ASPECTS OF PERSUASION AND MANIPULATION THROUGH WORDS IN THE ACT OF COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: *The paper outlines the permanence of manipulation in a fragile contemporary space. The analysis of the manipulative behaviour is meant to emphasize the acute need to counterbalance this phenomenon by studying the means used in order to obtain persuasion by reviving the study of rhetoric, of arguments, of discourse in general. The word becomes here an instrument of outmost importance by which one can denounce or support the contemporary forms of manipulation so that the better learning of decoding the transmitted messages becomes more important. The subtext of this paper is essentially that of highlighting the topicality of using manipulation in different social domains.*

Key words*: manipulation, persuasion, communication*.

1. Manipulation and persuasion in human communication

The attempts of drafting the process of communication have generated numerous theories, and the idea that we live in a communicational society has become quite common. According to Denis McQuail, the act of communication is a systematized transfer of significance, suggesting that in fact *any act of communication implies a succession of events, succession whose basic form comprises: the decision to transmit significance, the transfer of the intended message into a language or code, the act of transmitting, the reception* (CRAIA, 2000: 35 apud McQUAIL, 1999). Paul Watzlawick's meta-communicational axiom is worth mentioning here: "there is no possibility for non-communication". We can accept it by "relating" through the function of contact, or understand it as an informational transfer (implying our own filter as a system of values), or - from the social action perspective – we can perceive it, by intentionality, as a change of behaviour, but communication still has multiple, quite confusing, meanings, and the new thinking is, despite its unclear status, communicational. (MIČGE, 1998: 15).

1.1 Manipulation – theoretical premises

The research carried out with regard to communication and especially to the internal structure of the human psyche has revealed that certain individuals are more "suggestionable" than the others, easier to manipulate. This can be explained to a large extent by the fact that with some people we ascertain a somewhat special state of receptivity or, as the experts say, they are predisposed to a certain "state of suggestionability".

Ştefan Buzărnescu also seems to share this theory; he defines manipulation as: *the act of making a social actor (person, group, collectivity) think and act according to the initiator's interests and not its own, by using persuasion techniques that deliberately distort the truth but leaving the impression of freedom of thinking and decision. Unlike influence of the rational persuasion type, by manipulation one is not pursuing the deeper and more accurate understanding of the situation, but the inoculation of a convenient understanding, resorting both to misguiding by using false arguments and to using non-rational means. The real intentions of the one who transmits the message remain unperceivable to the actor* (BUZĂRNESCU, 1996: 102).

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Based on the amplitude of the modifications determined in a certain social context, Philip Zimbardo classifies manipulation as follows:

- *small manipulation* – causes minor changes in the social situation but can also have ample, unpredictable effects;
- *medium manipulation* – causes major modifications of the social situation, with effects that may dramatically exceed expectations, given the underestimated power of influence of social circumstances on human behaviour;
- *large manipulation* – influences the entire culture within which the individual lives, his own system of values, behaviour and thinking (ZIMBARDO, 1972 apud FICEAC, 1996: 30) .

Computerization is the technical means that allows the largest control over the context and mainly over the individuals' lives, especially the ones that can be manipulated. Post-modern society has the necessary technical means by which certain people, positioned on top of a pyramidal organization, use communication so that they may obtain, process and transmit altered information (filtered by their own thinking) in such a way that they gain profit.

If with most communicational types, from the incidental one to the communion or the consuming one, the form and contents of the emitted messages depend on the emitter's mood, in the case of instrumental communication messages are transmitted and vary according to the effects they must have on the receiver. Thus, if in the case of communion communication the other is perceived as the subject selected to meet and to establish communication with, in the case of instrumental communication the other is perceived as an exploitable object and therefore he becomes much easier to manipulate.

Within the structural-expressive paradigm, suggestion is defined as a "power of speech" which is related to a "receiver's mood", representing *the act by which an idea is induced to the brain and accepted by the brain* (MUCCHIELLI, 2002: 114). In the frame of relational-systemic paradigm one has introduced a new point of view concerning the way the suggestionability phenomenon is regarded. It belongs to Watzlawick, who stated that *a phenomenon remains incomprehensible as long as the observational field is not large enough to comprise the circumstances under which it occurs. Unable to perceive the complexity of the relationships between a fact and the frame to which it belongs, between a body and its environment, the one noticing something "mysterious" ends by assigning to the studied object properties that it may not have… Manipulation is inherent to any communication, irrespective of its nature, be it with ourselves or with the others* (WATZLAWICK, 1972: 37).

To manipulate means first of all to build an image of reality which seems to be reality.

