Approaches to Political Discourse Analysis

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Abstract: *Political discourse plays a decisive role in our modern society. Be it live or mass media transmitted, it is always there shaping realities or preparing societies for a certain course of action. In most of its part, politics is a linguistic activity: in the absence of language – it's very cores (traits and functions) – would be nothing but some abstract concepts without the amazing capacity to trigger consequences in the practical plane.*

Keywords*: political discourse, social power phenomena, political legitimization, linguistic representation.*

1. General considerations

Political discourse plays a decisive role in our modern society. Be it live or mass media transmitted, it is always there shaping realities or preparing societies for a certain course of action. In most of its part, politics is a linguistic activity: in the absence of language – it's very cores (traits and functions) – would be nothing but some abstract concepts without the amazing capacity to trigger consequences in the practical plane. Political power appears due to a process of social innovation and is legitimated through one of acknowledgement, this way the innovation answers to the political need of being, while the acknowledgement expresses the right of being of a legitimate political power (Bordeiu, 2006) In this respect, innovation and acknowledgement become two complementary processes that undoubtedly configure political power and implicitly the efficiency of a political system through language.

Taking into consideration the role that power plays within the context of social life, becomes obvious that without this attribute called power[1] there could be no

1 The term power comes from the Latin word *potere* and it has the meaning of to be able to, to be capable of, from which derived the nouns *potentia* – the capacity of a person or a thing

ordinate human activity (Bordeiu, 2006). Seen as a political phenomenon, power seems to be mainly the most important component of political institutions. In this regard, it is being used for keeping and consolidating a certain social order, for assuring the functionality of all social institutions, for keeping the social cohesion in a society, for controlling citizens behavior and unwanted behavior prevention (Mihailescu, 2000).

The most general and well-known form of power is *social power* and the literature of the field (Downing, 1998; Hastings, 2000; Balandier, 1998; Valsan, 1997) describes it as the means through which society adjusts itself and self-regulates its mechanism with the purpose of assuring and sustaining its optimum functionality. Bordeiu (2006) sees it as the element that poses in motion all the social gearing towards historical progress, the propelling force which accomplishes social and sustainable development, the binding concept among all the social structures and phenomena, which it definitely organizes (forming its hierarchical systems), coordinates and orchestrates according to the target agenda.

Like any other social phenomena, the social power phenomena distinguishes itself through a series of specific traits and the question is whether these traits that personalize social power do need the use of language or not, and if they do, at what level? In the following I will briefly summarize the traits of social power as proposed by Bordeiu (2006) and the diversity of power forms manifestations in society, trying to determine (logical assumptions) the relevance of language for each category:

- *Display as social relation* – social power relies invariably in the existence of a specific social relation (subordination: leader to obedient, also co-operation for achieving conjoint goals) between people or groups of people, typical of any community, no matter its size (family, tribe, nation). Among the members of any groups appear different relations based on interests (power, solidarity, collaboration, conflict etc.), relations that come into being according to a **specific context and are submitted to the filter of language.**

- *Display as organization and management of social life* – power constitutes the most important element in organizing, ruling and adjustment setting of social life. It imposes the goals of human activity, the necessary means and strategies for achieving them and in this way power becomes the vital component that establishes and applies social order on the social level, order that in its turn generates the phenomenon of power. So, social order depends on organization in order to validate power and vice versa, but they both **cannot materialize themselves without the support of language.**

- *Essentiality and Permanence* – *power* is an essential and a permanent element for social relations and nevertheless assures the normal functioning of society. But the normal functioning of a society could never be achieved without the

patterns of communication and verbal interaction. Language itself becomes this way essential and permanent to society.

