Power, Influence and Control through Language.
An Analysis of Romanian Political Discourse

Teză de doctorat
Abstract

Coordonator științific:
Prof. Univ. Dr. Elena Dragoș

Doctorand:
Ioana-Silvia Tărău (căs. Sonea)

The main purpose of this paper is to identify the mechanisms that allow us to influence, persuade and even manipulate the others through language. We started off with some basic questions concerning meaning construction and processing, both at an individual level and at a social and cultural level, as a consequence of cooperation among individuals. We are particularly interested in the role played by language in human reason and experience, as part of the individual's interaction with the outside world. It is important to mention that by language we understand the general human capacity and we are not concerned with how speakers manipulate signs in their interactions, but rather with how the meaning is created, processed and interpreted.

The first chapter includes a comparison between two sub-disciplines of linguistics – Pragmatics and Cognitive Linguistics and their respective positions regarding the above mentioned issues. Pragmatics brought a radical change of perspective with the distinction brought by J. Austin in *How to Do Things With Words* (1975) between constative and performative utterances, between truth-conditions sentences and speech acts, while Searle, Grice, Sperber and Wilson provide explanations for phenomena such as intentionality, natural and nonnatural meaning, inferences, literal meaning vs nonliteral meaning, thus recognizing various means through which the context contributes to the processing and exchange of meaning among discourse participants.

Lakoff and Johnson, on the other hand, two of the founders of Cognitive Linguistics, are interested in how meaning is actually produced, as a result of the individual's interaction with the outside world. Maybe their most valuable contribution, the theory of conceptual metaphor states that metaphors are not useless ornaments, but means through which we structure our experience and understand reality. In their view, we build abstract concepts on basic concepts, that, in turn, are a result of body's interaction with the world. Although we agree that metaphor is essential not only to the understanding of language, but also to the understanding of reason, we still think that in the quest for universal concepts, the cultural dimension is somehow lost. We found their theory of the systematic character of metaphoric concepts extremely useful when applying the analysis to real language phenomena. We illustrated this trait of metaphorical concepts with the help of a few examples we identified in Romanian newspapers: „România e un stat femeie”

("Romania is a female state"), „Cafteala politică" ("Political battle"), „Țara ca un pacient" ("The country as a sick patient").

The second chapter offers a detailed presentation of Conceptual Integration Theory that promises to explain a wide variety of linguistic phenomena. The theoretical model regards meaning construction as a dynamic process. Conceptual Integration is an elementary mental operation, deeply imaginative, but central to even the most basic thinking processes (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 20). It refers to the human capacity to activate domains and mental spaces in order to establish connections among them, it plays a profound role in all areas of thought and action, including deciding, judging, reasoning, and inventing. It is dynamic, supple and active in the moment of thinking."(Turner 2001: 17) *Mental Spaces* are "small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk and are connected to long-term schematic knowledge called frames. They are sets of activated neuronal assemblies." (Fauconnier și Turner 2002: 40)

Mental spaces are temporary, dynamic and partial, since the elements they select from a more general frame are only those that serve the purposes for that particular instance. Two or more mental spaces can be blended together to create a mental scenario that can be remodeled, enriched by the speakers or recruited into a new conceptual network, in a potentially infinite and non-deterministic process, which is hard to anticipate, but which, in our view is just a proof for human creativity and the flexibility of human mind. However, in *The Way We Think* (2002), Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner are introducing the so-called *optimality principles* concerning the way vital relations such *as identity, change, time, space, compression* etc. are established around various mental spaces recruited in a conceptual network.

It is our belief that many of the persuasive attempts made through political discourse are based on the capacity of blends to simulate "reality", to suggest scenarios and stories and to influence the original input spaces. The mixture of reality, experience, perception, emotions associated with a certain event proves to be very powerful when used by political actors.