1.2. Persuasion as a communicational effect

The permanent diversification of the sources of conceiving and disseminating message s has led to a manipulative practice which is based on precise codes, identifiable only by "professionals" and totally inaccessible to the non-initiated in this field. One of the fundamental purposes of communication is to convince the receiver (receivers) of the message of a certain opinion and thus reinforce or modify his attitudes. If a sender wishes to change another person's attitude, he will have to identify the factors of the communicational process that may bring about this change. The message intended to induce a change of attitude to the receiver is called a persuasive message. Every day, people are assaulted by such types of messages.

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Research carried out on this subject points out that the reaction to the message often depends on the characteristics of the person who tries to persuade, having no connection with the value of the message. To this end there are three characteristics in which psychologists showed interest, that is:

- the credibility of the communicator;
- the physical qualities and charisma of the communicator;
- his intentions.

As a consequence of this fact, nowadays, not only people specially trained to govern have access to political dignities but also those coming from other walks of social life, such as: actors, journalists, writers, etc. So, one of the propaganda techniques used to change a person's (group of persons') opinions and to obtain from him (them) the expected reactions is persuasion.

Unlike manipulation, persuasion is an activity of conviction based on such an influential setup that it leads to a total and integrated assimilation of the ideas induced in the personal change. In the case of persuasion the sensation the other person must obtain, that he understood what he was told, that he integrated the motivations of the change and that absolutely all subsequent decisions belong to him, without external influences, are the most important. Persuasion is a process of guiding people to adopt attitudes or actions (more or less rational), based on discussions and "the attractiveness of the presentation" instead of using other means of conviction, while manipulation is also present as a form of influence, but for the benefit of one party on behalf of the other.

Manipulation is based on that personal factor called suggestionability, while persuasion is based on persuasibility, that tendency to be receptive to influences, implying on behalf of the individual the awareness of the acceptance and the interiorization of the transmitted messages (according to Larson, 2003).

In order to be successfully applied, both concepts depend on language. The quality, the diversity, the control, the hermeneutics and the richness of the vocabulary are significant for the success of persuasion or manipulation. Spoken language correlated with adequate gestures, position, mimics, (non-spoken language), intensity, rhythm, vocal print (para-spoken language), attitude are among the elements by which both reach their objectives.

2. The power of speech as a manipulation instrument

The human species is distinguished by *speech*, structured into three essential constitutive registers: expression, information and conviction. To this end, the ways of communication are animated by the desire to persuade. Persuasion, for man, is a complex activity that implies both to persuade the material environment to be subject to a project regarding itself (the moulding of a clay pot) and to persuade another person to share a certain opinion or to adopt a certain behaviour (BRETON, 2006: 27-28).

Traditional analysis on suggestion phenomena is focused on the state of „suggestionability" of the subject (receiver analysis) or on "the power of speech" (message analysis) (MUCCHIELLI, 2002: 115). A speaker 'communicates and expresses" for himself and for the others. An individual frame of mind is set free and a social relationship is organised within language. Considered in its double expression one may say that the linguistic fact is at the same time "reflexive" and "transitive". It reflects the one who produces it and it also reaches to all the people that know it. As to the role of language functions in behaviour alteration, recent research has shown that cliché or stereotype like formulae existing in human language have proved to be a common and essential feature of modern communication. The language, full of

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stereotypes, has a number of socio-interactional, communicational functions which are directed to a physical, emotional and perceptual manipulation of the audience. This explains why certain orders, requests or warnings can be expressed only in certain words. Words create in our mind a reality independent from the external one based on the impressive, descriptive, referential, argumentative or persuasive connotations of language.

As Aristotle stated: *rhetoric is the art of discovery, and in a particular case, of discovering means of persuasion at hand* (ARISTOTLE, 1971: I,1), for ancient philosophers the persuasive function is closely related to the phenomenon of interpreting the rhetoric, in the sense that the latter is interested in directing proper words to a specific audience.

For post-modernists, the persuasive function changes into a manipulative function of the spoken language. An eloquent and up to date example is given by the political elective discourses. It is interesting how Barack Obama, president of the U.S.A., succeeds in impressing his electors through simple words, but with maximum impact and a positive and achievable final message. B. Obama's words: „Change has come to America. (...) This is your victory. (...) You did it because you understand the enormity of the task that lies ahead (...) I will always be honest with you about the challenges we face (...) To those who would tear the world down, we will defeat you. To those who seek peace and security, we support you" (v. Evenimentul zilei, nr. 5344, 2008: 2-5,7) have an important role in behaviour alteration, having the effect of what the specialized literature calls "magic bullet". The American president's discourse proves that, in the layout of the actual reality, words can have unlimited power, they can change implicit knowledge into explicit knowledge, can influence human mind and actions as expected.

