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NEGOTIATION AND DISCURSIVE CONFLICT WITHIN OPINION:
PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE IN THE SOCIAL ROMANIAN IMAGINARY

Abstract

The paper approaches contemporary Romanian media in order to outline negotiation and discursive conflict strategies in public storytelling about the country's recent history. In the so-called Romanian social imaginary, notions of public versus private highlight the way public officials resort to the language of culture-specific communication-related concepts that are a starting point for much of the discourse on decision-making.

Keywords: negotiation, conflict, social imaginary

Marshall McLuhan (1964) formulated the theory of media determinism, regarding a subtle influence of communication technologies on human life at a social level. Jürgen Habermas (2005) linked the birth of critical conscience of the public sphere to the inception of the independent press. This replaced the cafés and salons in which a timely culture of rationality and debate had been established, contributing to the consolidation of the civic sense and to the creation and consolidation of the political competence of ordinary people. Thus, power became public, subject to contestations. We believe that the two theories can be overlapped, in the sense that the evolution of communication technologies can be linked to the process of modifying the configuration and the relationships of political life. It is our opinion that we are witnessing a process of substantial transformation of contemporary society under the influence of new technologies, having effects on social structures and mentalities, on dominant paradigms of thought and on the manner of making politics.

The widening of the public sphere continues, together with the refinement of social communication networks and with the apparition of the interactive platforms which offer support for expressing public opinion. The agora is migrating towards the electronic medium, where forums, comment sections, and discussion groups take over the tasks of controlling and supervising political power. We can, without exaggeration, state that the online discussion groups, comment sections of electronic press articles are the natural heirs of cafés, clubs and old literary salons, pointing out that absolutely anyone, regardless of economic circumstances or of social class is free to express themselves here. As a result of the present orientation of communication media towards interactivity, the current public sphere seems more decentred and freer than ever. The dynamic virtual communities through which information circulates and rapidly amplifies can act as an important agent of political and social change. Because challenge and opposition are current realities online as well, being a factor of relativizing the power of public discourse, forms of resistance to the legitimizing pressures of authorities can be articulated through media of expression and socialization. The communication channels specific to the cultural and political elites can be neutralized and overcome with ease by

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adaptability, the capacity of social reaction, and contagiousness of these new communication structures.

The socio-linguist Uli Windisch investigates in his study *Le k.-o. verbal: la communication conflictuelle* the conflictual discourse in the social and political life of Switzerland. Having a direct and deliberate nature, the Swiss democratic system encourages popular initiatives that can modify the legislative framework at all levels. Uli Windisch's research examines the discursive interactions of ordinary people who publicly express and argue their case on certain matters of general interest and which often take on a polemic and irreconcilable form. More precisely, Windisch's study analyzes readers' letters to newspapers which are the embodiment of a disagreement regarding the public position taken by a politician, a journalist or another reader of the newspaper. The research ignores the discourse of the political elites and is interested in the common, everyday forms of argumentation, pertaining to ordinary people.

Conflict is a component of social interaction. Conflictual discourse reveals the forces which divide a society and which are usually tamed by respecting the rules of consensual communication: "Conflictual communication is a part of reality and a reality in itself, specific and susceptible to better emphasizing the ensemble of political and social reality¹ (Windisch, 2007: 17). Discursive conflicts are also important because they can contribute to the modification of reality, being elements of social change.

We define conflict as a situation in which the parties, disputing their superiority, place themselves on opposing stances as a result of contradicting interests or viewpoints. According to Windisch, the term *conflictual discourse* refers to the discourse of one of the parties involved in the dispute and which is addressed to an opponent who, in their turn, has the possibility of replying. Each conflictual discourse is composed of conflictual statements, whereas a discursive conflict is created when multiple conflictual discourses meet: "A conflictual discourse is the discourse of a person, whereas a discursive conflict involves at least two people, two discourses: an attack and at least one answer"² (Windisch, 2007: 24).

Our analysis dedicated to discursive conflict stems from the declaration made on May 6th 2010 by the president at that time during a press conference in which he announced significant cuts of salaries, pensions, subventions, and social aids due to the economic crisis:

The state resembles a very fat, 200-kilogram man piggy-backing a very thin 50-kilogram man who represents the real economy, and the huge expenses of the state have been transferred to those working in the service and industry sectors ...

