Aspects related to language in political sciences

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Abstract: *Communication in politics is nowadays an unavoidable reality, both in the private and the state sector. This field of activity has witnessed an unparalleled expansion which justifies in itself a specialized training for professionals, as an astuteness with regard to the intricacies of communication is vital for the activity of institutions, businesses, associations and even universities. While it is true that it takes an interdisciplinary approach to master this professional formation, which requires capacities of strategic reflection and analysis as well as a certain awareness in terms of political, economic, social, commercial and organizational environments, it has become increasingly obvious that being knowledgeable in political or diplomatic language and in the variety of language styles and communication challenges is a an essential prerequisite in the success of any endeavor.*

Keywords: *communication in politics, language style, communication traps, political language.*

Introduction

Although English has undeniably won a privileged position as a universal language of communication, the linguistic diversity still raises a whole series of challenges and obstacles in communication at an international level, despite several extreme points of view, such as that of a US senator interviewed by Hervé Lavenir de Buffon, a journalist at Figaro, who stated: "there are 6000 languages spoken in the world, which is 5999 too many, English would be enough"[1]. Linguistic and cultural differences have played a large role in shaping the world as we know it, drawing borders and giving rise to fruitful debate on philosophical issues such as identity and alterity: "There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning. If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me"[2]. Apart from the linguistic connotation *(Barbaros* was the term used in Greek to express the babbling nonsense that any foreign language sounds like to a person who doesn't understand it), St. Paul's meditation on himself and the others can be interpreted as a general principle of alterity: each and everyone is a barbarian for the other and to become a barbarian is enough to speak a language that the other doesn't know.

The main reason why the Greeks would call the other peoples barbarian was their poor knowledge of the Greek language, but, from this perspective, there is no human being or race who is not a barbarian in relation to another human being or race.

Linguistic diversity, together with other forms of ethnic and religious diversities, can be a significant source of political conflict and therefore proper attention should be paid to the subtleties of communicating in a different language, for instance, to the translation of political and diplomatic documents or to various cultural specificities. Beside the challenges that come with the transfer of information from a source language to a target language, translators and communicators in the field of politics should also be aware of certain field-specific language units that can dramatically change the meaning and intended purpose of the oral or written expression.

Language on the Political Stage

Language and politics are the constitutive elements of social relationships and they are omnipresent and inseparable in the public space: institutional debates, legal discussions in the realm of definitions and controversial denominations, parliamentary speeches or mediatic clenches and their success or failure is closely connected to the discourse elements articulated by the media specialists, which can involve repeated language units, small phrases, qualificatives at the border of insult with various legal conesquences, continuous comments and exchanges on social networks which frequently raise questions about the language norms, legitimation, verbal or written violence which further fuels quasi permanent debates. The relationship between language and politics is first of all anchored in the rhetoric-grammatical tradition. It is based on the traditional notions of discourse and word. While these two notions were well defined and redefined during the last century by structuralist linguists and sociolinguists, it is the more modern methods and disciplines, such as political socio-lexicology, discourse analysis or lexical statistics that have more closely explored the relationship between language and politics in the last few decades.

One of the most striking elements of political language, especially in democracies, is its *persuasive* vocation. Politics differs from coercion in the sense that it depends on the agreement or, at least, consent of those who are governed and thus rhetoric becomes a necessity for the political stage. The theory of rhetoric insists on the contingent nature of the human nature which forces us to continuously make choices, without always being able to pinpoint exactly which are the right choices. Taken from a personal to a collective level, the necessity to make collective choices justifies rhetoric as neither science nor philosophy, for that

matter, are able to offer a guide on the future a certain society should choose or the means to ensure it. Politics is therefore based on opinion or what the Greek used to call "doxa", signifying opinions, beliefs, conjectures or estimates[3], a concept largely based on previous experience and arguments which are always open to challenge, as each opinion has its opposite. Politics thus becomes an endless debate as each new circumstance requires a reply and a further clash of opinion to decide which decision to make. To attain such a persuasive or better said manipulative goal, language in politics has become extremely *pragmatic* and it has developed a series of peculiarities which allow its categorization as a specialized language, a highly elaborated formal codification in terms of linguistic description and expression.

Among the features of political language, *euphemisms* are arguably the most important and prevailing aspect and, due to the latest focus on political correctness (which is yet another peculiarity of political discourse), they have witnessed unprecedented development in the last decades, especially in the US. A euphemism is generally defined as a substitution of an otherwise harsh or blunt term with a milder, more indirect word or expression to alleviate the discomforting or offensive nature of the discourse. There are critics[4] who argue that euphemisms have been taken to an embarrassing extreme just to cover the ugly nature

of the modern society. Accurately legal terms such as "illegal alien" are being replaced with "border infiltrator" or "illegal invader", "amnesty for illegal aliens" becomes "pathway to citizenship" or even "comprehensive immigration reform" and "illegal alien anchor babies" could hypothetically be replaced by "Birthright Citizenship for Children of Undocumented Immigrants"[5]. Political texts abound of many others misleading and truth distorting linguistic devices that differentiate them from any other piece of writing, and which have been used for more than a century in political discourse, as Noam Chomsky argues in "*Language and Politics*": "The American public relations industry, which is a very sophisticated industry, already in the early 1920s was developing these tools, writing about them, and so on. In fact, even earlier, during the First World War, American historians offered themselves to President Woodrow Wilson to carry out a task that they called "historical engineering", meaning designing the facts of history so that they would serve state policy. That's Orwell, long before Orwell was writing. Shortly after that, American journalists like Walter Lippman (…) said in 1921 that the art of democracy requires what he called "manufacture of consent", what the public relations industry calls "engineering of consent", another Orwellism meaning "thought control"[6]. In time, *orwellisms* have become a specialized form of