Pragmatics and neuro-linguistic programming mention the power and the frailty of words, considering them instruments that act on the human mind and soul. Research has shown that, in the human brain, they trigger specific biochemical effects, followed by physiological reactions that either induce pleasure or ravage the entire organism. For example, human reactions in case of swearing and compliments are significant. So, the influential power of speech must not be underestimated, for using a word implies personal, actual relationships.

An effective mechanism by which words influence behaviour is that of triggering, intensifying and expressing in varying nuances emotions and feelings through the so-called label words. For example, a person displaying a behaviour referring to a certain situation or character in the real or fantastic worlds can be easily labelled by his fellows as "Dom Juan" (for a lover), "Pinocchio" (for a liar), "Snow White" (for a beautiful girl) etc.

Another mechanism by which words influence behaviour is that of suggestion and associating mental images, the so called image-words, as it is the case of certain psycho-visual expressions like: "to blush with shame", "to blush when hearing one's name called" etc. television or more specifically language possesses that complementarity of codes which allows an image to be extremely suggestive.

An important part in behaviour alterations is played by the *transformational vocabulary*, concept that belongs to the psychotherapist Anthony Robbins, and consists of replacing words that describe emotions in a negative manner by others that describe them in a positive manner (ROBBINS, 2002: 57). In Romanian, for example, the number of words that statistically induce negative emotions would be three times higher than the one of those that describe positive emotions.

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The enormous power of words acts upon the listeners. Our own words, spoken or just thought, can do us good or harm through their extraordinary power of suggestion. Thus, at a behaviouristic level, a vocabulary is represented by:

- expressions that in spite of the fact that they include the negation (adverb) have a positive character: "Nu vă supărați!" (No offence!), „Nici o problemă" (No problem!), „Nu te teme"(Do not be afraid!) etc.;
- negating a state of affairs that could have negative consequences by using the adversative conjunction "dar"(but): "Da, dar…" (Yes, but…) which is a reply to something one previously said, the adversative "dar"(but) having a precise role which is that of negating all that was said before. The solution is the use of "şi" (and) instead of "dar" (but), which is much more efficient;
- replacing the conditional "dacă" (if) in order to optimize the effect with the adverb of time "când" (when), unquestioning the subjects' ability to solve the problem but turning it into a simple matter of time.

People define themselves and their relationships, encoding their experience by assigning a metaphorical feature to language, just to reach forms of communication "beyond" their primary, immediate meaning. Metaphor (gr. *metaphora* – to carry over) has the gift of showing the object without being part of its magical substance. For the magical mentality, metaphor is no mere metaphor, but a defence weapon and preventive reflex. So, villagers for example, resort to metaphors out of the self-preservation instinct, out of personal and collective security interest, referring to the "devil" as "ucigă-l toaca" (the evil one).

Modern man resorts to metaphors in order to express something entirely different. The Romanian philosopher Lucian Blaga explains the role of metaphors in communication when he decides to classify them into two large categories: expressive metaphors ("metafore plasticizante") and revealing metaphors ("metafore revelatorii").

Expressive metaphors occur in language when a fact approaches another, more or less similar, both facts belonging to the given, imagined, experienced or thought of worlds

Revealing metaphors are destined to disclose something hidden even about the facts they refer to, to reveal a mystery. These metaphors can be assigned a revealing characteristic, because they cancel the ordinary meaning of facts, attributing them a new vision. Blaga proved that the metaphoric way of speaking about things is not a peripheral phenomenon of human psychology, but it results as a necessary corollary from the specifically human constitution and existence (BLAGA, 1987: 334-357).

3. Conclusions

Orators, writers, politicians, tradesmen, teachers, lawyers, managers, preachers, advertisers and others are in fact the creators of a mental state wanted by their public by means of word manipulation. The word can be the perfect instrument to persuade, to induce behaviour chosen and sustained in the register of both positive and negative emotions. When mastering the art of selecting the right words for the desired mental states, we discover in ourselves a power we could not even imagine to possess. Unfortunately, as the psychotherapist Anthony Robbins noticed, most of us choose their words unconsciously, and their impact on our fellows can be but unpredictable.

Pragmatically speaking, the word is the most powerful instrument we can make use of in order to reach our purposes. This is exactly why it is imperatively necessary to

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be careful with the effect it can trigger on our fellows and with its possible nuances according to the targeted person for decoding the message.

The one who has the information does not necessarily have the power, but the one who has and controls the force of language is the real beneficiary of power.

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