

Intensification And Minimization — Persuasive Techniques In The Present Political Discourse

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Abstract: *The political discourse is a “discourse of influence” whose particular nature can be outlined by firstly beginning from the persuasive effect directed to the audience. This type of speech is based on a special relationship (oriented, intentioned, dissimulated) with the receiver, showing its effectiveness exclusively in relation with this one and only on the background of a supportive climate. In these conditions, in the present work, we propose a delimitation of the persuasive strategies used in the present Romanian political discourse and, implicitly, an analysis of their functioning from the perspective of Rank's Model. We consider that this model is essential to approach a political discourse as a process of persuasion, since it lays on an appropriate understanding of persuasion's mechanisms, which can prevent the manifestation of manipulation, being centered upon the development of the discourse's active/critical reception. Thus, we will analyze the manner in which the two main persuasive strategies - intensification and minimization - concretize themselves in today's politicians' speeches, on the basis of two substrategies: on the one hand, the intensification of their own strong points/intensification of opponents' weak points, and, on the other hand, the minimization of their vulnerable points/minimization of their opponents' strong points. The analyzed material is represented by the political speeches from the first electoral confrontation from Cluj, between the candidate of the National Liberal Party, Crin Antonescu and Traian Băsescu, on 14th November 2009 (debate broadcasted by Realitatea TV). On the basis of this televised political debate, we will illustrate that political discourse is (or at least should be) a discursive space carefully elaborated, whose efficiency particularly depends on the force of the discursive strategies, meant to influence the audience.*

Keywords: *discourse of influence, persuasive effect, manipulation*

1. Conceptual and methodological specifications

Starting from the premise that the political discourse is based on a special relationship (oriented, intentioned, dissimulated) with the audience, showing its efficiency exclusively in relation with this one and only on the background of a supportive climate, we propose a delimitation of the persuasive strategies, and, implicitly, a pragma-rhetorical analysis of their functioning from the perspective of Rank's Model.

Approaching from a mythological perspective the forms of the Peitho's¹ cult in ancient Greece, Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge defines persuasion as an art, a technique which is closely related to the privileged political field and also to that of justice's exercise: « persuader, c'est amener quelqu'un à croire, à penser, à vouloir, à faire quelque chose, par une adhésion complète, sentimentale autant qu'intellectuelle » (1991: 395). Thus, persuasion appears as an act of influencing the audience, whose purpose is to obtain adhesion at the subjective level of feelings and emotions². Nevertheless, obtaining adhesion is also the target of persuasion, but this one follows the objective way of reason, of logical-material proofs. In this respect, the difference between argumentative and persuasive strategies can be explained by the correlation between *argumentation* and *persuasion*. The argumentative strategies specific to the act of “determining to do” have, as a purpose, the conviction (corresponding to the truth) following the rational direction of logics, whereas the persuasive strategies specific to the act of “determining to believe” have persuasion as a purpose (corresponding to the verisimilar), following the way of emotion, suggestion and imagination (according to Cmeciu, 2005: 22-23).

We consider that Rank's Model is appropriate for the present analysis, firstly because the declared purpose of its elaboration can inclusively (and not only) attain the sphere of the political discourse; as it results from Hugh Rank's assertions, the model was designed for didactic aims, in order to prepare the critical recipients when, in modern society, propaganda has acquired impressive proportions: “Schools should [...] be centered upon preparing a big part of the population according to a new educational approach, so as the more and more sophisticated techniques of persuasion can be recognized” (Rank, 1976, apud Larson, 2003: 32). The model itself is thus based on an appropriate understanding of persuasion's mechanisms, being centered on the development of their critical and active reception which can become the manifestation of manipulation.

According to Rank's Model, "persuasive agents usually use two main strategies in order to fulfill their objectives or to intensify certain characteristics of the product, of the candidate or of the ideology, or to minimize some aspects" (Larson, 2003: 32). Thus, the model – initially called *intensification/minimization scheme* – is structured on two levels: the level of strategies and the level of tactics. Projecting the political speech (metaphorically seen as a fortress) in the space of confrontations, Camelia Cmeciu distinguishes between *strategy* – the art of leading an army on the basis of an operation plan up to the moment of the contact with the enemy and *tactic* – the art of combining military means in the battle, depending on the context of the battle and on the adopted strategy (2005: 61-62). In this respect, two main strategies can be identified within Rank's Model: intensification and minimization, including two substrategies: on the one hand, "intensification of his/her own strong points" and "intensification of the opponent's weak points", and, on the other hand, "minimization of one's vulnerable points" and "minimization of opponent's strong points" (Larson, 2003: 33). The strategy of intensification is performed with the help of some tactics such as repetitions, association and composition, whereas the strategy of minimization exploits tactics such as omission, diversion and confusion (Larson, 2003: 33).

