, the real Prime Minister, Mr. Traian Băsescu will appear, with the real government, as he has promised us all.'

In the same line of argumentation, Ponta contested the list of members of the government by adding an ironic comment to a syllogism based on an *ad hominem* argument. The indirect inference resulting from the rhetorical question (*We would*

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like to ask the Prime Minister-designate, Mr. Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu, if these are the best members of the government that the Alliance could offer) is augmented by a *no – yes* dilemma, which is also transformed into a *bad – worse* dilemma (*If not, it is bad, if yes, it is even worse*), either choice being disregarded by the speaker. The inferred thesis appears to be that the proposed government is not a capable one. An explanation is expected in the following lines, but another ironic attack is launched. The speaker mimics the good intentions (*I still hope that…*) and invokes that the government proposed by the Prime Minister-designate is a *farce, an exercise (of image), and a test of the atmosphere.* The repetition of the word 'real' contradicts historical facts, Traian Băsescu being the President of Romania at that time. The implausible scenario imagined by the opposition appears as a firm promise made by the power Alliance *to us all*.

It has been demonstrated that "political discourse is not necessarily successful because of correctness of truth; rather it may be a matter of presenting arguments" (Beard 2000, 18). Still, the opposition *true – false, real – false* (here farcical) marks the argumentation of many political speeches. Posing an argumentation in black and white contrast shows the limitations of political manoeuvring for the sake of easing the understanding of the political speeches by the overhearing constituency.

In response to the group face-attacks of the opposition, the power alliance also alludes to an alternative cabinet proposed by the opposition.

(8) *Context*: Puiu Hașotti, an MP from the government coalition, discussing an innuendo about the intention of the SDP to propose an alternative cabinet.

Hașotti: *S-a spus că PSD pregăteşte un guvern din umbră. Astăzi, am auzit pe la ora 14.00 la radio. Le reamintesc celor din PSD că umbra este răcoroasă şi poate duce cel puţin la reumatism. Le recomand colegilor din PSD să profite mai bine de soarele Coastei de Azur şi să facă Guvernul la una din superbele vile ale colegului lor, prea cinstitul Corneliu Iacubov*. (Hașoti – 28.12.2004_4.4)

'It has been said that SDP is preparing a shadow cabinet. Today, around 2 p.m., I heard it on the radio. I remind those (MPs) from SDP that it is cold in the shade and it can cause at least rheumatism. I recommend the colleagues from SDP to enjoy the sun on the French Riviera and to assemble the Government in one of the gorgeous villas of the all too honourable Corneliu Iacubov.'

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The focal event derives from an innuendo; therefore, it is not suitable for a direct attack. The irony in the above example masks a threat. In the line *it is cold in the shade*; the speaker colloquially alludes to the fact that those who undermine the state institutions are susceptible of being sent to jail (*shade*). The ironic comment continues through a recommendation which, in turn, alludes to the luxurious estate owned by a member of the SDP on the French Riviera.

3.3.2. Humour as an argumentative tool

In the analysed parliamentary debate, various types of humour contribute to building the argumentative structure of many speeches. In examples (9) to (11), name-calling and using nicknames belong to the entertaining aspects of political speeches, valued both by the onlooking audience (especially MPs from the same political group) and by the overhearing listeners (the constituency supporting a political party).

(9) *Context:* Ponta is discussing the members of the coalition for the new government in contrast with a former political coalition (The Democratic Convention which governed Romania from 1997 to 2000).

Ponta: *Atunci erau patru partide, care făceau uneori şi lucruri bune - de exemplu, l-au schimbat pe domnul Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu din funcţie - astăzi sunt cinci, pentru că lor li s-a adăugat "Partidul Primăriei Municipiului Bucureşti". Cu un pic de Primărie Cluj la educaţie. Îmi cer scuze. (aplauze)* (Ponta_28.12.2004)

‘Back then, there were four parties that sometimes also did good things – for instance, they changed Mr. Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu from his position – today there are five, because “The Party of Bucharest City Hall” was added to them. With a little bit of Cluj City Hall at the (Ministry of) Education. I apologize.’ (Applauses).

The Party of Bucharest City Hall alludes to Traian Băsescu, the central figure of the power alliance, the former mayor of the capital city of Romania, and the President of Romania at that time. *A little bit of Cluj City Hall* alludes to Emil Boc, the former mayor of Cluj-Napoca and the current president of the Democratic Party, from the DA alliance. The use of humour as name-calling attempts to lessen the importance of the power alliance and to downsize their political influence.

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(10) *Context:* Ponta is building an argument based on a comparison between doing politics and playing football, at the same time between the names (Corneliu) Coposu (a remarkable political figure) and (George) Copos (the manager of a football team).

Ponta: *Cu toată simpatia mea pentru patronul "Rapid"-ului, editorialul lui Cristian Tudor Popescu "De la Coposu la Copos" m-a făcut să mă gândesc că mai bine ne transferăm toţi la Galatasaray, ca să înţelegem cum se face politică în România*. (*râsete în sală, aplauze)* (Ponta_28.12.2004_4.2)

'With all my sympathy for the manager of Rapid, the editorial by Cristian Tudor Popescu entitled 'From Coposu to Copos' made me think that we'd better all get transferred to Galatasaray, in order to better understand how politics is done in Romania*.'* (*laughter, rounds of applause)*

The humorous analogy between doing politics and playing football results in laughter and rounds of applause. Humour is used in Ponta's speech to reinforce the common view that in Romania, everybody is good at football and at politics. The humorous comment is also aimed to correct the idea that the opposition is less powerful than the government coalition.