The on-line construction of meaning is, as we stated above, a dynamic process, during which the speaker will integrate new information with old information stored in the long term memory. As a consequence, meaning will always be connected to a certain context and when there is no context, "the speaker will create one". (Coulson 2000: 25) Since we wanted to establish the importance of a context when analyzing language, we asked speakers with a completely different cultural background to interpret the front page of a Romanian political

newspaper – a picture with captions – without receiving any previous information regarding the characters illustrated in the picture or the relationship between them. We must mention that both the picture and the text that accompanied it included several blends and complicated conceptual networks. Still, the speakers were able to recreate the missing context, without having much knowledge of the situation described. "Miraculously", the speaker manages to interpret what was communicated, to identify irony and humour and to make the necessary inferences, partly due to the fact that they belonged to a (relatively) common cultural background (they came from European, democratic countries), but mostly because they were sensitive to the speaker's intentions, recreating what was originally produced by the speaker. Meaning arises among participants and speaker's intentions always play a very important part in the interpretation process.

A vital relationship that seems to be often exploited by creators of political discourse is *identity*, probably because it is generally taken for granted, when , in fact, it should be regarded as a highly complex and imaginative process. When we recruit characters from an input space, for instance, we have the option of selecting only a certain trait or side of their personality and ignore others in order to achieve the intended purpose. We tried to show how the image of a well-known Romanian politician was built by means of conceptual blending.

Conceptual Integration has attracted several criticisms too and we discuss them in the last section of the second chapter. We will only mention one here: although they claim to regard meaning construction as something dynamic, Fauconnier and Turner represent mental spaces as circles and elements as dots, which suggest a static model, instead of emphasizing the relations among elements. In *The Continuity of Mind* (2008) Michael Spivey has an interesting theory with respect to the concepts and representations understood as continuous mental processes, rather than as entities.

Although meaning creation is the work of internal cognitive processes, we must also view it as a result of cooperation among individuals, so, in the third chapter we extended the analysis in order to incorporate the social and cultural background.

The last chapter is divided into three main parts – one dealing with emotions in relation to reason (following Damasio's argument that emotions and reason cannot be separated, as they play a crucial part in human activities such as a making choices and connecting to a social group), a second one that talks about the construction of social reality (discussing topics such as

collective intentionality, institutional facts, constitutive rules, leadership) and a third part, which consists of a practical analysis of *heat metaphor* in Romanian politics.

Damasio's plead against "cool reason" is especially relevant in the context of political discourse from more than one point of view. First of all, cold and purely objective reason becomes a myth. Then, it seems to support the entire architecture built by Cognitive linguistics:

> „In some circumstances, real-time processing may require holding information-representations of persons, objects, or scenes, for instance-in mind for longer periods, especially if new options or consequences surface and require comparison. Furthermore, in our tasks, the situations and questions about them were presented almost entirely through language. More often than not, real life faces us with a greater mix of pictorial and linguistic material. We are confronted with people and objects; with sights, sounds, smells, and so on; with scenes of varying intensities; and with whatever narratives, verbal and or pictorial, we create to accompany them."

(Damasio 1994: 50)

Finally, in order to function properly as a member of a social group, emotions are very important. Then, we continue by discussing the relation between language and emotions and we introduce the classical debate between ethnocentrism, researchers who claim emotions are universal and a completely different view which suggests we understand our emotions or even experience them differently, according to our own language and culture. We thought there was no reason to choose between the biological, universal level and the cultural level and we can consider both as essential to the way we structure our experience as far as emotional states are concerned. However, unlike the defenders of linguistic determinism, we think that communication among different cultures is possible, even when the inventory of concepts defining emotions is very different. When we look at concepts as being something dynamic, communication, imperfect as it may be, becomes possible, both among individuals and cultures.

Finally, we analyzed a set of terms organized around certain conceptual metaphors such as "emotions are heat/fire", "emotions mean internal pressure", following three main steps, as an attempt to integrate a few investigation methods in order to obtain a complete understanding of the phenomena. We started by identifying the basic metaphors (following Lakoff and Johnson), we continued with Talmy's force dynamics, we extended the analysis to the Mental Space Theory and finally, we considered factors such as the specificity of Romanian cultural environment, along with that of certain sub-cultures (Romanian written press, in our case), the

diachronic perspective in the case of a novel metaphor, thus looking at the linguistic expressions not only as a creation of an individual, but as a result of a collective effort to produce new meaning.

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