We mention that the analyzed material on the basis of which we will follow these strategies and tactics is represented by the political speeches from the first electoral confrontation in Cluj, between the candidate of the National Liberal Party, Crin Antonescu and Traian Băsescu, on 14th November 2009 (debate broadcasted by TV Reality). This debate's recording was performed with the help of a TV tuner and its transcription was done on the basis of the system of symbols and conventions used by *The Corpus of spoken Romanian. Samples* (Dascălu Jinga, 2002)³.

2. The persuasive strategy of intensification

Every politician establishes to reach power as one of his/her main objectives; permanently, (s)he is preoccupied with his/her own image by means of which (s)he tries to obtain votes. Or, a credible and attractive image is the first condition of a politician's success. By means of this premise can also be explained the fact that, presently, political actions are performed more obviously according to the principles specific to marketing and advertisement. "The political offer borrowed the characteristics of a product" (Roșca, 2007: 41). Moreover, we could consider the special relationship between politician and audience as being similar to that one between the seller and the customer: the politician-seller searches for the most effective means to sell his/her image, and the electorate-the potential client has to evaluate this image, to select and, finally, to decide by the act of voting. In order to put his/her image into a favourable light, the political actor will try to fully highlight his/her qualities, and, at the same time, to reveal in a certain (mostly exaggerated) manner his/her adversary's flaws.

2.1. Repetition represents the tactics frequently used by politicians to underline their own qualities or the opponent's flaws. The idea that the obsessive resumption can influence audience's affective attitude is being continuously stressed upon, so as the audience can support the "image" with most qualities. We will illustrate the manner in which this tactic is applied both within the substrategy of intensifying his/her own strong points, as well as within the substrategy intensifying the other's flaws.

For instance, during the first electoral confrontation on 14th November, Traian Băsescu resorts to repetition to impress audience with his qualities, the most obvious ones being courage (1) and exemplary conduct:

- (1) „Traian Băsescu: *Sunt un politician care avu (AK) a avut cuRAJ* să vină în fața parlamentului să vă spună <CIT Domnilor parlamentari↑ trebuie să vă reforMAți CIT>. *Sunt un politician care a avut curaj*. să:: susțină... că:: presa trebuie să fie

Liberă domnule Antonescu↓ și să suporte consecințele libertății presei. [...] *Sunt un politician care: a avut curaj* când <MARC toți MARC>.. rÂDEAți de politica externă↓ să spună <CIT Avem nevoie de militari americani la frontiera de <MARC est MARC> a României CIT>↑” (C. E.)

- (2) „Traian Băsescu: Domnu’ Antonescu să știți că *am CĂutat să fiu un moDEL*↓ și spre exemplu eu m-am dus în fiecare zi la servicii (sic!)... Nu știu dacă dumne- // [discursul este întrerupt de aplauzele și râsetele susținătorilor] /ă:... și mai ales *am încercat să fiu un model de om* care resPECTă votu’ electoratului.” (C. E.)

On the one hand, on the occasion of the same confrontation, Crin Antonescu reproaches Traian Băsescu that, during his mandate, he had a disrespectful attitude towards women and that he promoted the undignified woman’s model of quick success. In this respect, the president of the National Liberal Party does not only bring concrete examples to illustrate Traian Băsescu’s inappropriate manifestations, but he also repeats the insulting word that Băsescu addressed to a woman, in the past, word which, maybe, out of decency, would have been recommendable to be omitted⁴. The impact upon the audience was as stronger as the repetition was more often placed at the end of the statement, in the form of a really shocking conclusion:

- (3) „Crin Antonescu: Modelele feminine↑ de pildă↓ și discursul raportat la femeie în timpul mandatului dumneavoastră sunt nepotrivite. Ați promovat.. femeia: obiect↓ femeia cu succes facil↓ *ați vorbit despre: „păsărică”*↓ despre o femeie nu despre un bărbat↓ i-ați smuls telefonul unei ziariste nu unui ziarist↓ ați invitat „pe masă” o ziaristă nu un ziarist. Asta înseamnă o atitudine NEpotrivită față de femei Ați promovat prea puțin modelul ăsta și din păcate↑ *femeile din România nu sunt doar „păsărici”*↓ „țigănci împutite”↓ și nici femei cu succes ușor.” (C. E.)

