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VERBAL IRONY AND LINGUISTIC POLITENESS
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CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

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KEYWORDS:

- linguistic politeness; face; polite language; diplomatic language; politeness principle; impoliteness; *wakimae*; rhetoric; argumentation; persuasion; figure of speech; verbal irony; antiphrasis; echoic mention; pretence; dissimulation; sarcasm; humour; political discourse.

STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION**Introduction**

In our paper, we set out to make a comparative study between the way contemporary political discourse is structured and delivered by two cultures – the American and the Italian ones. More to the core, we focused on two linguistic aspects which are very recurrent in today’s general political discourse: linguistic politeness – which has for a long time been assumed to be a necessary means to transmit a (political) message, and verbal irony – which more and more nowadays seems to take over language in the political field, thus affecting opinions and decisions. Because of the broad influence that political discourse has on all aspects of the life of a society, we decided to tackle the way it is structured contemporarily and to figure out some possible outcomes in two different cultural and political realities. Our particular interest resided in the manifestation of language as politeness and as verbal irony, or politeness and verbal irony conveyed by language; the fact that some scholars consider that politeness and irony have certain universals across cultures, while others think they are particular to each culture and to each respective situation. It was our intention to discover their ways of manifestation in the political discourse of two cultures – albeit they are both of the “Western world”. Although both cultures and manifestations of political discourse reside on the same rhetorical and behavioural foundations, we hoped to bring forward the differences in their manner of expressing politeness and irony.

Part I

The **First Part** of the paper discusses some four theories of linguistic politeness that we considered were the most important and closest to our understanding of the phenomenon, easily applicable to our analysis. This part is presented as such in order to set and show the premises from which we began our analysis of polite language in political discourse; we

touched on Robin Lakoff's politeness principle, tackled Brown and Levinson's and Watts' theories of politeness, as well as Sachiko Ide's thesis on *wakimae* (social norm imposed on the speaker of each society as a kind of prescriptive criteria of social rules of politeness), thus setting the general framework for our analysis with regard to the topic of linguistic politeness.

The examples we took to showcase our viewpoint on what we consider to be the four main theories on linguistic politeness concerning our study are examples taken from one of the world's most prolific 20th-century leader – Lady Margaret Thatcher, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. One of her addresses exemplified in this part proves both instances of linguistic politeness and the lack of it (according to the partial definitions we found in the four politeness theories mentioned and discussed). Lady Thatcher's politeness greatly resides in her behaviour, as well, a behaviour marked by social rules and tradition within the British political arena. Any clear verbal attack (which to us exemplifies a lack of linguistic politeness) is elegantly – we put it – counteracted by the Lady, at times even provoking laughter on behalf of the audience. Given the intertwining of polite and diplomatic behaviour, in these instances, we decided to have a short look over the difference between politeness and diplomacy. As earlier in our paper, we considered linguistic politeness not to be universal – according to Brown & Levinson – after the short analysis on diplomatic language, we considered that the latter may be considered universal and fixed (Villar 2003: 49).

After having re-visited some of the most important, to our view, theories on linguistic politeness, in the first part of our paper, we agreed to conclude (and leave room for more interpretations and further analyses) that linguistic politeness is achieved only by considering Robin Lakoff's rules of politeness – be clear and be polite by not imposing, by giving options and by making others feel good –, while seeing these as the basis of human cooperation through communication. We agreed, and hope to have shown to some small extent, that linguistic politeness helps human communication and cooperation beyond personal views, by engaging in verbal negotiations without damaging face. If the face, in Watt's idea of it, is a public property, then we agree to go as far as to say that linguistic politeness implies social norms, involving reason and acknowledging one's context – as Sachiko Ide would argue with regard to how linguistic politeness is viewed by the Japanese culture. We believe that all these approaches on and theories of linguistic politeness ought to be acknowledged and engaged by political actors when interacting and delivering political discourse.

Part II

The **Second Part** is a presentation of the major remarks made on rhetoric along history, through the major periods and changes that rhetoric has gone through from Aristotle until our days. We argued that the object of rhetoric is persuasion, through arguments (based on logic, mainly), in public and political contexts. We argued that rhetoric is most flourishing in open and democratic societies, where the right to free speech is exercised.

