

Key Aspects of Myths and Metaphors in Romanian Political Discourse from a Cognitive Linguistic Perspective

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Abstract. *In its endeavour to legitimate power, political communication seeks to convince the electorate, in every possible way and on every possible occasion and, while doing so, it resorts to different linguistic strategies. The presence of myths and metaphors seems to have flourished in today's political discourse, probably due to the numerous political crises that have erupted lately at an international level. This article aims to address a few of the linguistic characteristics of political myths and metaphors, mostly from a theoretical point of view, trying at the same time to establish a connection between the two, regarding the creation of political realities and practices through language.*

Keywords: Political communication; Political metaphors; Myths; Linguistic strategies; Political representation.

Language, myth, and metaphor in political discourse

“Knowing begins with the awareness of the deceptiveness of our common-sense perceptions ... most people are half-awake, half-dreaming and are unaware that most of what they hold to be true and self-evident is illusion produced by the suggestive influence of the social world in which they live.” (Fromm 1983: 28)

Myths and metaphors have always been deeply rooted in political language, probably because “politics is quintessentially a linguistic activity, an activity in which language is employed to inform others about political issues and persuade them to adopt courses of action in regard to these issues” (Geis 1989, p. 18). Tackling things from this perspective, one may depict the importance of language as the foundation of a very complex mechanism such as political communication. Taking one step further, there have been numerous positions arguing that language may be more than just a “carrier” of political messages, as Edelman (1987, p. 5) underlines that language is “not simply an instrument for describing events but [is] itself a part of events”. In relation to this statement, Geis considers that language employed to describe different political events “[...] can influence political perceptions in a way that goes beyond its propositional content. The net effect can be a subtle, largely covert influence of language on political perceptions” (Edelman 1987). The relationship between political language and political thought can be explained through the fact that our attitude towards a thing or an event is considerably affected by the way in which those are described (Whorf 1964). Describing a thing or an event presupposes some background assumptions and, in the case of political language, such a description would include, besides linguistic significance, the political beliefs encoded in the language. Neşu (2005, p. 23) believes that the unbiased centre of any political discourse is represented by the power of words. This power generates a specific rhetoric, materialized in the use of a specialized vocabulary, specific discursive clichés and stereotypes, and specific argumentative rules and strategies. Political discourse relates to concepts (persons, situations, things) situated outside the common sense daily routine. It orientates itself towards a past or a future, towards its founders, an initial charter and its principles, images and symbols, progress, change, and the perspectives that impose future management assurance (Zglobiu 2015, p. 13).

Political discourse is a distinct type of discourse, as it seeks the legitimization of power. In its process of fulfilling a previously established agenda, most of its uses are dedicated to persuasion and influence. Besides the linguistic devices employed in its construction, it makes use of all the possible mechanisms to create adhesion and in order to do that, political language has always been in a pursuit of communication, as Balandier (2000, p. 149) points out:

“It entails a constant search for compensating means; it resorts to complicated linguistic innuendoes and fosters the employment of semantic ruses with the aid of specialists. The recipients of political messages turn into descriptors, partly discovering the pleasure of the game in political expression. They look for the text engaged inside conventional discourse, worn out through repetition, or search for words that make sense or for gaps between overt and covert expression, according to the logic of doubletalk”.

It is through language that “the battle of power” is fought. Once the ideologies have been shaped, they carry through their semantic hues a semantic cargo that will be used at some point in the construction of “mythical leaders,” who, in their turn will employ linguistic strategies to provide adhesion and influence through discourse: “successful and charismatic leaders create metaphors onto which followers project their own meanings and in doing so find a degree of socio-psychological and emotional gratification” (Charteris-Black 2009, p. 97).

According to the anthropologist Georges Balandier (2000), there are three main fields where the current political power manifests itself: the rational activities field, the mass media activity field, and the field of mystical political transfiguration. The last one is the place where myths, symbols, rites, collective values and the emotions they provoke tend to perform a unifying function (through creation) in order to establish a form of superior generalized solidarity. In times of turmoil, a specific need for solidarity becomes more evident, as people feel the urge to find symbolic explanations to any existential crisis they undergo (Frunză 2012, p. 183). The position of myth within contemporary political discourse seems to be a well preserved one. As Stoica asserts, “myths have remained an essential part of politics, and more so in a society dominated by communication, as is the postmodern one, a society marked by crises, from an individual level all the way up to a systemic level” (2017, p. 66).