Firstly this means the reduction of the salary fund for the entire Romanian budgetary group by 25%, and by the end of the year, the heads of institutions have the obligation of making their own selection, of choosing the best and not the political clientele, so that by 2011, maintaining the salary cap and in hopes of economic growth, wages can return to their current level ...

I wouldn't want to go over the numbers together – and we could easily do it – we find that the average income in the state budget is 31% of the GDP and the expenses of the state budget are 40%. We must make up for this difference, and the sectors which must be restructured are the budgetary and the social ones ... There will be many more measures which the Government must take, such as the modification of the work code in order to make the work force more flexible, and certain analyses regarding taxes.

...

But the budgetary system cannot be so high as far as the salaries and especially the incomes are concerned, because there is a large difference between salaries and incomes, in relation to the private sector which makes the money which the budgetary sector lives off. I repeat, it is like a very fat and large, 200-kilogram man riding on the back of a 50-

¹ My translation of „Le conflit, la lutte sont des réalités quotidiennes, constitutives de toute société.”

² My translation of „Un discours conflictuel est le discours d'une personne tandis qu'un conflit discursif concerne au moins deux personnes, deux discours, une attaque et au moins une réponse.”

kilogram one, a fat man who always wants food when he sees the plate, it is always the fat man who wants to eat, leaving nothing for the skinny one on whose back he is riding.³

The above text has the typical traits associated with the discursive universe of power. The speaker hides behind a syntax of vagueness that eludes the agents of action through a host of procedures:

- by turning elements of speech into nouns: “the *reduction* of the salary fund”, “the *modification* of the Labour Code”;
- through depersonalization: “*Firstly this means* the reduction of the salary fund”, “*There will be* many more measures”;
- by turning elements of speech into pseudo-agents: “*wages* can return to their current level”
- through the use of deictics: “I wouldn’t want to go over the numbers together – and we could easily do it - we find that the average income in the state budget is 31% of the GDP and the expenses of the state budget are 40%. We must make up for this difference, and the sectors which must be restructured are the budgetary and social ones.” It is unclear to whom the personal pronoun “we” refers, facilitating the intentional confusion between the meanings brought about by his affiliation to “the semantic of power”: *we, the power* or to “the semantic of solidarity”: *we, the people*.

At the same time, this speech boasts the pragmatic marks of authority which indicate to what extent the speaker considers that another person has to fulfil a series of actions:

- acts of directive language: “the heads of institutions *have the obligation* of making their own selection”;
- deontic modalization: “the sectors which *must* be restructured are the budgetary and social ones.”

There are also a few examples of enunciative assumption which is made, however, by invoking a position of authority with a pedagogical function: “I wouldn’t want to”, “I repeat”. The use of the recurrence marker of the conclusive type “repeat” is a strategy which emphasizes the importance of the repeated part within the argumentative power of the discourse and is also a means through which the speaker consolidates his position of authority in front of the listener. The listener is notified that an important discursive part is coming up, and the asymmetric discursive relationship he is involved in is subtly reconfirmed to him. The entire speech reproduced above seems to have a didactic dominant. A problem is indicated (the budgetary imbalance) and a solution (the reduction of the salary fund) is demonstrated by means of an accessible language, using the parable and the summary.

The analyzed discourse utilizes preterition, a figure of speech related to irony, which consists of pretending to avoid a subject while at the same time drawing attention to it: “I wouldn’t want to go over the numbers together – and we could easily do it – we find that...” We believe that preterition is

