

# L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI LINGUE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE  
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

1

ANNO XVI 2008

*SPECIAL ISSUE*

Proceedings of the IADA Workshop  
*Word Meaning in Argumentative Dialogue*

Homage to Sorin Stati

VOLUME 1

EDUCATT - UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

L'ANALISI  
LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

---

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE  
E LETTERATURE STRANIERE

UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

ANNO XVI 2008

*SPECIAL ISSUE*

Proceedings of the IADA Workshop  
*Word Meaning in Argumentative Dialogue*

Homage to Sorin Stati

Milan 2008, 15-17 May

VOLUME 1

edited by G. Gobber, S. Cantarini, S. Cigada, M.C. Gatti & S. Gilardoni

# L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

Facoltà di Scienze linguistiche e Letterature straniere

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

Anno XVI - 1/2008

ISSN 1122-1917

---

## **Direzione**

GIUSEPPE BERNARDELLI

LUISA CAMAIORA

SERGIO CIGADA

GIOVANNI GOBBER

## **Comitato scientifico**

GIUSEPPE BERNARDELLI - LUISA CAMAIORA - BONA CAMBIAGHI - ARTURO CATTANEO

SERGIO CIGADA - MARIA FRANCA FROLA - ENRICA GALAZZI - GIOVANNI GOBBER

DANTE LIANO - MARGHERITA ULRYCH - MARISA VERNA - SERENA VITALE - MARIA TERESA ZANOLA

## **Segreteria di redazione**

LAURA BALBIANI - GIULIANA BENDELLI - ANNA BONOLA - GUIDO MILANESE

MARIACRISTINA PEDRAZZINI - VITTORIA PRENCIPE - MARISA VERNA

Pubblicazione realizzata con il contributo PRIN - anno 2006

© 2009 EDUCatt - Ente per il Diritto allo Studio Universitario dell'Università Cattolica

Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.72342235 - fax 02.80.53.215

*e-mail:* editoriale.dsu@unicatt.it (*produzione*); librario.dsu@unicatt.it (*distribuzione*);

*web:* [www.unicatt.it/librario](http://www.unicatt.it/librario)

*Redazione della Rivista:* [redazione.all@unicatt.it](mailto:redazione.all@unicatt.it) - *web:* [www.unicatt.it/librario/all](http://www.unicatt.it/librario/all)

Questo volume è stato stampato nel mese di luglio 2009

presso la Litografia Solari - Peschiera Borromeo (Milano)

## DISCURSIVE PERSPECTIVE AND ARGUMENTATION IN THE ROMANIAN PARLIAMENTARY DISCOURSE. A CASE STUDY

LILIANA IONESCU-RUXĂNDIOIU

### *1. Preliminary remarks*

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of April 2007, the two Chambers of the Romanian Parliament gathered in a joint session with a unique point on its agenda: to debate the proposal of President Traian Băsescu's suspension from office. This debate was the result of an ambiguous decision of the Constitutional Court (CC), which admitted the infringement of the Constitution by the President, but declared his unconstitutional deeds as minor with regard to both their content and their consequences. Accordingly, the decision was transferred to the Parliament. As the great majority of the MPs voted in favour of the suspension (322 vs. 108), the President was suspended from office for 30 days and the president of the Senate was appointed to carry out his charges. The referendum organized on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May brought the President back to office, in spite of a high rate of absenteeism (participation of less than 45%) and of the fact that 25% of the participants were against.

This paper has in view the intervention of a prominent member of the social democratic parliamentary group, the president of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), Mircea Geoană, in the above mentioned debate. The social democrats, the most important opposition party, were the authors of the suspension proposal, signed by 200 MPs.

The speech under consideration has a very complex and elaborated structure. At the macro-discursive level, one can identify three basic units. The first, a long introduction defining the main goal of the parliamentary session, involves a sub-textual criticism directed towards the hesitating attitude of the CC. This institution considered that the notoriety of the facts invoked in the proposal of suspension from office could not offer a solid basis for a peremptory verdict and asked the Parliament to prove these facts. The speaker's starting point is the axiom "The infringement of the Constitution by Traian Băsescu is a political reality". The gravity of the President's deeds is not proved, but only asserted in an insistent manner and in very general and abstract terms. The conclusion is that the existing system has reached its limits and that Traian Băsescu is "a failed political project". His suspension from office would close a tragic chapter in our history: the reign of a leader's subjective will and the myth of the providential leader. Our analysis will focus on this unit.

The second unit lists the President's major abuses. To his cynical formula "it will do", the rhetor answers "it won't do any more", and concludes that this is "a worn-out

way of making politics”.