- *Globally Display* – power has, among other things, the quality of a global factor and becomes an integrator that orchestrates and incorporates all the other forms of ruling and organization of social activities. During the integration process, **language plays a decisive role, as it ensures the uniformity of the system (language performing values).**

- *Social Values Synthesis Display* – The values promoted by the power represent a synthesis of the other values manifested on the social level, which reflect the interests of the social majority, taking into consideration those related to the historical, moral or cultural tradition. In this case, **language has the capacity to store these values, assures the fluency in passing on specific values and gives the opportunity to form a majority which will share the same ideological language.**

- *Roles Asymmetry within Power Relationships* – The need of organization and ruling different forms of activity (within human complex groups) determined social divisions, respectively asymmetries in assumed roles by the different categories of individuals (leaders and obeyers). The roles asymmetry provokes a relationship asymmetry which is being established between leaders and obeyers (domination and subordination). These relationships go through a constant fluctuating process and are subject to spectacular changes, most of them **using language as a vehicle to establish** the new asymmetries created and to maintain the new roles operational.

- *The Use of Coercion Display* – Once the asymmetry established (leaders/obeyers), power may use coercion (constraint) to ensure the correct appliance of organizational rules and the right fulfillment of attributions. All democracies resort to physical coercion instruments (police, army, and constabulary) in order to maintain public order, citizens' safety, political stability and so on. But even coercion has to **rely on language, first because the rules have to be written in order to be followed (official language), then warnings are being issued in specific formulae (that only language can shape).**

Language also plays a decisive role in shaping the forms of power manifestations. The field of Political Sciences considers that there are as many forms of power manifestations as many stable social groups exist in the world and following this criterion (Nazare, 2002) they may be divided in:

a) *Related to the domain of human activity:*

- *political power* – manifested between the members of society during the process of social organization and political leadership (uses the *specialized political language* which offers patterns to enable the appliance of rules, decisions, discussions, and so on);

- *legislative power* – produces or cancels laws built for society, they establish the behavioral norms (uses the legislative language, a *specialized law language* which enables the character of the law to be preserved within language);

- *executive power* – applies the laws and maintain order within the system (uses a specialized type of language which assures the continuity of action);
- *judiciary power* – imposes authority and deals with any kind of contentions that might appear due to the misunderstanding of the laws (uses a specialized *law language* that operates in courts);
- *budgetary power* – elaborates the political decisions regarding the income and the expenditures within the public monetary system (uses a specialized *financial language* which allows the setting of new profitable financial strategies);
- *economical power* – determined by the possibilities of action of a certain person, group or organization, in promoting their very own interests (uses a specialized type of language that incorporates structures from all the above mentioned specialized languages);
- military power, civil power, cultural power, religious power, technical power and so on (they all use specialized types of languages in order to incorporate their own ideologies and to offer social support).

b) *Related to the specific of the human community:*
- *family power* – institutionalized within family, covers the relationships between parents and children (*informal language*);
- *society power* – covers the relationships created between the leaders and obidients (*formal language*);
- *internal power and international power* – decides what role the states play among the international stage according to the role that each state plays within its own borders (uses a specialized international political language).

c) *Related to means and targets:*
- *democratic power* – an outcome of citizens' consulting and consent (uses the democratic *political language*, prone to debate, public speeches, political confrontations and so on);
- *dictatorial power* – does not take into consideration the public opinion and sets itself as a foreign force (*wooden language*).

Social beings developed society as a form of joint living, but living together requires more than some shared principles, patterns or laws: it needs something much stronger than that, something that will provide the link between so many concepts and structures, and that is language. Even the very definition of ''humans are social beings''[2] rests on the assumption that communication is one of our fundamental traits that make us distinct as species.

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2 Humans have a highly developed brain, capable of abstract reasoning, language, introspection, and problem solving. This mental capability, combined with an erect body carriage that frees the hands for manipulating objects, has allowed humans to make far greater use of tools than any other species. Like most higher primates, **humans are social**

1.1. Linguistical and philosophical approaches to political discourse analysis

It has been stated that the study of political discourse has been around for as long as politics itself. From Cicero (1971) to Aristotle (1991) it seemed that the major concern was mostly about how different methods of social and political competence managed to achieve specific objectives. (Wilson, 2001) In general lines, this approach is still continued today.