³ My translation of “Statul arată ca un om foarte gras de 200 kilograme care s-a cocoțat în spatele unuia foarte slab și subțirel, de 50 kilograme, care este economia reală, iar cheltuielile imense ale statului s-au transferat asupra celor care lucrează în servicii și industrie. (...) În primul rând este vorba despre reducerea fondului de salarii pentru tot aparatul bugetar din România cu 25%, iar până la sfârșitul anului, șefii de instituții au obligația să-și facă selecția, să-i aleagă pe cei mai buni și nu clientela politică, în așa fel încât în anul 2011, menținându-se anvelopa salarială și în speranța creșterii economiei, salariile să poată reveni la cele pe care le au acum. (...) N-aș vrea să facem împreună socoteala - și o putem face cu ușurință - constatăm că venitul mediu în bugetul de stat este 31% din PIB iar cheltuielile bugetului de stat sunt de 40%. Trebuie să completăm această diferență, iar locul unde trebuie să restructurăm este sectorul bugetar și sectorul social (...). Vor mai fi și multe alte măsuri pe care trebuie să le ia Guvernul, cum ar fi modificări ale Codului muncii pentru a flexibiliza forța de muncă, unele analize cu privire la impozite. (...) Dar sistemul bugetar nu poate fi atât de sus, din punct de vedere al salarizării și al veniturilor în mod deosebit, că e o mare diferență între salarii și venituri, în raport cu sectorul privat, care produce banii din care trăiește sectorul bugetar. Repet, e ca un om foarte gras și mare, de 200 de kilograme, care stă în spinarea unuia de 50 de kilograme și tot vrea când vede farfuria cu mâncare, tot acela gras vrea să mănânce, nu-i lasă nimic celui slab, în spatele căruia stă.”, <http://www.mediafax.ro/politic/basescu-statul-este-un-om-foarte-gras-cocotat-in-spatele-unuia-slab-si-subtirel-care-este-economia-6097010>, retrieved on 25.09.2014.

a rhetorical mark that indicates the polemic orientation of the discourse, being issued from the same position of pedagogical superiority.

At the rhetorical level the euphemism is also at work, being a mark of the dissimulated nature of the political discourse. “The restructuring of the administrative group”, “make the work force more flexible” are mild expressions for the acts of firing and for creating the legal context for firing more easily. Breaking the law of information exhaustiveness, the euphemism is used in order to preserve the legitimacy of power over social relations. Through these traits of the speech which embody an ideology of impersonalizing the acts of power, the authoritarian discourse can easily elude the obligations and responsibilities of the participants or can transfer them to false agents.

The analyzed discourse is built around the metaphor of the fat man (the state worker) perched on the back of the thin man (the private sector worker), which is meant to suggestively explain the imbalance within the Romanian work force. The pragmatic function of these rhetorical figures is clear: it is to justify the reduction of the state workers’ salaries. The contestable characteristic of this metaphor stems from the fact that it recycles a rhetoric that has proven its efficiency in the past (during fascism or Marxism), through which exploiters or parasites were denounced from society. This type of discourse is condemnable because it fuels the divisions in society, turning one category against another. Through an ideological trick, an image consecrated in Marxism and in contemporary protest movements against the banking system - that of the obese capitalist who suffocates the weak proletariat - is turned upside down. Expressing the unfamiliar (subtle relations of a macroeconomic nature) in familiar terms (the gastric imaginary), this metaphor moved the meaning from within the economy towards public morality, sub-textually invoking values such as justice or equity in support of austerity measures. Through a strategy of establishing a sense of the common, this neoliberal speech tries to make plausible the idea that the public sector workers are paid from the profits generated by the private sector: “...the private sector which makes the money which the budgetary sector lives off”, ignoring the productive nature of the work carried out by the state workers. The common ideological sense also excludes the possibility of taking into consideration the causes of the budgetary imbalance as being the responsibility of the state (bad politics) or of the private sector (illegal work, tax evasion).

This speech is proof of the way in which an element of rhetoric can be used as an ideological instrument of marginalizing and demonizing an entire social category and as an example of the manner in which the socio-economic rights of a social category can be restricted both through political decisions as well as through means of discursive portrayal. Inevitably, this discursive intervention, which also benefits from the prestige of the speaker’s authority, generated lively polemic reactions.

We will follow a part of these discursive exchanges from the electronic medium, which entitle us to consider this space as an arena of public debate in which there unfolds the ideological struggle between the structures of power and the resistance of social categories with opposing interests. Turning towards the analysis of the online conflictual discourse, we aim to decipher the political conflicts through their linguistic manifestations. We will turn our attention to the discursive interactions within the comment sections of the readers of the electronic press, analyzing the pragmatic and rhetoric marks and strategies of conflictual discourse. All these interactions configure a space of public debate, a medium of participative democracy and of popular initiative. We link the analysis of the discourse from a conflictual point of view to the social relations and representations, working with a decentered image of the public space in which power is diluted and divided by the community.