The second part of the dissertation discussed the topic of rhetoric, both in its classical and in its contemporary definitions because we consider it important to understand what is understood today by rhetoric, and how it is mainly used in political discourse. The chapter discusses irony as a rhetorical figure of speech and as a strategy of building discourse and delivering it to the audience. The subchapter on irony as figure of speech approaches the topic by first placing it in its historical context and contemporary understanding. We covered irony from classical rhetoric – as discussed by ancient Greeks and ancient Romans, and until neo-modern times, with a particular emphasis on Wayne C. Booth's view on irony (intended statement meant to help reconstruct the meaning, with no room for re-interpretation, considering context as essential to the use and understanding of irony) and on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on irony – the “double-voiced” word having two meanings: the literal meaning and the one conveyed by the mechanics of the relationship between the utterer and the audience. As a discursive strategy, we briefly gave examples of irony as echoic mention, as pretence and as dissimulation. The idea was to approach the rhetorical figure of speech in its many investments so as to see if in today's political discourse it is engaged in the same manner, and which of the verbal tactics of engaging irony is more profuse, which is the influence it has on the audience and how it relates to linguistic politeness.

The difference was made between irony and other sometimes similarly used figures of speech, such as: litotes or sarcasm, and also in relation to humour. Among the scholars who have tackled verbal irony, we found Linda Hutcheon's so-called definition¹ most interesting: “it is not a static rhetorical tool to be deployed, but itself comes into being in the relations between meanings, but also between people and utterances and, sometimes, between intentions and interpretation” (Hutcheon 1995: 13). We have also observed a

¹ We used the phrase “so-called definition” because Linda Hutcheon herself does not call it a definition, and also because we cannot assume it is the definition of irony. We may assume it is one of the definitions, however.

tendency in political actors to use irony in order to spark laughter or at least smile in the public's acceptance of the discourse, with the intention of, perhaps, getting closer to the audience and thus leading some of its members to accept an idea the political actor is putting out there. In fact, Salvatore Attardo's theoretical paper on irony and humour will be discussed, as it stands at the basis of our dissertation, partly. Within the theoretical part of the dissertation, we will give examples, where needed, of political discourses other than the ones included in the analytical part.

It is our personal view that irony, as a rhetorical figure of speech and of thought at the same time, is no longer considered a figure of thought in some political contexts. At least not after close analysis.

The examples in this third chapter of Part II range from American comedian Lewis Black's sarcasm and humour (2006), to Lady Margaret Thatcher (1980, 1989, 2001), Silvio Berlusconi (2013) and Barack Obama (2012).

Part III

The **Third Part** of the paper briefly discussed political discourse, its rhetoric and how linguistic politeness and verbal irony appear in contemporaneity. We tried to give examples of political discourse in Romanian, with an English translation provided by the author of the dissertation, and examples from one political discourse held in English, by former British Prime Minister – Margaret Thatcher.

Political discourse is a much-discussed type of discourse, having, perhaps, one of the broadest possibilities of approach and interpretation, being disseminated through every means of communication and to the widest range of citizens, regardless of their class, ethnicity, nationality, religion, culture, age, gender etc. Some of the world's greatest scholars have taken to tackling political discourse, through the prism of their own speciality: political science, psychology, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, religion, history, philosophy and so on. Among them, we have approached Dutch linguist, Teun A. van Dijk, whose general definition of political discourse² we have considered in our paper, and have applied our analysis as such. When relating political discourse to linguistic politeness, Robin Lakoff was considered because the linguist is among the first contemporary scholars to have asked the question of whether political discourse and political instances lack politeness or not.

² Teun A. van Dijk, *What Is Political Discourse Analysis?*, Key-note address Congress Political Linguistics. Antwerp, 7-9 December 1995. In Jan Blommaert & Christ Bulcaen (eds.), *Political Linguistics* (pp. 11-52). Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Part IV

