

## Libellous Messages in Electoral Posters

Lect. Dr. Gina Necula

Lect. Dr. Marius Velică

Universitatea "Dunărea de Jos" din Galați

**Résumé :** *Le langage politique contemporain semble vouloir quitter la scène du discours publique afin d'occuper le territoire du discours privé, par l'usage des technique spécifiques au dernier. La calomnie est une modalité tout particulière d'intégrer le discours public au discours privé. En tant que stratégie rhétorique efficace, souvent utilisée pendant les dernières campagnes électorales, la calomnie a poussé le discours politique vers une rhétorique violente. Notre travail se propose de souligner le rôle négatif d'une telle stratégie rhétorique.*

**Mots-clef :** *rhétorique violente, calomnie, discours publique, discours privé*

Human communication is generally seen as a direct strategy of influencing people on adopting a certain social/political behaviour thus manipulating their attitudes and beliefs. The political discourse is that particular type of discourse which can highly illustrate this communicating tendency towards manipulation. But manipulation cannot be achieved unless the target electors are very attentively selected. This selection leads to a keen observation of the stimuli that they respond best at. The choice of words may indicate a wish for empathy, in an attempt to attain the reader/hearer's sympathy and complicity. In this respect, political discourse must be as much similar as possible with the electors' discourse. Therefore we may say that the contemporary Romanian political discourse is characterized by an excessive, even vulgar familiarity, as well as an inadequate style that makes the difference between what it is supposed to be and what the political discourse really is, the difference between solemn and ordinary style. This way, slander and label seem to become a common place with the present day political discourse, as long as the public is positively responding to such negative linguistic stimuli. The present article tries to demonstrate that the contemporary political discourse tends to glide from the public sphere into the private one through imprecation, slander and aggressiveness. Consequently, our interest here goes particularly towards libel messages in electoral posters, being motivated by their impact on public. The fact that electoral posters are exposed in public places, where they can be seen, read and interpreted by different categories of readers, determines the value of their message. When electoral posters display libellous messages (whether explicitly expressed or subliminally transmitted) they seem to invite their electors to think and act in the given key.

Before illustrating libellous messages in electoral posters we must stop and give some definitions for libel, in order to mark the limits of the concept in question here.

According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, libel is:

- (1) : a statement or representation published without just cause and tending to expose another to public contempt (2) : defamation of a person by written or representational means (3) : the publication of blasphemous, treasonable, seditious, or obscene writings or pictures (4) : the act, tort, or crime of publishing such a libel.

And according to the Legal Dictionary, libel is:

- 1) n. to publish in print (including pictures), writing or broadcast through radio, television or film, an untruth about another which will do harm to that person or his/her reputation, by tending to bring the target into ridicule, hatred, scorn or contempt of others. Libel is the written or broadcast form of defamation, distinguished from slander which is oral defamation. It is a tort (civil wrong) making the person or entity (like a newspaper, magazine or political organization) open to a lawsuit for damages by the person who can prove the statement about him/her was a lie. Publication need only be to one person, but it must be a statement which claims to be fact, and is not clearly identified as an opinion. While it is sometimes said that the person making the libellous statement must have been intentional and malicious, actually it need only be obvious that the statement would do harm and is untrue. Proof of malice, however, does allow a party defamed to sue for "general damages" for damage to

reputation, while an inadvertent libel limits the damages to actual harm (such as loss of business) called "special damages." "Libel per se" involves statements so vicious that malice is assumed and does not require a proof of intent to get an award of general damages. Libel against the reputation of a person who has died will allow surviving members of the family to bring an action for damages. Most states provide for a party defamed by a periodical to demand a published retraction. If the correction is made, then there is no right to file a lawsuit.

Trying to find arguments to our theory we traced the last electoral campaign that took place in the fall of 2009. After the first scrutiny, two candidates ran for the Presidency of Romania: Traian Basescu (supported by the Democrat-Liberals) and Mircea Geoana (the candidate of the Social-Democrats). Both parties involved in the process agreed to fight the same battle and used slander or libel as a communicating strategy of deprecating the opponent. They were equally likely to support political violence, exhibited the same distribution of trait aggression, and were equivalently responsive and prone to violent rhetoric. The Social-Democrats were as well involved in this as the Democrat-Liberals, as long as they adopted the same offensive strategy against the opponent and his supporters. We shall analyze two samples of electoral banners that collate the same libellous strategies, even if they belong to adverse parties.