2.2. Association, as the tactic of the persuasive strategy of intensification, is a process made up of three component elements: “(1) a cause, a product or a candidate associated with (2), an object already accepted or rejected by (3) the public; in this way, the cause, the product or the candidate benefits from or identifies itself/himself with that accepted or repudiated object” (Larson, 2003: 33-34). We conclude that political actors prefer this tactic which seems to have considerable effects. This tactic brought about, to a certain extent, Mircea Geoană’s defeat in the last year presidential elections, if we take into account the whole context: up to the moment of the last election confrontation on 3rd December 2009, Traian Băsescu obsessively associated (both in his speeches and in his elective banners⁵) Mircea Geoană with moguls Dan Voiculescu and Sorin Ovidiu Vântu. These ones were presented as being the persons enriched overnight, owners of television trusts, who unscrupulously manipulate public opinion. It’s a certain fact that the relationships of the Social Democratic Party’s president with these persons wasn’t acknowledged directly, but suspicions became convictions when, in front of the proofs brought by Traian Băsescu, Mircea Geoană confirmed that his image’s association with Sorin Ovidiu Vântu (accused of being behind the fall of the National Investment Fund (NIF) is justified⁶.

- (4) „Traian Băsescu: Ieri a fost arestat Popa Nicolae cel care a devalizat în numele lui Vântu FNI. Vântu are o mare problemă, unul dintre principalii martori a fost arestat. Robert Turcescu.: Vă rog să concentrați.
Traian Băsescu: Are legătură chemarea lui Vântu cu arestarea lui Popa?
Mircea Geoană: E o uriașă minciună. Nu știu cine e Popa ăsta.
Traian Băsescu: Ați fost azi-noapte la Vântu?
Mircea Geoană: Am spus că da.”⁶

Coming back to our analyzed material, one can notice that “the moguls” and “the communists” become in Traian Băsescu’s political speech, the basic element of the

association, usually rejected by the public. He frequently resorts to the persuasive substrategy of intensifying opponents' flaws, by means of association tactics:

- (5) „Crin Antonescu: Păi nu..... Cei care mă susțin cei care mă susțin pe mine v-au simțit lipsa↑ și e vorba de români să știți. <F Nu toți F>↓ niște români. Vom vedea câți.

Traian Băsescu: <R Știu știu R>. *Și Dan Voiculescu mi-a simțit lipsa↓ și Ion Iliescu și Hrebenciuc↓ [râsete] că. nu s-au făcut alianțele de la Grivco nici cu mine↓ dar cu dumneavoastră da.*” (C. E.)

In the above example (5), it is made a politician's association with negative persons who, by the virtue of speech, should be rejected by the receiver. Interesting is the fact that, in such situations, the audience's rejecting attitude can be also triggered by illustrating the impossibility to associate the politician with positive persons who should be immediately accepted:

- (6) „Corneliu Vadim Tudor: *Da' vi se pare normal domnule↑ ca un marinar pensionar↓ fără știință de carte care n-a citit decât etichete de whisky și de rom Jamaica= să ajungă urMAșul lui Mihai Viteazul... și regelui Ferdinand?*” (C. E.)

2.3. Composition is also used in politics, as a persuasion tactic of intensification, not only at the verbal level of the speech, but especially at the iconic level, consisting in “the modification of the material form of the message”, usually by nonverbal means, in the plan of the image; for instance, “the alteration – or the composition – of a candidate's advertising photo” (Larson, 2003: 34). A convincing example in this respect would be the well-known elective scandal from the election campaign for presidency, when the Democratic Liberal Party launched an aggressive anticampaign by exposing doctored⁷ elective posters, with anti-Liberal Democratic Party messages: “Together we will win because together we have 100 years of communism, and now it's our time again.” The posters present Mircea Geoană in the middle, surrounded, on a red background (allusion to communism) by the so-called “communists and moguls” Dan Voiculescu, Adrian Năstase, Ion Iliescu, Marian Vanghelie, Viorel Hrebenciuc and Sorin Ovidiu Vântu. The members of the Social Democratic Party (Vrancea) also exposed anti-Liberal Democratic Party posters with the white inscription on the black background “Do you live well?”⁸, at the basis of which stands the ironic modification of Traian Băsescu's slogan “Live well!”.