The historian Reinhart Koselleck describes the concept of “crisis” as an irreplaceable semantic concept which implies strict alternatives that permit no further revision: success or failure, right or wrong, life or death, and finally, salvation or damnation (Koselleck 2002, p. 237). In his own words:

“Crises pointed toward the pressure of time, so to speak, which constituted the understanding of the sense of the concept. The knowledge of uncertainty and the compulsion toward foresight were part of almost every mention of crisis in order to prevent disaster or to search for salvation. In so doing, the particular temporal spans were delimited in varying ways according to the spheres of life thematised”

Defining the term and its conceptual connotations, as well as their metaphorical meanings in the medical, political, legal, and theological domains, Koselleck considers that there have been three active semantic models of the crisis in the European mentality since the 17th century: the processual model, the iterative periodic event model, and the anticipatory model. The relevance of the semantic models proposed by Koselleck resides in the fact that most of the metaphors used in political communication nowadays rely on a pre-existent cognitive semantic model of crisis that is active in our mentalities (Ștefănescu 2015, p. 132). The processual model, for example, refers to the fact that “history can be interpreted as a

permanent crisis. World history is the judgment of the world. It is, then, a question of a concept of trial" (Koselleck 2002, p. 240). At a discursive level, the metaphors accompanying the above mentioned model will focus on the concept of "judgment" and "trial": *Our children will judge us, We shall be judged by the next generation or People be our judge.*

Resorting to the use of myth as a linguistic strategy in today's Romanian political discourse tends to have a threefold orientation. Firstly, the contemporary political arena is rather unstable and the electorate seems to undergo crises more often than before, at least at a communicational level. In such times, politicians prefer to deliver direct solutions and use simple formulations that target the cognitive patterns deeply rooted in the peoples' systems of thought (Marga 2004, p. 82). In their attempt to offer simple solutions to complex issues, accessing the mythical thinking coordinates of the electorate facilitates the almost effortless decoding of the intended political message. Secondly, mythical themes can be evoked through the use of favoured metaphors (Geis 1989, p. 174). Amongst all the linguistic procedures offered by language, metaphor, from a cognitive perspective, enables "thinking of one thing (A) as though it were another thing (B), and linguistically this will result in an item of vocabulary or a larger stretch of text being applied in an unusual or a new way (Goatly 2007, p. 11). And thirdly, psychological studies undertaken in the domain of impression formation point out the fact that impressions are highly perseverant. Put simply, once formed, the cognitive structure of the impression can hardly be distorted, altered or discharged (see Andersen, Reznik and Glassman 2005; Crawford, Sherman and Hamilton 2002). Since both myths and metaphors operate at a cognitive level, triggering interpretations based on previous personal experiences of the world, individual worldviews and different inner cognitions, they allow a very generous space for manoeuvres in terms of political discursive strategies.

The use of political myths and metaphors as a linguistic strategy in Romanian political discourse

The existence of myth has accompanied our collective consciousness for centuries. Boticci (2007, p. 116) asserts that the basic performance of myth is to provide names, that is, only by naming does something or someone become the "myth of" something or someone, providing a direct object of the story. In her opinion,

"Providing names does not just render stories possible; naming the unknown is already a way of dominating the unknown. Denominating a thing is the first – if not the most interesting – answer to the question *what is this or that?* Moreover, by giving a name to the unknown, whole webs of other meanings are recalled".

The practical dimension of myth consists in offering the possibility of a narrative to collect and combine different elements into a plot. The existence of a plot allows the people involved in social action to represent their upcoming action in the form of a narrative or sequence of events that ensures the triumph of their cause (Boticci 2007, p. 116). In politics, ensuring the triumph of a cause means more votes. Since the whole political discursive construction aims to obtain the legitimization of power, the abundance of the so-called political plots has been extensively used in an attempt to correlate the emotional needs of the Romanian electorate to the hidden agenda of politics. Moreover, political myths permit narratives of the events to be shaped in a dramatic setting (Tudor 1972). The magical linguistic formula of the last two decades of Romanian political discourse seems to be a correlation between different moments of crises with the specific pathos of political myths brought forward through the use of familiar metaphors. As far as the settings of myth are concerned, there are numerous contexts in which political myths have flooded into the public space: "The work on myth is a process that can take place in very different settings: speeches, icons, arts, both visual and otherwise, rituals and almost all other kinds of social practices" (Boticci 2007, p. 181).

