

# “ATTACK” / “COUNTER ATTACK” OR ON THE RHETORICS OF PERSUASION IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

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## *Abstract*

The cognitive metaphor in media discourse plays a persuasive role, it represents an „image” and the favorite way to reason the events, the reality of the world in which we live in (social, political, economic). It is the assertion on which the study is based. “Charge/counter-charge and the rhetorical persuasion in media language”. We will take into account several aspects: persuasive function of the language, metaphors used in media discourse to persuade, persuasive message type and its materialization in language register. The conclusion of our research is that a pattern exists, belonging to the election campaign in news media, comparable with the political discourse delivered in public spaces, pattern used by extension to other types of campaign, which can be analyzed in terms of a rhetoric of persuasion. The approach perspective is cognitive without excluding linguistic methods and relevant semantic analysis.

**Keywords:** journalistic metaphor, rhetorical persuasion, attack, counterattack

**0.** The journalistic discourse has become in the past few decades a “space” in which the journalist and the receiver meet in one way or another: the first - to persuade, and the second - to take possession in a selective way, of the informational universe, necessary for its own knowledge. The cognitive metaphor has gained a considerable importance from this perspective. Our study is based on two assertions regarding the form and content of the language of the media: 1. in the present-day media there is a discourse of “information” and “the actual language of advertising” (S. Dumistrăcel, 2007), aspects that have serious consequences on the journalistic metaphor. 2. As a component of the media discourse, the metaphor expresses a certain degree of personal introspection that is the conceptualization of the information and the command of the language, as well as the subjective refining of the various forms of culture. This explains the fact that some journalists use a rich language, unique in the different ways of conceptualizing, while others use poor language, in which they project the information. The concepts in black and white, reminiscent of the simplistic good-bad perception of the “mythical age” of the world (we can find it in the tales of the people) lack shade, which lowers the value of the journalistic text.

## **I. “Attack” / “counterattack” or on information and persuasion**

Studying some of the series of equivalences from the interdisciplinary field of sports, the research proposes the excerpt of the metaphor not so much in relation to information, but in terms of the conative function of language, called the imperative-persuasive function (Roman Jakobson, 1963) or function of appeal (Karl Bühler, 1934). Roman Jakobson (1963) addressed this function from the perspective of the recipient. The “persuasive” nature of the conative function is mainly cultivated in the journalistic language. Through the persuasive function we understand the ability of the language to influence, to varying degrees - in the process of cognition - the thoughts and behaviour of the target group, of large groups of people in a given time. From a purely linguistic perspective, the persuasive-imperative function is marked by the second person personal pronoun and verb, by the vocative case of

the noun/personal pronoun and/or the usage of the imperative mood of the Romanian language verb. The supra-segmental markers of the utterance centred on the receiver are then used, for example the exclamatory/interrogative intonation (Look at him! Why don't you visit him?). This is where however two factors different from the phonetic-phonologic and grammatical ones intervene. There are two levels at which the persuasive function can be activated in media: at the level of the semantic content of the message, and at the cognitive level. These are consubstantial dimensions of the type of information, subordinate to the objectives of the press and/or of the journalist, with major implications in the rhetoric of the discourse and the media communication: 1. the cognitive factor. The persuasive function could not be possible outside reasoning, outside equivalences; 2. the semantic factor: the language totals the semantic dimension of the language, but not in all situations does this dimension completely overlap language. The journalist can add major significances, secondary meanings through equivalence, starting from a *conceptual model* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980 ) such as that of the fight: *charge*: “Charge at the highest levels. Ponta: “Even shooting them is not enough” | Anastase: “This character has psychiatric problems” (Libertatea, April 2012), “Tariceanu attacks at a high level: He goes to the ECHR in the Sterling case” (Ghimpele.ro, Oct. 2011); // *counter-charge*: “Religion counteracted in schools” (*evz.ro*, Oct. 2012; “Szukala countercharges: Păduleanu should make a public apology” (*Citynews.ro*, November 2010); [“Faced with a motion, Boc counterattacks”](#) (Oct. 2010).

