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***“ELECTORAL DISCOURSE
IN PRESENT-DAY ROMANIAN.
A COGNITIVE-SEMANTIC APPROACH”***

DOCTORAL THESIS ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

This paper is, to our knowledge, the first approach in the Romanian research of electoral discourse by means of an automated analytical model. This is the *cognitive-discursive analysis*, initially applied in the French academic environment, cf. Rodolphe Ghiglione, Christiane Kekenbosch and Agnès Landré, 1995. This model was automatized as early as the 1990s by Pierre Molette and Agnès Landré and later developed and completed with the *chronological analysis* based on the *theory of bundles and episodes* (Mathieu Brugidou, Pierre Le Quéau, 1995; 1999), the *style analysis* (Patrick Charaudeau) and the use of elements of *linguistic statistics*. The resulting software is called “Tropes” and was adapted for Romanian by Pierre Molette and Dan Caragea, at UEFISCDI (latest version: 8.2, in 2015).

Since the beginning, the model has been applied in the analysis of political discourse (Rodolphe Ghiglione (ed.), *Je vous ai compris ou l'analyse des discours politiques*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1989; Rodolphe Ghiglione, M. Bromberg, *Discours politique et télévision*, Paris, PUF, 1998). Gradually, the number of applications has increased in the French cultural space and beyond.

Prior to analysing the texts produced by the elections in Romania and their results, in the first chapter, which aims to clarify several conceptual landmarks, we have deemed necessary to define the reference axes of our approach: *political communication*, *public opinion* and *discourse*.

Political communication refers to the conditions and types of communication in the field of politics. In postmodernity, the mass media are located at the centre of social life. People have become increasingly dependent on the media, which assume not only the role of dissemination, but also that of conditioning life in the community. Contemporary societies require people to participate in the construction of democracy through rational choices. The analysis of deliberative democracy reveals the role of the media in communication, as a means and an institution which edits (processes and transforms) political messages as a public good.

Public opinion is built on the consensus among individuals, controlling the democratic functioning of the state. It is frequently invoked by the media, particularly through surveys. It becomes decisive in elections, referendums, in everything that involves the public legitimation of the power. Recent theories show that public opinion

is not a univocal reality, but rather the “chorus” of several voices making themselves heard in society.

Political discourse is the concept intimately related to the topic of our paper, the specific form of political communication. In the classical view, argumentation and persuasion are achieved both rationally and emotionally. The aim is to seduce the public, which points out the *pathos*, as we know from the Greco-Latin classics of rhetoric. The *ethos* deals with the reputation and credibility of the orator, the candidate in our case. As it is known, the relationship between the politician and the public is one of controlled power. The rhetoric of political discourse implies a three-fold analysis: dialectical, ethical and aesthetic.

In the linguistic approach and then in the theory of discourse, we have dwelt upon the concept of “enunciation/statement”, highlighting the aspects observed by Michel Foucault in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). It is particularly important to distinguish, from the very beginning, between the *sentence*, which is part of language, and *statement*, which belongs to the discourse. This is precisely why we have discussed *discursive formations*, another essential concept in our analysis, in the next chapter.

In relation to the means of mass communication, electoral political discourse has four fundamental characteristics: 1) the “applause” (i.e. what the ancients called *captatio benevolentiae*), attack and defence, the latter being most often designed and manifested in the form of counterattack; 2) the appeal to the public’s emotionality; 3) clarification of the meaning of several concepts; 4) the directed and intentional message. The media do not only disseminate the information. They conceive the news, edit presentations in newspapers, on radio or television, intervene in campaigns as mediators, as the “representative” of the public, contribute to personalizing policies and direct the political show (interviews, press conferences, debates etc.).

Media coverage is the most important aspect of an electoral campaign, because it refers to the entire process of turning communication into a consumer good. It is not only a matter of technologies of dissemination, but it is an entire process of conceiving, production and control.

In the second chapter of the thesis, *Logico-linguistic bases of discourse production*, we have presented several theories that are particularly relevant to the construction of the analytical model we have adopted.