Fig.1



Fig. 2

*At first glance everything looks normal in these posters (the candidate in the middle surrounded by most prominent party members, the party logo and the very well known colours assumed by each party), but a second, closer glance shows that they cannot belong to the party/candidate they seem to, because they are, in fact, a parodic version of the original posters. Both of them are libellous because they infer that the candidate is supported by corrupt people, willing to pursue their own interests only. The message with the first poster is rather subliminal, but that of the second poster is explicit. The technique here is even more evidently libellous because the one that created the message simply collated the slogans that closely became clichés and twisted their message as to obtain the opposite of the initial version.*

As a result of this denigrating campaign, the reactions of the two parties that were supposed to be involved were that of denying the libellous actions: none of the two parties were willing to admit/assume paternity of those posters. Instead, both of them filled criminal complaints against the opponents without pursuing the process up to a final point, thus letting us think that the complaints were not meant as resolute actions.

Therefore, we may say that slander and libel seem to be efficient discursive strategies, having as attributes the fact that they can easily turn on people emotions in favour or against an issue or something, all of them used in order to shock and impress the audience, and always give the impression that Everything Is Under Control – you are so familiar with these persons and their intentions that you can dominate them.

The only argument that we find for libellous/slandorous messages in electoral discourse is the attempt of getting voters adhesion and this could be seen as a common practice with human communication in its attempt to perform social functions, such as the sense of belonging to a community. Bronislaw Malinowski (*The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages* : 2001, 390) tried to prove that language is used to perform social functions; in other words, social relationships and interaction are geared to the use of linguistic expressions. One of such functions consists of what he called fatic communion. According to Malinowski, Language is used to maintain fatic communion - a feeling of belonging to a community. Fatic communion implies the maintenance of a sense of community, of solidarity with other members of the group, of a particular status within the hierarchies of the group, and at the same time a feeling of accepting others and being oneself accepted by others.

To conclude, we may say that contemporary Romanian political discourse tends to move from the public sphere into the private one through imprecation, slander and violence. Thus linguistic violence tends to turn into physical violence manipulating and using language as a weapon meant to annihilate any possible opponent. No differences are to be traced among the speakers any longer because the violent discourse does not allow that to happen so that the only way somebody can make his voice heard is through a similar discourse.

Either if we speak about poster messages or political discourses completely assumed by a certain public figure, we are witnessing the same strategy: violent slanderous rhetoric meant to annihilate the opponent and to fully satisfy the targeted public, a public that is not responsive to logical arguments, and willing to vote that particular candidate able to eliminate the others through violent rhetoric.

In fact, slander/libel words are just a smoke-screen used by those speakers who do not have access to other rhetorical means of persuasion but from some of our country's most prominent political figures and personalities down a certain subset of people who litter chat channels in video games and other social outlets, it seems that modesty, politeness, and respect have been widely eschewed in favour of disrespect, taunting, name-calling, hate-spew, and violent speech of one kind or another. The deteriorating quality of

public discourse makes us think that political discourse has become a discursive standard, and, despite all of the studies that demonstrate how public is divided according to social status and degree of culture, at the end of the day, the message goes out to the general public, hitting its target audiences as well as others.

### **Bibliography**

- Labov, W. *Therapeutic Discourse: Psychotherapy as Conversation*, NY.: Academic Press, 1977.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw, *The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages*, in **The Routledge Language & Cultural Theory Reader**, Edited by Lucy Burke, Tony Crowley & Alan Girvin, London, Reprinted 2001.
- Thun, Harald, *Probleme der Phraseologie*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1978.
- Nathan P. Kalmoe2 - *Does Violent Political Rhetoric Fuel Support for Political Violence?* [http://sitemaker.umich.edu/kalmoe/files/kalmoe\\_-\\_political\\_violence.pdf](http://sitemaker.umich.edu/kalmoe/files/kalmoe_-_political_violence.pdf)
- <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/libel>
- <http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/libel>