The third unit presents the consequence of President's behaviour, who continuously claimed his intention to be a “President-player”: Romania of the “President-player” is a country deeply affected by a profound crisis. The normal conclusion is: “Traian Băsescu is a closed chapter”; by voting in favour of his suspension from office, the MPs would offer the people the chance of a fresh start.

Our analysis will focus on the first unit, setting out several basic argumentation strategies and techniques identified in the text. We shall try to bring forward – in a pragma-semantic analytical framework – the effects of some grammatical and lexical choices made by the speaker upon the argumentation processes.

## *2. The source of argumentation. The source-audience relationship. The discursive perspective*

As a component of the communicative activity, argumentation involves a source, an object (the target the arguments are focused on) and an audience that receives and evaluates the arguments.

Two classes of personal forms, whose distribution is strongly unbalanced, make reference to the source of argumentation: the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular (A) and the quantitatively prevalent 1<sup>st</sup> person plural forms (B) of the personal and possessive pronouns, as well as of the verbs.

A(a) The 1<sup>st</sup> pers. sg. appears mostly in meta-communicative utterances, which have a parenthetic use. They motivate some particular features of the discourse organization:

- (1) “I felt the need of an introduction – which you might find too long – in order to ensure a better understanding of our role today”,

express or evaluate speaker's own attitude in a certain moment of his performance:

- (2) “I can tell you, in front of God and of my own conscience that...”;  
“I am saying that in a very responsible way”,

or express predictions about the attitude of the audience:

- (3) “Dear colleagues and citizens who are watching – I am convinced – with great anxiety this important session...”.

In example (2), the presence of the 1<sup>st</sup> person sg. seems to mark a self-disclosing attitude, but in fact speaker's sincerity is part of the performance he is staging (see Goffman 1959: 17-18).

(b) There is also an I marking the opposition and delimiting two polar points of view:

- (4) “Traian Băsescu says that only thieves need peace in order to better steal. I tell **him** that Romanians need peace because only in peace can they raise their children [...]. And I also tell **Mister Băsescu** that thieves hide better and steal undisturbed when the riot is loud, as loud as possible.”

Repetition and parallelism amplify the antithesis.

(c) A stronger expression of the speaker's goals appears when urging the audience to adhere to his evaluation of President's actions, in a formula with an explicit performative verb:

- (5) "Today **I am solemnly asking you** to show President **Băsescu** that this is a worn out manner of making politics".

(B) Except for the above mentioned situations, the source of argumentation is ambiguously defined by the use of the 1<sup>st</sup> person pl. The inclusive meaning of this person creates a "useful ambivalence" (Wales 1996: 58), currently exploited in the political discourse. "We is one of the most political of all pronouns", as T.A. van Dijk (2004: 360) puts it; it offers the speaker the advantage of disguising his subjectivity. **We** "is a shifting signifier" (Wales 1996: 62), placing the **ego** in various combinations (for their inventory functions, Wales 1996: 58-68), which sometimes are explicitly described by the speaker. In the case under consideration, there are several meanings covered by the 1<sup>st</sup> pers. pl. forms.

(a) The speaker and the group of insiders from the audience (the other MPs). This meaning results from the reference to different actions involving only this part of the audience:

- (6) "What **we** are going to decide **within this supreme forum of the Romanian democracy** today is how serious the deeds of the Romanian President are".

Still, from the very beginning, one can notice a strategic ambiguity introduced by the double opening formula of address: "Honorable colleagues, Dear Romanians", which brings together insiders (MPs) and outsiders (ordinary citizens), as equally ratified participants in the debate. What follows is exclusively directed towards the MPs.

One may wonder why the speaker explains in detail the aims and tasks of the parliamentary session, fixing an agenda to the MPs, when usually this is the obligation of the chairman of the session. This happens because – as already mentioned – his parliamentary group initiated the proposal of President's suspension from office. The rhetor does not speak for himself, but in the name of the political group whose mandatory he is. His status of spokesperson of a certain group is strategically extended, tacitly including all the groups of MPs; the existence of largely shared views is consequently insinuated. This is a perverse persuasive strategy. One of its technical instruments is a repeated parallel between the unfulfilled mission of the CC and the mission of the Parliament, considered as a block. The formula repeated unchanged four times is:

- (7) "Legally, the Court did not have the possibility to evaluate the prejudices caused to Romania by [x]. Today we need to say that [y] is an extremely serious deed / is extremely serious."