We have begun by addressing some aspects of the *theory of enunciation*, because, as shown in the previous chapter, understanding the statement and its conditionings leads

one from the linguistic question of the “I” in relation to the speaker (E. Benveniste) to the instance uttering the statement. According to Bahtin and Pêcheux, the statement is not an individual formulation of language, but a reality impossible to conceive in the absence of social and historical conditioning.

This approach has led to the concept of “discursive formation”, highlighted by M. Foucault and M. Pêcheux, according to whom discourse is no longer a neuter product, but a manifestation conditioned by subjacent ideologies. *Discursive formation* plays a special part in our analysis, as it has enabled us to find the *ideologemes*, i.e. the markers of the presence of an ideology of a certain party in the candidates’ discourse. The same theory has allowed us to also approach the concepts of *intradiscourse* and *interdiscourse*, based on some observations taken from J.-J. Courtine or D. Maingueneau.

The *semiolinguistic theory* has helped us point out several characteristics of the subject from a social perspective. In line with P. Charaudeau, who focuses on the communication contract with media information, we discuss the communicational contract and its dependency on three components specific to the language act: the situation level, the communication level and the discursive level. We have also appealed to P. Charaudeau in the classification of styles, adopted by “Tropes”, the discourse analysis program, to which we have referred in the first paragraph.

Speech act theory, launched in the specialized American research, is presented in our study by applying some elements of analysis from the works of J.L. Austin, J. Searle and Daniel Vanderveken to the texts of the Romanian political electoral discourse. The interest in this theory is obvious in the political electoral discourse, because, as we have also noted in the rhetorical approach, the candidates express themselves mainly through criticism (attack, counterattack) and promise, with argumentative and persuasive effects.

In chapter three we have dealt with the analytical model, adopted in our research: the *cognitive-discursive analysis* (Ghiglione; Kekenbosch; Landré, 1995), which relies on two previous developments: the *propositional predicative analysis* (Kintsch and van Dijk, 1978) and the *propositional discourse analysis* (R. Ghiglione et al., 1991).

Cognitive-discursive analysis postulates a cognitive unit of information, which the receiver processes, and a syntactic unit, which allows for discourse segmentation in order to be received. From this point of view, the communicating subject producing the statement is aware of the cognitive capacity of his/her interlocutor. But how is information produced and stored? It appears that the discursive unit of production and storage is the proposition (actant-act-acted). Naturally, not all propositions are stored by

the receiver, which means that the latter makes an assessment and filtration of the propositions received. That is how references (substantives and their equivalents) emerge as entities to which the verbs refer, and the most important ones make up the general structure of signification. For example, in our study, terms and phrases like *PSD*, *pesediştii*, *ciuma roşie* form a single reference. References enter into relations inside the same proposition, in other words, in the *intradiscourse*. The most important references (in terms of frequency, number of relations) make up the skeletal structure of discourse.

As previously mentioned, this analytical model was informatized and enhanced in the “Tropes” software, which allows a morphosyntactic, semantic, stylistic and statistical analysis of corpora. The most important functions employed are the *scenario* (i.e. the semantic and hierarchical classification of references), *relations* among them, their *distribution* inside the discourse, the discursive insistence (*bundles*), the study of verbs, divided into *factive*, *stative* and *reflexive* (verbs expressing cognitive, affective, volitional etc. activities), of personal pronouns (mainly those in the first person), of modalities (adverbs) and connectors. Finally, based on the aforementioned verbal typology, the software decides on the discursive *style* (enunciative, descriptive, narrative and argumentative), according to the theory of P. Charaudeau.

Chapter four is the most important in the economy of the thesis and is our original contribution to the *analysis of the political electoral discourse in Romanian*, relying on texts resulted from the *2019 presidential elections in Romania*.