euphemisms that state something which is the opposite of its real meaning to create ambiguity and to mislead the public in official pronouncements or political propaganda (as in George Orwell's *1984* the Ministry of Peace concerned itself with war and the Ministry of Love with torture[7]). Another linguistic device often used in political language is *obfuscation*, or the action of making something less clear and less easy to understand, especially intentionally, as the Cambridge Dictionary defines it. It is a strategy used to mitigate the impact of a certain political decision, for instance, by adding noise to make the message more ambiguous, confusing, and harder to follow. While it is true that obfuscation can be found in other fields, including the academic world (where, for instance, "The Correlation between Oral and Somatic Motor habits" is just a fancy way of meaning "facts and words"), it is in politics that it finds its most sublime expression as it perfectly serves its purpose: that of taking the public on the wrong path by intentionally distorting reality. Another linguistic device shared massively by the political world and the world of journalism is the use of *slanting*, or innuendos, noun or verb modifiers that subtly influence the impact on the audience and which can convey a neutral, negative or positive attitude towards a certain subject: "there were one thousand people in the square", "there were more than one thousand people in the square" or "there were merely one thousand people in the square". Slanting also refers to the association of a powerful adjective to make a point or draw the audience on the author's side: "an evil leader" or "horrifying incident". In journalism, slanting goes hand in hand with using eye-catching titles and headlines, followed by a so-called "*fine print disclaimer*", a term borrowed from the legal world, whereas important information is intentionally left out of the main body of a document, being inserted in footnotes or otherwise supplemental documents (credit cards agreements are notorious for inserting extra unknown fees, rates or payment terms in the fine print of contracts). In describing a military attack, for instance, a political leader might argue: "The missile attack was an astounding success, as 98 percent of the missiles were launched successfully", with the intention of deceiving the unsuspecting audience, who fails to make the distinction between "successfully launched" and "actually reached their target".

Experienced politicians also make heavy use of the so-called "*weasel words*", which is invoking a non-specific or anonymous authority to enhance the legitimation of their words. As an old saying goes, "never believe anything until it is officially denied", a rational and well-informed audience should be able to spot the biased view and superficiality of arguments that include: "some people say", "most people argue", "researchers believe". A few other examples of weasel words used in

politics include: "Americans want" (when a certain political action is promoted without being able to produce enough evidence to support the claim) or "we will take that under advisement" (often used to avoid uncomfortable answers or when a politician would rather avoid a delicate answer).

The political language is also studded with clichés and what is generally referred to as "wooden language", a simulacrum of communication with the sole purpose of manipulating people. The four characteristics of wooden language identified by Francoise Thom in "*La langue de bois*"[8], the abstraction and the avoidance of the concrete, tautologies, bad metaphors and Manichaeism that divides the world into good and evil" help the communicator to divert attention from the salient issues by use of rather vague, ambiguous or abstract words. Most of these words or phrases carry out a positive significance, such as "freedom", "family values", "our way of life" but are in fact hollow, artificial and carry no concrete meaning. Although admittedly more common in nondemocratic regimes, wooden language has pervaded political language worldwide as a specialized register, with a simplified syntax and an artificial meaning, with elaborate phrases and keywords used to replace common, plain language, in an effort to interpose barriers and make the speech utterly unintelligible for the populations.

Conclusions

The very nature of the political language relies on a linguistic combat, as the theory of rhetoric implies that we cannot determine in an absolute manner what is really good or bad and that a debate should yield in to the unanimity and consensus, in the constant presence of an antithesis. To be successful, the political discourse had to adapt to these limitations and to take advantage of all the tools available to make a discourse more susceptible of persuading an audience on a certain subject. From this perspective, the political discourse is a display of a power balance and while the political class has made tremendous efforts to master these tools, its counterpart, the common citizen, has remained somewhat behind and should dedicate more time and energy to identify these field-specific language features to be able to discern the truth or its closest variant behind the traps and lures set in front of them by skillful politicians.

Notes

[1] Hervé Lavenir de Buffon, "Après la monnaie, la langue commune", in *Le Figaro*, 22.06.2002 – "Il y a 6000 langues parlées dans le monde, 5 999 de trop, l'anglais suffira", in Cordier Lionel, „Les langues de pouvoir. La Langue comme outil de puissance: L'exemple de l'espéranto dans les jeux de pouvoir lingvistiques européens", sous la direction de Albane Geslin, Mémoire soutenu le 6 septembre 2012, available online at: file:///C:/Users/catalin/Downloads/cordier_l.pdf, accessed on 15 May, 2020

[2] St. Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians* (14: 10-1), available online at: http://biblescripture.net/1Corinthians.html, accessed on 15 May, 2020

[3] *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press, 2005.

[4] See, for instance, Allan, Keithand Kate Burridge, *Forbidden Words. Taboo and the Censoring of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 and Lutz, William, *Double speak Defined: Cut through the Bull**** and Get the Point!* New York: Harper Collins, 1999.

[5] Alex Nowrasteh, The Use of Euphemisms in Political Debate, Cato Institute, December 7, 2017, available online at: https://www.cato.org/blog/use-euphemisms-political-debate, accessed on 15 May, 2020.

[6] Noam Chomsky, *Language and Politics*, AK Press, 2004, p. 549

[7] See George Orwell, *1984 Nineteen Eighty-Four, Penguin Classics*, New Edition, 2004.

[8] In Roger Scruton, *The Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Political Thought*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 477.

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