Not in every situation can the researcher speak about conceptual metaphors which have a clearly defined source area. There are several interferences imposed by the journalistic genre, by the grid of the collective imaginary between the sports metaphors and/or the ones belonging to the sphere of war. The word “counterattack” or “countercharge” means, based on the definition given by the dictionary: “an offensive response conducted by a military unit in defense in order to refuse an attack of the enemy penetrated in its line up and to restore the initial positions. (Sports) Retaliation”. (DEX 1975: 191). The term is also used in the military and sports language, has a special, inter-domain semantic characteristic, recorded in the lexicographical sources. This meaning is universally accepted, nevertheless the journalistic language adds a cognitive-motivational dimension, depending on the function of the context of the communication and the “talent” of the author, which can be found in the titles of newspaper articles: “Bonetti counterattacks and responds to complainants.” “Ignorance is the mother of the ill-educated, of the parasites” (*Gazeta sporturilor*, August 2012)”.

## II. Discussions

1. “Campaign counterattack: Why does Boagiu want to sue Ponta” (*Cotidianul.ro*, November 2012)

where the equivalence between “Counterattack” = “political retaliation, campaign retaliation” has the advantage to constitute a challenge for the curiosity of the receiver, through several characteristics: it “fixes” an image and an information in the collective imaginary; it is the conceptualization of an attitude (counterattack) which has become a behavioural cliché, at least in the electoral campaigns, imposed by the media of the last decade. The lexical and semantic relationship between “counterattack” and “campaign”

contributes to the cancellation of the ambiguity the two journalistic metaphors could have created. The issue is very timely, and the journalist creates the necessary link between an event (an electoral campaign) and the conflict between the agents of political change. The curiosity of the receiver is induced also by the interrogative form of the title. By applying the scheme of the myths in political messages proposed by Raoul Girardet (Girardet 1997), we identify a subtle allusion to what the author called the “conspiracy myth”, generated by the instability of the socio-political instability.

2. Ponta’s counterattack: “I sent my advisers to Cotroceni to teach Basescu what to say in Brussels. He had no idea what was negotiated (Gândul.info, November 2012)

where the persuasive metaphor functions as a marker of the attitude (counter-offensive) and of the opposing “relationship” between two personalities whose traits are objectified; the option for the idea is doubled as in the example 1., the option for a person (Boagiu/ Ponta; Ponta/Băsescu). The difference is marked by the context of communication, general in the first utterance, particular in the second as the “subjective” marks of opposition used by the two journalists: impersonal/non-participating (counterattack, common noun, non-articulated), personal/participating (counterattack, common noun, proclitic definite article). In full agreement with the referential, extra-linguistic context (political, of a socio-human nature, cultural) the equivalence between “counterattack” and “political retaliation” requires an attitude, it is contextually correlated with toponyms/anthroponyms etc., basic elements in the fixing of the image of the public person. The series of metaphors of persuasion - “attack”, “counterattack” - has become a focalizing procedure in the title of the newspaper article. Under the aspect of the linguistic means, the technique is supported by strong verbs semantically marked / by pronominal forms of the self (“I sent”) etc.

3. Ponta counterattacks: “Băsescu confuses me with Boc again. Let me take care of the government, he has destroyed the heart of Romania” (Gândul, November 2012);

In the same area of “attitude” is the message of the title under 3, which we could name campaign title. The “positive” image of the politician is subtly nuanced through the insertion of the emotional suggestion. In a slightly disguised way the attention is oriented towards the persuasive idea of the title: the image of the politician overlaps, it is confused with “the heart of Romania”. The metaphor of the “heart” associated with other elements of the subject is the surprise-producing “denouement” in a confessional type microstructure. The journalist maintains the credibility of the “positive” images not only through the equivalence given by the metaphor: the ideas are developed through the technical pros and cons of argumentation, the objective tone is combined with the subjective tone of the confession. The dynamics/tension inherent to communication, presented through the abundance of verbs (“counteracts”, “mistakes”, “I take care”, “has destroyed”) as an amalgam of styles, the “I-him” dichotomy creates in the receiver the sense to adhere to the public person’s actions. The anthroponyms make the referent unambiguous. Depending on the assumed intention, the title of the campaign comprises two types of messages, one for information, and the other, derived, always of a persuasive nature. Through the message for information under examples 2 and 3 the political person showcases his own identity, on the level of the socio-political context, insisting on the promoted values, on interests but especially on action. The persuasive

message is focused upon the metaphor of “the heart of Romania” used as an emotional marker of political will, which undermines the position held by the Other.

