

Today's Political Discourse: between Contextual Mobility and Ambiguity of Meaning

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Abstract: Analyzed under the rigorous principles of scientific terminology, today's political lexicon stands out as a type of terminology in progress, characterized on one hand as an open code, and on the other, as possessing contextual mobility leading to the immediate effect of ambiguity of meaning. The present paper aims at examining the relation between clichés and lexical innovation in the contemporary political discourse, as well as its representation in the Romanian written media.

Keywords: political lexicon, terminology, contextual mobility, ambiguity of meaning

Recent studies on the Romanian political vocabulary have evinced its open, dynamic character, as well as its notable mobility. As compared to the rigorous principles of defining scientific terminologies, the political lexicon appears as a "weak" terminology, marked by its open code character and its contextual mobility (both denotative and connotative), which may result in ambiguity of meaning.

The following aims at analyzing the relation between cliché (stereotyped phrase) and innovation in today's written press. Our research bears on the interference area between the political and the mediatic communication as the focus lies on the political discourse as broadcast by the media channels.

In point of political communication, one should remark the intertwining of the political act and the communication act. In this respect, media coverage is considered as an essential condition in ensuring the dialogic and interactional dimension defining this type of communication in democratic communities. It should be successful not only on a top-bottom direction (from the governors to the governed) but also on a bottom-top direction, which presupposes the formation of a political culture at the level of the public at large.

The complexity of the political discourse in the media is accounted for by the double quality of mass-media, i.e. *mediator* between the political actors and the public, and *coauthor* of political discourse. Thus, the authority of the press, deemed to be the 4th power in the state, consists in its very ability to build a reflected reality, interposed between the public and reality proper, without necessarily overlapping it.

The strategies involved in the process of orienting and shaping public opinion concern the selection of information considered as a priority (the *agenda-setting* function), putting it in order (the *agenda-building* function) and its final assessment (the *attribute agenda*).

The result is that such simplified standard images obtain legitimacy and circulate certain opinions with a persuasive effect. Metaphorically speaking, Dobrescu and Bârgăoanu (2002) use the following title for one of their subchapters "Media cultivates opinions just like a farmer cultivates his land". They also consider that "we look at and interpret segments of reality through the 'glasses' provided by these representations somehow legitimized by their mere publication or broadcasting."

Our research proposes a twofold perspective: one pertaining to *political semantics* and one to *political rhetoric*. From this point of view, Van Cuilenburg (2000) opines that "Language, semantic and political strategy is interdependent, serving not only information conveyance, but also persuasion. They provide the game field for political manipulation." In addition, the theatrical-historical dimension of political discourse was evinced and analyzed by Bertrand (2001), Beciu (2002), Sălăvăstru (1999).

From the point of view of political semantics, innovation and stereotyping represent correlative aspects of meaning dynamics, pragmatically and ideologically conditioned. They are in constant interplay, whereby innovations become trivial, becoming clichés (e.g. catachreses), while clichés undergoing a certain „processing” may acquire new expressive nuances.

If the former concept (*innovation*) requires no supplementary explanations from the perspective of political communication, the terms *stereotyping*, *stereotype* and *cliché* need certain terminological clarifications.

The current sense, also attested in DEX and taken over as such in normative stylistics literature, identifies stereotype as "the repetition of something, being always the same"; *stereotyped*

is seen as synonymous to unchanged, ordinary, trivial. *Cliché*, according to DEX, is synonymous to *pattern*, being defined as "*stylistic formula, phrase trivialized by excessive repetition*".

According to W. Lippmann (in *Public Opinion*, 1922), *stereotypes* represent mental structures whose role is to select and assess information. As unifying mechanisms, stereotypes (also including myths and symbols) contribute to achieving group solidarity and forming public opinion.

Most research in the sphere of political communication agrees that *stereotypes (clichés)* are multifunctional discursive procedures with specific valences, positive or negative in character.

The positive side of stereotypes envisages advantages such as conciseness, simplicity and lack of ambiguity. By frequent repetition, they pin down into the collective mentality simplified images of reality, which do not necessarily reflect the objective truth. Clichés add tags, in an ironic or pejorative manner, to certain aspects of political life, such as: *political routing, political migration, local baron*, etc.

The massive presence of stereotypes (formulas, images, slogans) among propaganda strategies is due to their ability to be easily memorized and create empathy and social consensus.

Clichés take shape and gain notoriety in time that is why their effects on ideological, social and linguistic levels are not instantly perceptible; their span of life varies according to the importance of the referent, which changes in time. Here are a few examples of clichés that appeared in the post-1989 years, which have passed into oblivion today: the term *ragamuffin* (with a positive value in the context of Piata Universitatii manifestations) occurs today in its proper derogatory meaning: "*Ragamuffin manifestation in PSD: The angry MPs want Geoană to apologize*." (ReTV, March 16 2006). Similarly, the pejorative terms *emanated* and *emanation* (during the Revolution) intensely used in 1990, 1991 only know sporadic occurrences nowadays: "*Ion Iliescu pretended to be emanated by the Revolution*" (ReTV, December 20 2005).