Witticism is part of doing power in political interaction. After delivering the formal speeches MPs use the remaining time for some memorable closing remarks meant to 'bring to order' the rebellious MP from the opposition. The following examples prove the use of humour in such closing remarks.

(11) *Context*: Radu Berceanu, an MP from the government coalition, closing his speech.

Berceanu: *Am să închei transmiţându-i mai tânărului meu coleg Victor Ponta că nu e bine la primul său discurs să-şi atragă porecla de "Victor Poantă". Ar fi fost mai bună porecla "Victor Seriozitate". (Aplauze)* (Berceanu_28. 12.2004_4.30)

'I would like to round up by telling to my younger colleague, Victor Ponta, that it is not good, as early as his first speech, to be given the nickname "Victor Punchline". "Victor Seriousness" would have been better.' (*rounds of applause*)

In example (11), humour is used for re-establishing power relations between opposing political groups. In Romanian, the first nickname used for Ponta phonetically resembles his name (*poantă* means 'punchline'), taking the speech into

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derision. The second nickname has the semblance of advice: *"Victor Seriousness" would have been better*. The age factor is also relevant for building identity. Berceanu's expertise in politics morally entitles him to advise Ponta, his *younger colleague.*

The next example bears the same moralistic view, in the form of a joke.

(12) *Context*: The response speech of Prime Minister-designate, following the issues raised by the MPs.

Tăriceanu: *În ceea ce priveşte stilul discursului, să ştiţi, când v-am ascultat, mi-am adus aminte de un banc cu o persoană care într-un cerc public spunea "şi eu am prezenţă de spirit, dar nu îmi vine când trebuie". Nu vă stă bine acest tip de discurs, încercaţi să fiţi ceva mai sobru. (Aplauze)* (Tăriceanu_28.12.2004_5.4)

'Regarding the style of your speech, you should know that, when I listened to you, a joke came to my mind. A joke with a person who said in a public place "I also have a presence of mind, but it does not emerge when it should". This type of speech does not suit you. Try to be more sober.' *(applauses)*

A parliamentary debate is a less common site for telling jokes. The speaker uses a one-liner as a means of softening the critique in a socially acceptable manner. The MP's piece of advice following the joke assumes a parental tone. The move reflects the individual identities of both the speaker and the target in an indirect, polite manner, although it may be perceived by an outsider as a face-attack.

Intertextuality as a resource for humour is visible in the next example.

(13) *Context*: Corneliu Vadim Tudor, from Greater Romania, a nationalist party which was always in opposition.

Tudor: *Vă reamintesc tuturor că Imnul Naţional al României nu este "Somnoroasepăsărele", ci "Deşteaptă-te, române!"* (Tudor_28.10.2004_4.49)

'I remind you all that the national anthem of Romania is not "Sleepy birdies", but "Wake up, Romanians!"'

Humour is one of the characteristics of Tudor's *political brand* (Săftoiu and Popescu 2014). His cultural background is self-explanatory for his use of titles of poems. In this example, Tudor humorously alludes to a poem of Mihai Eminescu, the

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Romanian national poet, entitled “Sleepy birdies”, which contrasts with “Wake up, Romanians!”, the title of the national anthem. The humour is raised by the opposition between being sleepy and being awake in matters of politics.

By means of humour, MPs relieve the tension of parliamentary debates and allow serious issues to be tackled indirectly. The use of nicknames, jokes and intertextuality proved both the interest for reinforcing power relationships and for preserving socially acceptable manners of criticizing one’s conduct.

3. Conclusion

Though limited at the extent of a single parliamentary debate, the analysis of humour and irony as interactional practices involved in doing power and politeness in Romanian parliamentary speeches proved worthwhile.

Doing power and politeness in any institutional setting cannot be undertaken separately. In political exchanges the process is particularly complicated because the typical exchange involves multiple parties bound to each other in webs of competing and cooperative relationships. This complexity results in facework strategies that do not readily fit any simple description. Facework in political exchanges regularly involves positive and negative linguistic politeness forms mixed with self-enhancing formulations and other self-attacking moves. The way people perceive these moves also vary according to their affiliated political groups and the positions regarding the disputed issues. Therefore, analysing issues pertaining to power and politeness requires the understanding of people’s positioning and of their judgements.

Approaching irony and humour as strategies of building power and politeness also involved understanding the type of identity work politicians employed in their speeches. While talking, politicians perform identity work for themselves, for the parties they represent, and for the larger institutional settings in which they activate. As seen in the analysed parliamentary debate, the MPs respond to institutional requirements, party affiliations, political alliances, and individual representational needs.

The role of humour and irony used by MPs in their speeches was mainly that of maintaining the equilibrium between power and politeness in an institutional setting. The power relations between MPs result from their attempt to tackle specific transactional goals, while politeness fosters important social goals such as cooperation, collegiality, and solidarity. Humour and irony may have both cooperative and conflicting functions (Attardo 2014). While irony appears as more face-threatening than humour, some of its uses proved to be face saving in

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comparison with, for instance, a direct critique. At the same time, in biased counter speeches, as is commonplace in political talk, both parties spoke in ways likely to be seen as "rude and face-attacking by those opposing their view but warranted and reasonable by those who agreed to their view". (Tracy 2017, 750)

Within the political communication continuum of the analysed parliamentary debate, both irony and humour function as argumentative tools of a rational nature – in the strictly institutionalized dialogic exchange (the previously prepared speeches) – and of an emotional nature – in the semiformal ones.

Further research could benefit from a larger corpus and from a more specific theoretical background. The insights offered by the argumentation theory or by a critical discursive approach may better explain the strategic choices made by MPs in certain contexts in order to build power relations and to perform their complex identity work.

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