From the perspective of the position of the analyst (Marga: 2004), on the other hand, the approaches tackled the following angles:

A) The role that language played in politics;

B) The relation between language and ideology;

C) The relation between language and power.

Following the pattern proposed by the above approaches, the direction of the political discourse analysis could take different routes of analysis such as: to study the way in which language is being used by the politicians for persuasive goals, the way language becomes a tool used for evoking political convictions or the way in which mass media means transfer and report political events shaping them and offering them completely different political perspectives.

Political discourse analysis has always oscillated between the following concepts (Marga: 2004): the ''strong'' concept, which works upon the assumption that political language entails political thought, and the ''weak'' concept, which considers that political language can influence political thought. As a representative of the ''strong concept'', M. Edelman, in a series of articles, states that political language is political reality in the sense that language is an integrated part of the political scene, not only a tool used for describing events, but becomes itself (language) part of the events, strongly shaping their meaning and helping to define all political roles involved in political acts. From a different point of view, the relationship between political language and political thought can be explained through the fact that our attitude towards a thing or an event is considerably affected by the way in which those are described. (Whorf: 1964). Describing a thing or an event presupposes some background assumptions and in the case of political language, such a description would include, besides linguistic significance, the political beliefs encoded in the language. M.L. Geis, in his book The Language of Politics, adopts somehow a middle position, considering that language may have a substantial and subliminal influence

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by nature. However, humans are uniquely adept at utilizing systems of **communication for self-expression, the exchange of ideas, and organization. Humans create complex social structures composed of many cooperating and competing groups, from families to nations.** Social interactions between humans have established an extremely wide variety of values, social norms, and rituals, **which together form the basis of human society**. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human)

upon political thought, which can be highlighted on the condition of overtaking an excessive ''doubletalk'' analysis and concentrating more on the ''patterns of political beliefs''. As a matter of fact, Geis proposes a cognitive approach of the relationship between political language and political thought. (Marga: 2004)

If trying a possible categorization of political text as a distinct type of text, Coşeriu (1996) underlined that the collocation ''political language'' may have at least three different understandings:

A) Political lexicon: terminology referring to the designation of political notions and institutions (particular to each and every country);

B) Appliance method: the linguistic use determined by the political ideologies and attitudes; covering all the ways in which language is being used, subjective ways orientated towards extra linguistic facts, ways determined by the adopted attitudes of the speakers, through the use of words towards the designated objects;

C) The use of language in political "discursive chunks''/ "texts'', observing the specific linguistic traits of such a type of text.

The last category proposed by Coşeriu in his article, implies the study of political texts from three different perspectives:

C1) as any type of texts, within the philological area, texts being regarded as documents in this case;

C2) as typical examples of "efficient'' discourses, orientated towards ''the practical values of efficiency'', in this context, political text is being determined through its own finality and the functions corresponding to this finality (the final finality of such a text is its practical efficiency and the function that corresponds to such a type of finality is that of "appealing'', orientated towards the listener (receiver), whom it has to determine to act or to adopt a specific attitude;

C3) individually, within the area of speech stylistics and text linguistics as the hermeneutics of meaning.

The conclusion reached in Coşeriu's article is that there is no precise nature of political text that would require specialized analysis techniques or methods, but their justification as a distinct class of texts arises from their "extra linguistic content'' (Neşu: 2005)