Stereotyped expressions are also present in the informative discourse of the news type, having a denominative function, but they may also occur in evaluative and persuasive discourse (editorial), where they decode messages with a figurative, allegoric or symbolic meaning. For example, an editorial called *Democratic czarism* is built on the basis of the cliché "*czar Putin*"; the headlines *Season of migratory birds* and *Political parties ravaged by migrations* rely on the phenomenon of MPs' migration from a party to another.

The negative side of stereotypes is associated to the „wooden language” specific to totalitarian regimes. George Orwell considers the major causes of the decline of political discourse to be the clichés (or *ready-made phrases*) and trivialized metaphors (*dying metaphors*).

The phenomenon also appears in the press: "*what is called in a new wooden language*" *local character*" (Re TV, March 23 2006); "*C. Gușă accused Boc of UASCR-like language of the "Scânteia" type*" (ReTV, February 10 2005).

It is worth remarking that journalistic discourse quite frequently resorts to quoting certain clichés of the communist wooden language as a discursive technique with an evaluative function: "*life and work comrades*" (Adevărul, March 9 2004); "*politruks in Galati health system*" (Adevărul, January 27 2004).

Another disadvantage of using clichés in political discourse is spoliating language by de-semantisation or meaning emptying of certain terms or phrases employed abusively. An example in this respect is seen in the political discourse of the Romanian transition: "*acquis, reform, leader, transparence, political correctness, national interest*". Their semantic lack of precision is ironically evinced by the metalinguistic comments of the journalist: "*work progress slip for Romania's integration in EU*" (Adevărul, March 17 2004); "*our new great Leader*" (Gândul, August 24 2005); "*former and contemporary comrades*" (Gândul, August 16 2005).

The following section will analyze, starting from the examples provided in the Romanian press, the means of manifestation of stereotypes. First, the focus lies on *graphical stereotypes* with a persuasive-evocative function, achieved by capitalizing some words with a symbolic charge ("*The post-communist state inherits many traits from the Old Regime*") and by spelling politically-marked terms in a form close to the Russian etymology: "*What scared the Romanian nomenclature*". The spelling with a small case initial marks the use of proper names by antonomasia as categorial common nouns with a pejorative connotation: "*With all their faults, the cozmâncas, hrebenciucs and năstases prove good to have around*." (Gândul, July 29 2005). The

presence of inverted commas is a typical means of evincing the deviated or altered meanings ("the power void"), antiphrasis ("The Democrat" Traian Băsescu) or metaphor ("Czar Vladimir could stay in power until 2018) – Adevărul, February 7 2004.

Strictly semantic stereotypes, which bear exclusively on the "signifiant" occur in the terms *nostalgia*, *nostalgic* and *politics*, which acquired meanings with pejorative connotations: "In fact maneuvering occurs in politics not in official negotiations, but at secret reunions, when wetting the bargain." (Gândul, October 17 2005). A similar situation is apparent in the use of colors symbolically associated to some political orientations: "leader of the Austrian greens", "the red Chinese president", "the orange Ukrainian revolution died drowning in corruption" (Gândul, September 9 2005), "Red beats Alliance's orange." (Gândul, May 24 2005).

The most frequent clichified metonymies involve geographic locations ("the Relations between Washington and Madrid – on the verge of freezing") and years evocative of certain events: "Let us not repeat 1989!"

Typical instances of connotative manipulation are *local baron* and *political migration*, whose resilience is explained not only through denotation, but mostly through the meaning associations generated in the recipients. *Local baron* designates the political and administrative authorities in various areas of the country, characterized by abusive conduct and corruption: *baron of Ilfov*, *the PSD baron Balcan*. The second metaphoric phrase, *parliamentary migration*, may be found together with its more recent synonym, viz. *political routing*. The derivatives referring to the agent name are also frequently used, although they are in competition with several synonyms: *political flies*, *travelers*, *chameleons*, *migratory birds*, *political parrots*: "The local representatives are free to migrate another 45 days"; "Opposition mayors or councilors who want to board the governmental boat have a few months at their disposal". (Gândul, February 24 2006). A productive lexico-semantic stereotype in political discourse is the creation of more or less specialized syntagms, by associating an informal word with a clichified figurative meaning and a determiner from the social-political terminology: *pre-electoral splashing*, *electoral piggy bank*, *political circus*, *cultural bone*, *political merry-making*. It is interesting to note the use of the chess game metaphor in contexts of the following type: "On the democratic chess board, only one character is making the moves, who does not understand that his role is to supervise, and not to control. He is Traian Băsescu, and the way he is doing that proves he is merciless and does not care. Boc, Videanu, Frunzăverde or Blaga took their turn in being either bishops or kings."

The sphere of macro-stereotypes of the contemporary political discourse also includes certain lexico-semantic fields issuing most metaphors, which are more or less lexicalized. Thus, *the lexico-semantic field of the show* may be identified in "political-administrative circus", "catastrophic scenarios", "the government played the comedy of the innocents"; *the lexico-semantic field of trade*: "political parrots", "political flies", "political stray dog", "political chameleons"; *the lexico-semantic field of gambling*: "presidential poker", "Jolly Joker of local politics"; *the lexico-semantic field of sports*: "The start of the national Olympics of political hypocrisy and demagoguery. "Who cares more" caught the people's representatives, no matter what political color they may be."

Without ending our research, it is considered that the aspects presented in this paper contribute to cliché rehabilitation, including it among semantico-stylistic strategies pertaining to the discourse of journalism.

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