(where x and y are various labels used to classify different actions of the president, often in a metonymic cause – effect relationship. For example: x = "continuous attacks directed towards the main institutions of the state"; y = "blocking these institutions,

dragging them into a pointless war”).

(b) The speaker and the political class in general. If in the case (a) there is no explicit reference to the MPs, in this case political class is explicitly mentioned, appositive constructions defining the speaker as one of its members:

- (8) “It is **our** collective fault, the fault **of the whole political class...**”;  
 “The time has come for **us, the Romanian political class**, [...] to propose a great national project to Romania”.

One can notice the same strategic tendency towards leveling the differences between the political parties.

In spite of the objective semantic differences, the names **political class** and **politicians** are contextually used as quasi-synonyms of MPs, as it results from the following example:

- (9) “It is our duty as **politicians** towards the **citizens** who have **elected us** and who still have some hope from **the Romanian parliament...**”.

In comparison with the groups designated by different forms of the 1<sup>st</sup> pers. pl., the citizens or the Romanians – even if invoked as equally involved in the debate in the beginning (see above) – appear in fact not as outsiders, but rather as aliens (“not like us” – Wales 1996: 60). See the preceding example, as well as the following one:

- (10) “**We** should honestly tell **Romanians** what to expect in the future, and especially what **we** can and are trying to do for **them**.”

These examples fully reflect an elitist attitude of the politicians who consider themselves as a different community, in a superior position, in charge with the destiny of the whole nation, conceived as a passive mass of people. Accordingly, in this text, the distinction we/they does not concern different political parties (for a discussion about “them” and “us” attitudes, Wales 1996: 58-63), but politicians vs. citizens (or MPs vs. voters). This distinction is preserved in a more analytic review of those who could express an opinion:

- (11) “**The Social Democratic Party** and even **I** and maybe **all of us** and maybe **the citizens of Romania** hoped that at least at the 13<sup>th</sup> hour, Traian Băsescu would eventually adjust his behavior”.

(c) Beside the above described cases of specific reference of the 1<sup>st</sup> pers. pl. forms (a and b), there are cases of generalized reference (for the distinction between specific exophoric reference and generalized homophoric reference, Wales 1996: 58-59). Sometimes the 1<sup>st</sup> pers. pl. forms express impersonal meanings:

- (12) “... **we** cannot speak about prosperity, equity, solidarity, justice or democracy in Romania” (=one cannot speak)

or indefinite meanings, with generic connotations (the Romanians):

- (13) “Our start in Europe risks being a failure”;  
“Unfortunately for him and for us, Traian Băsescu is...”  
“It is better to build (literal translation: that we build) a new Romania”.

Only in these situations, is the polarization politicians/citizens suspended in favour of the common national identity. What is sometimes suggested is the isolation of the President, who appears as the only person acting contrary to the general aspirations. Reinforcing the team views and extending them to the whole nation is another variant of the persuasive strategy of ignoring the differences, which we have already discussed.

Speaker’s strategy of overlooking the politically heterogeneous structure of the Parliament and presenting the MP status as a unifying factor is determined by the basic goal of this speech: to get a vote in favor of President’s suspension from office. It has a strong impact on the general organization of the discourse as well as on the choices at the argumentative level (the nature and disposition of arguments, the means of argumentation). The speaker does not engage in polemics with other political groups. It is only an implicit criticism directed towards the CC, whose ambiguous decision was supposedly a result of the intimidating actions of the President.

### 3. *The target of argumentation. Argumentative strategies and techniques*

The main target of an explicit sharp criticism is Traian Băsescu, pictured as an embodiment of a principle of evil. *Ad personam* sophisms, in their abusive variant (see van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004: 177), aiming at discrediting the President, represent an important component of the argumentation system displayed by the text. This is a basic strategy in the process of motivating the proposal of the SDP parliamentary group.

Closely connected with it is another type of strategic sophistic argumentation characteristic of the text: *petitio principii*. In the beginning, where the speaker was supposed to prove that president’s deeds are “extremely serious”, as repeatedly asserted, the whole presentation creates the impression of reminding facts which are very well known by everybody. In other words, the “facts” selected by the SDP spokesperson appear as part of the doxa. The doxa delimits a space which strongly determines the discourse situation where argumentation takes place (for the strategic functioning of the doxa in argumentation, see Amossy 2006: 99-125). In the case under consideration, it represents another strategic means of inducing the idea of a consensus between the MPs: no demonstration is necessary and, at the same time, being taken for granted, these facts cannot be contested. At a closer examination, the so-called “facts” are, actually, either too abstract, or subjectively interpreted. They are presented in a patterned sentential form, as possible definitions of some general terms, like *deed* or *fact*:

- (14) “Today, we need to say that [x] is an extremely serious *deed* / *fact*.”