John Wilson in his article Political Discourse manages to draw attention to a new aspect of political discourse analysis: "While language is always clearly central to political discourse, what shifts is the balance between linguistic analysis and political comment. Distinguishing the direction of this balance, however, is not always straightforward." (The Handbook of Discourse Analysis; 2001: 400) That is due to the fact that modern political discourse studies "are more self-conscious, however, and interface with aspects of communication science, historical construction, social theory, and political science." (ibid) Although there has been a long tradition of interest in political discourse, it is only since the early 1980s or 1990s when the interest shifted from analyzing political discourse from a political perspective to defining

political discourse in broadly linguistic terms. It is now that an interdisciplinary approach can be spotted, where linguistics cooperates with rhetoric, communication sciences, psychology, sociology and political sciences. Studies undergone in political sciences (for an overview see Gill and Whedbee: 1997) started to demonstrate that what makes politics different from other methods of allotting values is the use of language with the specific purpose of legitimizing the action of power. In other words "The whole political activity is mainly sustained by the use of language. Either trying to convince or to persuade, to negotiate or to intimidate, resorting to language seems to be an alternative to physical violence."[4] (Gerstle; 2002:27, cited by Neşu: 2005) Becomes obvious that linguistic reality, built upon political reality, emphasizes the 'frame role" of language, this leading to the conclusion that language, discursive strategy and political strategy are interrelated, offering the "playground of political manipulation". (Cuilenburg, Scholten, Noomen; 1998: 172)

In Georges Balandier's opinion (Scena Puterii: 2000), nowadays political space is not an easy traceable stage anymore, but a jumpy one, may pop up almost everywhere (explicitly or implicitly), it is open to everyone and houses a large number of political actors, political roles or political masks; but despite its lack of transparence, the anthropologist speaks about three main fields where the current political power manifests itself:

A) The Rational Activities Field: it is the place allotted to political personalities, whose main task is to construct power and find technical solutions to different political problems and to deal with aspects related to political organization;

B) The Mass Media Activities Field: it is the place where information, language, image and dramatization (staging) build up reality;

C) The Field of Mystical Political Transfiguration: it is the place where the myth, the symbol, the rites, the collective values and the emotions they provoke tend to perform a unifying function (through creation) in order to establish a form of generalized superior solidarity; it is the field of the sovereign, of the supreme leader.

Balandier (2000) cited by Neşu (2005: 23) believes that the unbiased center of any political discourse is represented by the power of words. This power generates a specific rhetoric, materialized in the use of a specialized vocabulary, specific discursive clichés and stereotypes, and of specific argumentative rules and strategies. This "rhetoric machine" has been considered to work as an indicator of a certain political regime, printing on it a characteristic style that cannot be mistaken. But these traits of political discourse seem to remain quite shallow when taking a glance to a depth analysis which brings forward some new fundamental aspects of such a type of discourse. First of all, the language of power preserves its validity far beyond the immediate aspect, that of common daily life. Political discourse

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4 My translation.

relates to concepts (persons, situations, things) situated outside the commonsense daily routine, it orientates itself towards a past or a future, to its founders, to an initial charter and its principles, to images and symbols, to progress, to change, to perspectives that impose future management assurance. Although language has always been considered a political tool or a political stake, nowadays, in modern societies, dominated by the force of mass media means, it seems that the power or language alone is not enough anymore and words simply became the support of the images, representing the dynamic cargo that accompanies the political event. From this perspective one may easily detect a deficiency of the traditional type of political communication, an insufficiency of contemporary political communication that determined the need of compensatory elements, materialized through a large palette of options, from sophisticated linguistic allusions to different semantic tricks and strategies (Balandier; 2000: 149): "In democratic societies, political language vacillates in pursuit of communication that may capture the citizens' attention, instilling in them a sense of adhesion rather than of rejection based on lack of credibility or interest. The breakdown of political communication is periodically brought up. It entails a constant search for compensating means; it resorts to complicated linguistic innuendoes and fosters the employment of semantic ruses with the aid of specialists. The recipients of political messages turn into descriptors, partly discovering the pleasure of the game in political expression. They look for the text encaged inside conventional discourse, worn out through repetition, or search for words that make sense or for gaps between overt and covert expression, according to the logic of doubletalk."[5]

2. Conclusion

Political discourse may be tackled from different angles. No matter what those specific angles will be, the analyst must take into consideration the context of production and then relate it to the context of the social power it represents. In such a way, the analysis will offer an in depth perspective of how such a type of specialized language works and unfolds its communicative parameters.

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