According to Raoul Girardet (1997, p. 23) there are four fundamental political myths: Conspiracy, the Saviour, the Golden Age, and Unity. The conspiracy myth activates the symbol of the darkness, as opposed to the saviour myth which operates with the symbol of light. At a linguistic level the radial category (Lakoff 2012, p. 22) of light, for example, is characterized by the sub models: (a) natural light; (b) artificial light; thus allowing the construction of different metaphors on these models and their variations. What is nevertheless worth mentioning is the fact that political language operates with types of prototypes, which are different elements of different categories, used to represent the categories as a whole in the process of reasoning. Moreover, the inferences drawn about the category members as a whole, allow the extrapolation of the member's qualities upon the whole group. If we consider, for example, the metaphor "a bright politician", the cognitive constructions would include all the positive semantic choices for the model of "light" and the final construction that we obtain would be a positive mental image applied to the person and by extension to the whole group.

The use of metaphor as a linguistic strategy has become a common trait of Romanian political discourse today. Due to the fact that the mechanism of metaphor allows conceptualising a notion in terms of another, it has become the easiest way for the political text producers to reach their audience. According to the conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff 2002), most of our everyday speech is based on metaphors. Thus, metaphor is embedded in the way we build our world using representations or conceptual metaphors. Metaphorical common sense reasoning helps us decode metaphors such as: "*Romania goes forward but with its brakes pushed*

to the floor” or “The entire Romanian society probably needs mental evolution...” (The Address of the President of Romania, Timișoara, March 12, 2005), which otherwise would make no sense at all. Another aspect that has to be mentioned is the fact that metaphor facilitates the explanation of abstract notions through familiar ones, such as: *family, health, war, sport* and so on. Recent studies on political metaphors undertaken in the field of corpus analysis show that the most common metaphors in Romanian political discourse have started

“The modern process of the transfer of items from a field to another applies to items from Biology, Medicine, Law: to proliferate nuclear weapons/drugs/criminal organisations, electoral fever, social convulsions, to inoculate ideas, political corpse, sterile discussions, shock therapy, inflamed political situation, haemorrhage of words or brains, social and economic tensions become chronic” (Filimon 2012).

Lakoff (2002) explains conceptual metaphor as a conventional way of conceptualizing one domain of experience in terms of another, often unconsciously. A plausible explanation for the process of the transfer of items from a field to another could be the fact that politicians tend to use the lexical choices of their own domains of expertise which are, somehow, imported into the political mandate: “The country is led much harder than a ship on whose board there is no opposition” (Ex Romanian President, Traian Băsescu, Constanța, August 16, 2013).

One of the most extensively used metaphors in the Romanian political discourse during the last century has been the metaphorical representation of Europe as a family. Filimon (2012) considers it became a favourite cliché of the Romanian politicians: “Our country must be anchored in the European family of democratic nations.” Directly linked to the myth of unity, the idea of a shared political destiny under the umbrella of a protective European family has linguistically materialised itself as one of the most successful metaphorical constructions so far.

Taking into consideration the above mentioned examples, the use of myth and metaphor has definitely become a linguistic strategy in the political discourse of nowadays. Matching the narrative of a myth with the adequate metaphors provides distinct type of discourse that creates adhesion. Trying to persuade the electorate is one of the key traits of any type of political discourse, and the use of myths and metaphors has become a very elaborate way to address the audiences, in terms of not telling the people what to think, but just to suggest it.

Conclusion

One may say that political myths and metaphors should have disappeared by now from the political language, as we have entered an era of rationalisation, but the existence of the two is proven by the most powerful tool in political commu-

nication: language itself. As far as the Romanian political discourse is concerned, we may bring as a solid argument in favour of the use of myths and metaphors the fact that, due to the political turmoil of the last centuries, the political game relies on the emotional vote. Regardless of the political colour, the battle has been fought to accede to power and in order to do that politicians must have access to the emotions of the electorate. Reality has proven that audiences choose politicians who are capable of adorning their speeches with myths and metaphors rather than the ones with direct and technical speeches. Addressing the linguistic characteristics of the myths and metaphors of political discourse may be an appropriate move if we want to avoid the manipulation of populist discourse, for example. On the other hand, the fall into a technocratic discourse may diminish the chances of the electorate to take part in the process of political decision-making, which is the very core of a healthy democracy.

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