We can add that the facts are named using infinitives with a nominal value (which can also be translated in English by *-ing* forms), whose meaning is abstract by definition



(*to block* the main institutions of the state; *to drag* them into a pointless war; *to denigrate* the magistrates and the law courts; *to denigrate* the Parliament, a fundamental institution of any democracy). As a matter of fact, all these are classificatory terms, involving generalizations. But as no mention appears about particular deeds of the incriminated President in order to ground such classifications, these terms reflect a rather subjective analysis of the facts.

The key word of the introductory part of the speech is the adjective *serious*, which carries an intrinsic axiological (negative) meaning. It is the label applied to President's deeds, getting an important argumentative function by its rhetoric repetition. There is a long chain of negative terms which strengthen each other: *abuses, excesses, blackmail, intimidation, prejudices, refuse, denigration, attacks*; the above mentioned nominal infinitives can be added too. They form an isotopic discourse core, boosting the evaluation expressed by the adjective more efficiently than the arguments themselves and accordingly assigning a certain argumentative orientation to the discourse (Amossy 2006: 160-162). At the same time, the isotopic series provides strong reasons to consider President's behavior as non-democratic and to associate it with a detested past. Traian Băsescu is finally declared "the last President of the old system". This creates the possibility to introduce another dichotomy: old/new, and to offer an optimistic prospective view based on the use of the met-aphoric cliché of building a house:

- (15) "It is better to build a new Romania on a new foundation, on a sound foundation, than to build it on a shaking, rotten and dangerous one, and to find, after several years, that the whole edifice collapses with the Romanian citizens inside."

The antithesis is another means of indirectly arguing for the President's suspension from office. The whole utterance carries an exhortative implicature: the MPs are indirectly urged (notice the impersonal construction) to make the right choice. They play the core participative role of decision-making Agents, whereas the citizens are mere Patients (Ilie 2005: 191-198).

#### 4. *Final remarks*

Our case study attempted to bring forward the impact of the discursive perspective adopted by the speaker on the structure, functioning and efficiency of the parliamentary discourse.

In a parliamentary debate, an MP can speak for himself – as a rational being –, as a representative of a political group whose mandatory he is, or by virtue of his institutional role. Each of these perspectives has some advantages, but also some drawbacks, depending – among other factors – on the object and the main goals of the debate. At the same time, each perspective defines a specific type of ethos (for a possible typology, see Charaudeau 2005: 85-128).

In the case under consideration, the last variant has been chosen. It enables the speaker to resort to an integrating strategy, using an ambiguous *we*, which has the advantage of apparently maximizing the agreement and minimizing the possibility of disagreement. The inclusive *we* creates the impression of a merger between the audience and the speaker, who accordingly avoids being perceived as a representative of an opposition group. As an effect, polemic forms of expression directed towards other MPs are excluded. Emphasizing the common ground – especially, the common goals of protecting the citizens and securing their welfare –, the speaker can focus his attacks on a target presented, with sophistic arguments, as the unique obstacle in MPs' fight to fulfill their goals. The ethos projected by the speaker is that of a reasonable, unbiased person.

If the strategies of argumentation could be more efficient in disguising speaker's true intentions, lexical selections are more transparent for his / her subjectivity, as usually they include words with axiological (positive or negative) meanings, linked in complex chains.

To conclude, one can admit that the choices made in a political institutional speech are hierarchically structured and the discursive perspective adopted by the speaker is placed at the highest level, determining all the other choices.

### *References*

- Amossy, Ruth (2006). *L'argumentation dans le discours* (2e éd.). Paris: Armand Colin.
- Charaudeau, Patrick (2005). *Le discours politique. Les masques du pouvoir*. Paris: Vuibert.
- Dijk, Teun A. van (2004). Text and context of parliamentary debates. In: Bayley, P. (ed.). *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Parliamentary Discourse*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 339-372.
- Eemeren, Frans H. van & Rob Grootendorst (2004). *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation. The pragma-dialectical approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goffman, Erving (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City & New York: Doubleday & Co.
- Ilie, Cornelia (2005). An integrated approach to the analysis of participant roles in totalitarian discourse. The case of Ceausescu's agent roles. In: de Saussure, L. & P. Schultz (eds.). *Manipulation and Ideologies in the Twentieth Century*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 191-211.
- Wales, Kattie (1996). *Personal pronouns in present-day English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.