In the first part, we have presented the *corpus* to be analysed (principles of construction, organization, volumetry). The texts collected from the Web have been organized in candidate files and distributed in four categories, according to the chronology of elections: a) pre-campaign; b) first round; c) results; d) second round. It is undoubtedly the largest corpus used in an analysis of the electoral discourse in Romania so far (225 texts). It comprises statements, press conferences, interviews, debates. We have used, as much as possible, the most reliable, complete source as compared to the rest of the publications in which the information appeared.

In the second part of this chapter, we have conducted the actual analysis of the candidates’ discourse. We have considered the four abovementioned moments, as we have started from the assumption that the evolution of external conditioning (namely the reorganization of the balance of social-political forces involved in the ballot, i.e. the so-called “potential redistribution of votes”) also determines the internal reorganization of discourse (the shift of “targets”, re-hierarchization of themes, changes in vocabulary, tone

etc.). As regards the pre-campaign stage, we have analysed the discourse of the fourteen candidates, aiming to highlight the moment of their launch in the electoral fight, motivations and hopes expressed. It should be said that the press did not offer the same amount of space to candidates in a fair manner. Obviously, not all had the same financial and marketing means to address to the public. In terms of the first round, we have confined the analysis to the six candidates that managed to surpass 3%, because, as far as the others were concerned, the impact and the voters' choices at the polls could not be correlated. After a short presentation of the candidates' statements upon finding the results, we have dedicated the last part of the comparative discourse analysis to the candidates in the second round.

It is important to point out that the final model of analysis meant discussing the themes of each candidate, of their hierarchy, of the subthemes and references that are most insisted upon (calculation of occurrences) and of the relations among them. The scenario (semantic dictionary for nouns) provided by Tropes comprises 13,363 references (some may contain a large number of equivalents), including references that did not originally exist, which we have added (proper nouns, party logos etc.). Of course, not all these references are activated in the analysis of the candidates' discourse (only those which are referred to). However, we have made sure that no reference, above the detection threshold of 3 occurrences, should be excepted. We have also checked the *list of verbs, adjectives and adverbs so that the criticism or persuasion sentences should be emphasized*. Throughout the paper, we have justified our assertions through illustrative clippings from the program regarding the supporting contexts and the graphs of relations or distribution.

Our conclusions consider three novelties or three good arguments for justifying the analysis starting from the model tested and perfected by thousands of researchers over a period of almost thirty years.

The first advantage is the *power to analyse large and very large text corpora*, in order to find a significant number of variables (with a complex analytical model). It is obvious that as the corpus grows the manual human labour proves difficult and less and less reliable. We have also experienced this when analysing Viorica Dăncilă's discourse (68 texts), where the mere calculation of occurrences of some references would have meant a great waste of time.

The second advantage lies in *determining the relations among concepts (intradiscursive structure)*, which, at a certain point, becomes practically impossible for

an individual or even a group of individuals without computer means. As noted in the relation graph (star graph, planetary system graph of actors), we may three-dimensionally represent the discourse structure rapidly and accurately.

The third advantage is *style analysis*. As we have shown, in the decision upon styles there are enough variables which make the approach in other ways virtually impossible. The conclusion that Dan Barna had a rather argumentative discourse is more difficult to demonstrate by simply reading the texts. Moreover, two independent researchers analysing the same corpus, using the same software will obtain identical results, which eliminates the suspicion of subjectivity related to any interpretation.

Finally, it was possible to show how idealized the political discourse is in relation to other types of discourse. Nevertheless, however hard we may try, we do not always have the possibility to compare what the discourse promotes to what the candidates' behaviour and actions actually are, beyond the idealism and emotions expressed.

The political electoral discourse seems far from representing reality. Today, this cleavage is managed by the media, whose role is to present only some of the facts manifested in society, with inevitable distortions, for the purpose of communication manipulation.

As shown in the conclusions, the analyses in this thesis have both an interpretative and a productive purpose, in that, under mature conditions, the political actors may analyse their own discourse. This opens up other perspectives of research in the field of verbal communication, the political field and other fields as well (economy, education, culture etc.), which makes us believe that we may think of other applications in the future.

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