We are of the opinion that the disagreement represents the true substance of political discourse. Sometimes, when opinions are irreconcilable, the disagreement can degenerate into conflict. We believe that the conflictual strategies can be interpreted as attempts at reconfiguring social relations and as efforts to remodel the social structure.

According to Windisch, discursive strategies “represent the means of treating an opposing discourse, of integrating it through transformation and manipulation.” (Windisch, 2007: 39; author’s translation) The most frequent strategies are: the directly conveyed discourse, the indirectly conveyed discourse, exposing, irony and phantasmal representation.

a. Using the strategy of *the directly conveyed discourse*, the conflictual discourse integrates the discourse of authority in order to augment the argumentative power of their own discourse and to legitimize it:

“As Napoleon Hill said: WHETHER YOU TELL YOURSELF YOU CAN OR WHETHER YOU TELL YOURSELF YOU CAN’T, YOU ARE RIGHT.”⁴

b. By using the *indirectly conveyed discourse*, the opposing discourse is integrated in the agent’s discourse, being subjected to some changes in structure and content. Repeating the other’s discourse without direct quotes is an easier way of distorting and discrediting it:

This time those in power take action and explain to us so easily – after all, they have history in their blood – that supposedly there are two kinds of people in Romania. The good, meaning those in the private sector, more precisely those who make screws and corn, and the others, the bad, those who are provided for. However, these bad people, according to Mr. Băsescu’s profound political thinking, “got fat” beyond measure and have ended up “sucking the blood of the people”, of all those working in the private sector. The true workers cannot pull the weight of these “spongers” and we have to take out the big guns and put them in their place. Our friend Hitler said something similar about the weak German who carried the fat Jew on his back, although I think he used a different term for Jew.⁵

In the previous example, the patient discourse is falsified, and is attributed with assertions that do not belong to it. What is more, using the model of illegitimate authority when paraphrasing the patient discourse places the adversary in the same dishonorable ranks as monstrous historical characters.

c. By using the strategy of *exposing*, the conflictual discourse attempts to translate and express the true intentions of the opponent. However, this act of translation is an act of rewriting and restructuring the patient discourse by means of which false presuppositions can be attributed to it. The marks of this strategy include structures such as: *what is not being said is that, what they intend to do, to put it simply, it is not mentioned that, we must see the true reasons behind this initiative*:

“at Haryy în puf – Here is, in plain English, what you have written: A beneficial effect of cutting public sector wages will be that now I too will probably be able to find labourers willing to work for 9 million a month.” Translated – I am a cheapskate, looking for suckers to rip off with a small wage, with a ton of unpaid overtime, because the mistress needs Vuiton and I want vacations in the Antilles, I mean, who do they think they are?⁶

d. *Irony* as a strategy of conflictual discourse works by camouflaging the act of speaking with a threatening quality behind an apparently neutral or even opposite message. This figure pertains to the

⁴ My translation of: „Vorba lui Napoleon Hill: FIE CĂ-ȚI SPUI CĂ POȚI, FIE CĂ-ȚI SPUI CĂ NU POȚI, AI DREPTATE.”, <http://hymerion.ro/2010/05/09/era-nevoie-de-neghiobia-taierii-lefurilor-dl-boc-ar-trebui-sa-se-prezinte.html>, retrieved on 15.06.2014.

⁵ My translation of: „De data aceasta guvernării trec la acțiune și ne explică, atât de ușor, doar au istoria în sânge, cum că în România sunt două feluri de oameni. Cei buni, cei din sistemul privat, adică cei care fac șuruburi sau porumb și ceilalți, oamenii răi, cei care sunt întreținuți. Oamenii ăștia răi, însă, după gândirea politică profundă a domnului Băsescu, s-au „îngrășat” peste măsură și au ajuns să „sugă sângele poporului”, adică al tuturor celor care lucrează în sistemul privat. Adevărații muncitori nu mai pot să țină în spate acești „întreținuți” și trebuie să dăm milităria jos din pod și să îi scuturăm bine. Prietenul Hitler spunea ceva asemănător despre neamțul slab care îl ține în spate pe evreul gras, deși cred că pentru evreu folosea un alt termen.”, <http://revistacultura.ro/blog/2010/05/lupta-de-clasa-privati-vs-bugetari-o-analiza-de-alfred-bulai>, retrieved on 15.06.2014.