In the **Fourth Part**, we analysed political discourse in Italy and the United States of America, as presented and delivered in various settings, within television talk-shows, considering political discourse from Teun A. van Dijk's view – any discourse on political issues, within political contexts, delivered by political actors or not. We observed how and if linguistic politeness is engaged, and how irony affects the audience's or the interlocutor's reaction. Irony, it seems, in the Italian political discourse, and according to our analysis, is merely employed to serve the purpose of mockery and ridicule in politicians' and political actors' attacks on each other. It is certainly meant as critique, as well, but not to the extent of clever, intelligent, subtle critique, which does not fringe on the norms of politeness, assumed universally as considering the others' feelings and face. Verbal irony as engaged in the Italian political discourses that we analysed is merely meant as sarcasm, which is so easily perceived by the entire general audience who might be listening to those precise oral political discourse. We consider that this intense use of sarcasm is used purely as a way of diverting the audience's attention from the real problem, which is that perhaps the utterer has no idea of what answer to give, so they dodge, by trying to put their verbal opponent in a bad light. This might take the audience's attention away from the real problem, but we have no way to make sure that it is so. Certainly, the utterer of the sarcastic remark hopes and perhaps is convinced, too, that this verbal diversion will achieve its goal, but we have no way of knowing this for certain. It is only our personal interpretation that an intelligent audience will not let themselves be fooled by this use of language, which they will see beyond sarcasm and humour, sometimes.

However, there are examples in the Italian political discourse where verbal irony is not sarcasm, but rather satire and thus humour is engaged. The level of linguistic politeness cannot be entirely measured or interpreted by us as we consider that satire is not meant to be tackled in relation with linguistic politeness, for the former is a particular expression of witty critique of behaviours and vices with the view for those aspects to be improved.

For the American political discourse, however, the use of verbal irony is employed slightly differently. Verbal irony is not so much sarcasm as it is humour and perhaps satire, at times. There are instances where pure irony is used in a way that does not infringe on the principles of linguistic politeness which we have tackled in the first part of our paper.

If the theoretical part saw instances of linguistic politeness and verbal irony in the political discourse of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, of American comedian Lewis Black, of President Barack Obama, of former Romanian President Traian Băsescu and that of Silvio Berlusconi, in the fourth and last part of the dissertation we will analyse political discourse; as mentioned before, we will take the case of two television shows aired on Italian and on American television, hosting a number of political actors, journalists and critics discussing and debating upon world politics or national politics. We opted for television talk-shows because such a setting is more likely to see a wide range of manifestations of contemporary political discourse as held by various utterers with different backgrounds: political analysts, politicians, but also writers, comedians and journalists who engage in political talk, on political issues. The many possibilities of verbal irony and linguistic politeness manifestation in political discourse are more likely to occur in a live televised transmission, where the interactants may interfere in each other's interventions – this seems more unstable and our hope is to find situations, linguistic instances that are spontaneous, somewhat improvised, at times, and not fixed, controlled. These instances interest us for they might bring out manners of expressing messages in political discourse, manners of engaging the language which may show the use of verbal irony and of linguistic politeness and how the former can also be an expression of the latter, if ever.

A televised talk-show, with various actors engaging, will always see more linguistic spontaneity and unexpected outcomes in comparison to a speech delivered by one actor, in front of an audience (*i.e.*, a speech for a presidential campaign), where language is controlled and there are no intermissions or interruptions which may affect the quality of language, or the message, which may cause the utterer to express themselves in a different way than the expected one. A one-way political discourse, as we'd like to call it, is that in which the political discourse is delivered to an audience without there being a possibility of verbal interaction between utterer and interlocutor. The audience is simply expected to receive the message and interpret it whichever way. Whereas in a setting where there are various utterers which interact, such as a televised talk-show, the political discourse is a different one and there may surge unexpected linguistic interactions which may help the goal of our dissertation.

We used Linguistic Analysis, Rhetorical Political Analysis, Political Discourse Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis in order to arrive at the intended result. We engaged Linguistic Analysis at the level of semantics and pragmatics in order to describe

what we expected to be conscious and unconscious processes which people use in order to convey their intended meaning of utterances, with the hope that we might perceive some insight into the speakers' reasoning.