3. The persuasive strategy of minimization

In order to stimulate the audience to side with the position and value promoted by the speech, the political actor will also have to conceal his/her weak points and to shadow his/her opponent's strong points. “In fact, what the persuasive agent undertakes is to minimize his/her flaws and his/her opponent's qualities”, with the help of some tactics such as omission, diversion and confusion (Larson, 2003: 35). Of all these, we will consider only the first two tactics, as we think that ambiguity/confusion is more than tactics, being related to the nature of the political speech itself. Furthermore, the political discourse is built within a “rhetoric of ambiguity”⁹, which aims at creating multiple ways of interpretation, being given the audience's heterogeneity.

3.1. Omission was defined as the tactic which supposes “to ignore information with critical content in order to avoid highlighting one's own vulnerable points” (Larson, 2003: 36). At this point, we however wonder if *to omit* is the same as *to lie*, since omission also constitutes a partly presentation of reality, thus misrepresentation. As for this aspect, Septimus Chelcea asserts that omissions practised in politics – such as parliamentarians' incomplete wealth reports – are nothing else but lies by which “truth is deliberately hidden to get certain advantages” (2006: 195). And in the speeches made in different contexts, politician actors tend to omit some aspects, always those which

disadvantage them. Let's follow the functioning of the omission's mechanism, starting from the example below:

- (7) „Crin Antonescu: Păi dumneavoastră și Ion Iliescu↑ ați fost colegi în două partide↓ [Traian Băsescu râde] mă rog v-a fost mai șef. Eu nu. [...] cu domnu': Iliescu↓ cu domnu' GEOAnă↓ cu domnu' Hrebenciuc↓ cu domnu' Vanghelie ați fost aliat. Eu încă nu. Cine a făcut coaliția de la Grivco? Dumneavoastră↑ din când în când când ați avut nevoie. În guvernul lui Iliescu după mineriadă <Î n-am fost eu Î> [Traian Băsescu râde].

Traian Băsescu: Da. [aplauze] Domnu': domnu' Antonescu↑ eu sunt de-acord cu abordarea dumneavoastră. Ea nu are miez de realitate și până la urmă nu toți trebuie să avem responsabilitatea corectitudinii într-o campanie↓ dar aș vrea să vă spun altceva. Sunteți mai Vechi în politică decât mine. *Eu n-am fost Nică în partid cu Ion Iliescu*//

Crin Antonescu: Ei cum să nu?

Traian Băsescu: În FSN? Da?

Crin Antonescu: Nu. Partidul Comunist vorbesc.

Traian Băsescu: Da. Dânsu' era [discurs întrerupt de aplauze și râsete]

Crin Antonescu: Nu e-un partid care să fie uitat. Domnu' președinte↑" (C. E.)

The cause that determined this reply exchange between the two candidates for the presidency is Traian Băsescu's attempt to accuse Crin Antonescu of having sided with Dan Voiculescu, Ion Iliescu and Viorel Hrebenciuc. In these circumstances, the president of the Liberal National Party counterattacks, drawing Traian Băsescu's attention that he isn't entitled to bring this accusation, since he himself was party colleague with Ion Iliescu. From this moment, Traian Băsescu resorts to omission, firstly denying that he took part in the same party as Ion Iliescu ("I wasn't in the same party as Ion Iliescu"). However, at Crin Antonescu's insistence ("How come you didn't?"), he begins to remember about the National Salvation Front (NSF) which doesn't disadvantage him too much (yet), associating his image with a political postcommunist structure. Despite all these, Crin Antonescu wants to remind his counter candidate of the times when this one sided with the Communist Party, together with Ion Iliescu, finally underlining the deliberate resort to omission ("This is not a party to be forgotten, Mr President").