⁶ My translation of: „Pt Haryy în puf - Iată, cu cuvinte populare, ceea ce ai scris tu: „Un efect benefic al scăderii lefurilor bugetare va fi că probabil acum voi putea și eu găsi legătoare care să lucreze pt 9 milioane pe lună.” Tradus - eu sunt un zgârcoman, caut fraieri să-i rup pe salariu mic, cu ore suplimentare la greu, gratuite, doar la amanta îi trebuie Vuiton iar eu vreau în vacanță în Antile, ce se crede ăsta?”, <http://hymerion.ro/2010/05/09/era-nevoie-de-neghiobia-taierii-lefurilor-dl-boc-ar-trebui-sa-se-prezinte.html>, retrieved on 15.06.2014.

critical, polemic function of the political discourse. The purpose of irony is to ridicule the opponent and their speech. Its graphical marks are punctuation and the exclamation mark:

“Nothing gets past you, does it, papillon! I wonder how that is possible, considering your intellectual abilities.”⁷

“...the conclusion ‘the president of all Romanians’ wants us to draw is that ‘others are to blame’, naming new public enemies that need to be ostracized and stripped of their wealth.”⁸

e. *Phantasmal representation* is understood by Windisch as the act of reconstructing the opponent’s image, so that it has nothing to do with reality, being a mere invention:

“A FAT MAN, THE LIZARD, RIDES ON THE BACK OF A WEAK MAN, WHO IS CTP. THEREFORE, LET’S CHASE THEM... BOTH OF THEM. WHY? WHEN CTP TIRES, THEY EXCHANGE ROLES; THE LIZARD HAS TO UNDERGO THE STRICT DIET OF MENCINICOPSCHI-ICA-NAD AND THE JOURNALIST OWL CAN TURN COCKY. KNOCK ON WOOD WHEN YOU SEE THIS PAIR AND DON’T FORGET THAT THE ENTIRE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND RUNNING UNIT 2 PCR FROM 1990 TILL NOW LIES IN THIS ‘PARABLE’.”⁹

We can conclude that the internet has become a platform where critical thinking and people’s e-participation in deliberating certain crucial problems of their town manifest themselves. The fact that conflictual discourse works within the public space illustrates the hidden power of the powerless. Conflictual public communication, structured according to oppositional code, can be interpreted as being the acute phase of the process of reclaiming the ideological battle field, reflecting the instable balance of forces and the permanent regroupings within the social sphere.

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⁷ My translation of: „Cum le observi tu pe toate, papillon! Mă și mir cum de, ținând cont de capacitățile tale intelectuale.”, http://adevarul.ro/news/politica/scrisoarea-tinere-ponta-Iti-scriu-mos-craciun-sper-faca-minuni-ajun-craciun-dumneata-faci-pomeni-ajun-alegeri-1_5408842d0d133766a8db83ae/index.html, retrieved on 15.06.2014.

⁸ My translation of: „...concluzia spre care ne îndeamnă “președintele tuturor românilor” este că “alții sunt de vină” desemnând noi inamici publici care trebuie ostracizați și spoliați.”, <http://scmdfiliala1sibiu.blogspot.ro/2010/05/cei-grasi-cei-slabi-solidaritatea-si.html>, retrieved on 15.06.2014.

⁹ My translation of: „UN OM GRAS, CARE E VARANUL, STA IN CARCA UNUI OM SLAB, CARE ESTE CTP. PRIN URMARE, SA-I ALERGAM ... PE AMANDOI. DE CE ? CAND OBOSESTE CTP, ROLURILE SE SCHIMBA; INTRA VARANUL IN DIETA STRICTA MARCA MENCINICOPSCHI-ICA-DNA SI SE UMFLA IN PENE BUFNITA GAZETAR. SCUIPATI IN SAN CAND ZARITI PERECHEA ASTA SI NU UITATI CA, IN " PILDA" ASTA STA TOATA FILOZOFIA GUVERNARII ESALONULUI 2 PCR DIN 90 PANA ACUM.”, <http://www.gandul.info/puterea-gandului/slabii-si-grasii-10735662>, retrieved on 27.06.2014.

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