We should like to observe that, no matter the language it is expressed in, the language of contemporary political discourse, at least in the United States of America and in Italy (for we regard our examples as general representations of how political discourse is structured and delivered nowadays in two referential world cultures and political arenas) – the language used is simple, no excessive (or at all) use of metaphors or other rhetorical figures of speech which would usually come to organise such an intricate type of discourse. From the viewpoint of Linguistic Analysis, of Rhetoric Analysis, Political Discourse Analysis and even Critical Discourse Analysis (which would comprise, to some extent, the rest of the methods of analysis, in our view) the language is such that it may reach the understanding of anyone in the audience, no matter their education, culture or age. The only thing one would need to be acquainted with is the political or social context so that they understand the entire picture. Language here doesn't present great subtleties; rather it seems the shorter the words, the plainer and more common they are (perhaps in an attempt to appear funny), the less intricate the clauses are. We may argue that it has already began being easier for anyone to capture the ironic meaning than the literal one, because “our very historical context is ironic [...] because today nothing really means what it says. We live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony” (Colebrook 2004: 1). Mockery and ridicule are certainly employed at large both by political actors and by the ones holding a political discourse. From the above analysis, it is our personal evaluation that contemporary political discourse in Italy and in the United States has lowered not only in linguistic performance, but also in the actions that may derive from it due to its populist character. It seems as though language is merely an instrument to express mockery and rage. If political discourse is action, then perhaps political actors should employ more consideration into their political discourse. If language is able to trigger strong and permanent feelings in people, then perhaps we should consider elaborating our discourse on a higher level of reason.

We commented a little further on the examples of verbal irony in the Italian political discourse and in the American one. The question that arose was whether this difference in using verbal irony in political discourse in Italy and the United States of America reflects a difference in approaching political discourse and political realities or rather a matter of culture? Perhaps the analyses of other types of discourses could help us give a more

accurate reply, but our opinion is that political discourse reflects a kind of culture and the way that culture retrospects to discourse, in general. Being that the Italians' are widely renowned for their quick-tempered manners and extrovert character in engaging as a society and as individuals, we thought perhaps irony had developed more as sarcasm for this reason. Whenever used, this use of verbal irony in the Italian political discourse makes it sound like a political actor's personal attack of the individual that is another political actor, perhaps opposed; and indeed we believe this is the case taken from the example previously shown. Although socially and ethically we may consider this kind of verbal interaction as beneath one's dignity, the use of irony as sarcasm is meant to humiliate and ridicule the opponent in the eyes of the audience so that the latter takes sides with the utterer. Also, it seems like a way of blowing steam during a live interview where political opponents try to belittle each other in order that each becomes more credible and thus persuade the audience into adhering to their ideas. We consider this type of verbal engagement rather lacking in politeness. We, thus, concluded that verbal irony as sarcasm lacks linguistic politeness... at least in the examples that we've analysed.

Conclusions

In the **Conclusion**, it is our impression that both American and Italian political discourses have suffered some compromises at the level of the language; the Italian one seems more populist, somehow, less formal. The American political discourse has a certain degree of oratory and seems to keep with verbal formality at one point. Certainly, one may argue that if language is to be employed with greater wit, then many of the members of the audience might not fully understand the message political actors mean to convey. Education, thus, is a major factor of influence and comprehension in a society's development. One may develop the impression that, at least in Italy's case, the audience does not have a full vision of the political and social matters and contexts in which they interact and thus political actors need to lower the level of expression of their ideas in order to get to them, and perhaps make extensive appeal to the *pathos*, putting aside factual arguments or arguments in general, which make for a more successful political dialogue. Whereas, in the American political discourse, because the expression is much more straightforward for the audience to understand, the use of irony is less extensive, while trying to keep in with linguistic politeness.

The study developed throughout our paper is meant as a starting point for future analyses and studies to be carried out in the realm of contemporary political discourse and

the language engaged. In a globalised world, which sees dangers at every corner (be they military-, economic-, religious- or social-related), communication seems to be evermore complex and language more so. On the one hand, on a political level, on the level of political discourse, language seems to be simplified so as to reach as more people across the globe as possible, thus overlooking the barriers of culture; on the other hand, however, within political discourses, language seems to be employed with great wit, and there are hardly instances where verbal irony is not used, in whichever way. Nonetheless, we consider that linguistic politeness should be a characteristic to be taken into account when engaging in the delivery of a political discourse, and, thus, the use of verbal irony ought to consider linguistic politeness. Our intention is to raise awareness of this aspect and lead to further studies in the field, studies carried on by political actors, perhaps, which might consider using less verbal aggression and more consideration for the other.

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