3.2. Diversion represents another tactic allowing the achievement of the persuasive strategy of minimization, consisting in "distracting attention from ascertaining opponent's qualities or one's own flaws" by "furnishing a secondary discussion topic" (Larson, 2003: 36). A method frequently used by the Romanian politicians to create diversion on the moment when they are put in a difficult situation is *humour*. When they are accused of something, they try to distract attention, by finding different pretexts to joke. We have to mention that using jokes in order to make a relaxing atmosphere is included by Brown and Levinson in the 15 "local" strategies of the positive politeness: "Joking is a basic positive-politeness technique, for putting H 'at ease' – for example in response to a *faux pas* of H's, S may joke" (1987: 124).

For instance, when Crin Antonescu alludes to the fact that Traian Băsescu is inferior to him, from the point of view of education, and that his opponent owns doubtful fortunes, the present Romania's president takes advantage of one of his opponent's phrase ("if it's God's will") to make a joke meant to escape from the "trap" which was deliberately set for him:

- (8) „Crin Antonescu: Sunt multe deosebiri între noi aproPO de TEma de azi educație și economie. Mi-ar fi plăcut să discutăm despre educația și economiile dumneavoastră↓ despre educația și economiile mele↓ și să vedeți aCOlo deosebiri↓ foarte mari. Dar dați-mi voie să [discurs întrerupt de aplauze] să vă adresez să vă:: să

vă adresez.. cu tot respectul↓ și pregătindu-mă să fiu președintele <MARC tuturor MARC> românilor↓ INclusiv al dumneavoastră dacă o să dea Dumnezeu. Domnu' Băsescu↑ ați susȚInut//

Traian Băsescu: *Dumnezeu dă↓ da' nu bagă în traistă domnu':. Antonescu. [râsete și aplauze în sală]*" (C. E.)

On another occasion, while discussing about the topic of the young specialists leaving abroad, Crin Antonescu states that the phenomenon itself is generated by the political context, by the members of the government (with indirect allusion to the president) who had an improper attitude towards motivating the specialists from different fields of activity. Feeling that his position is attacked, Traian Băsescu resorts to the same tactic of diversion by means of jokes:

(9) „Crin Antonescu: Eu știu la fel de bine ca dumneavoastră cred din ce cauză pleacă↓ [...] dincolo de asta rămâne un element care nu ține de BANI↓ care nu ține de șansa imediată de a fi retribuiți pe măsura valorii lor profesionale↓ ci ține de înCREderea. în sistemu' instituțional↓ în climatul. politic↓ public↓ intelectual din țara în care trăiesc↓ și eu cred că <MARC aici MARC> un nou președinte↑ cu o nouă atitudine↓ cu o nouă acțiune politică↓ poate să le dea această încredere. [...] Dezamăgirea nu e NICiodată o scuză pentru inacțiune↓ și asta e un mesaj pe care cu tot respectul aș vrea să li-l transmit.

Mihnea Măruță: Vă mulțumesc. Domnule Băsescu.

Traian Băsescu: În afara.: [discurs întrerupt de aplauze] în afara TIMpului întrebării dacă-mi permiteți o glumă↑

Crin Antonescu: Vă <MARC rog MARC>.

Traian Băsescu: /ă: *Vedem că pleacă foarte mulți↓ da' cred că foarte mulți români se întreabă de ce nu plecăm <MARC noi MARC>↑ <@ să scape de noi @>.*" (C. E.)

Thus, the purpose of the political discourse consists in deliberately influencing the audience by elaborating some persuasive strategies which can lead to obtain audience's adhesion to the proposed ideas. In this context, the development of the critical active reception has an essential role in preventing manipulation by means of different persuasion mechanisms.

Endnotes

1. In Greek mythology, Peitho is the goddess of temptation, of seduction; she appears in Aphrodite's suite.
2. In the case of publicity rhetoric, it can be easily remarked "the glide" from the argumentative dimension towards the persuasive one, which tries "to seduce rather than to convince", mostly resorting to feelings rather than to reason (Frunză, 2007: 96-102).
3. See also Hoară Cărașu, Luminița (coord.), *Corpus de limbă română vorbită actuală*, 2005: 10-13.
4. This proves us once again that, in the electoral confrontation, all possible resources are bluntly used.
5. See the appendix.
6. Source - <http://www.hotnews.ro>.
7. See the appendix.
8. See the appendix.
9. Regarding the international ambiguity of the political discourse, as its fundamental trait, see Sălăvăstru, 1999: 82-85; Ștefănescu, 2008: 136-146.

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Appendix: Posters and electoral banners