4. “The smart boys” have started their counterattack at the Hidroelectrica (*Capital*, October 2012);

In the journalistic language the text is guided by two principles of media communication: referentiality and credibility of information. The first principle guides the structure of the text based on the capacity to monoreferentialize given by the instruments of the language used. The semantic ambiguity becomes in many of the communication situations one of the strategies of persuasion: “The heart of Romania” (which heart? where is it located?) in example no. 3, together with the “smart boys” (who are the “smart boys”? where do they come from) in example no. 4. There are two persuasive metaphors due to their ambiguous nature. The idea (Sălăvăstru Constantin 2009; Săvulescu Silvia 2003) that the message gains credibility through maintaining a controlled ambiguity becomes more and more accepted. The media-type ambiguity should not be confused with poetic ambiguity, given the potentiation of the representative function in the detriment of the poetic function of the journalistic discourse. David Randall (1998) noted that newspaper articles are not literature, “to write in a newspaper is different from writing a novel or a short story, but not so different as some would like to believe” (David Randall 1998, 137-138). The common denominator of the journalistic texts is the clarity, accessibility, naturalness of formulation (“you will spend less energy trying to write an elegant and fancy phrase, when one simple sentence would be more appropriate”), the maintaining of the phatic function of the language [“all quality texts (...) are clear, easy to read, use a fresh language, stimulate and entertain the reader”, *ibid.*]. Writing “is like a muscle, it becomes stronger if you exercise it daily” notes the researcher in a metaphor that became famous in the scholarly literature.

The undetermined character of the equivalence between “the heart of Romania” and “smart boys” leaves the public option free, which inspires a sense of adhering to the ideas contained in the message. The technique of ambiguity in the media transforms the receiver into a co-participant (together with the journalist) in identifying meanings. This communication between the journalist and the public is realized based on a specific blending of information with knowledge through co-participation. It is a type of knowledge which implies from the part of the receiver public the identification of the informational message of a text/title and the “participation” in the establishment of meaning / in the identification of referents of the derived/persuasive message. The “counterattack” does not contribute in all contexts to the construction of a positive image of the public person, as it can be inferred from example no. 4. Judged in terms of meaning relations established between “smart boys” and “the counterattack has begun” the metaphorical equivalence is “counterattack = subversive response.”

### **III. Patterns of persuasion**

It is easy to observe how in the studied utterances the metaphorical conceptualization of the information is aimed at the public / at the receiver through the instruments of the language, and not at the text itself. There are two patterns of persuasion identified by Paul A. Chilton and Christina Schäffner (Paul Anthony Chilton - Christina

Schäffner 2002) in the political discourse, as well: the first is the pattern of maintaining a positive image of the public person. In a newspaper article, based on the politics and objectivity of the “publication”, the journalist uses the metaphors of persuasion so as to keep the attention of the reader focused on a particular person. The attitude, the ideals, the actions of this person will be mostly valued, explicitly and / or implicitly. Unlike the political discourse where “politeness” (ibid.) is a *sine qua non* condition in the public interaction (can counteract for example the effect of less popular measures to be taken), the journalistic discourse focuses the receiver’s attention on the public person through a quasi-universal pattern of “persuasion” maintained through the elements of the cognitive (the series of the metaphors “attack”, “counterattack”, “to attack”, “to counterattack”, “attacked”, “counterattacked” etc.) as well as through the register of the language. The second element of persuasion invoked by the authors of the book is “veracity”, credibility. It is a “quality” maintained through the implication of the journalist who communicates the truth before communicating any given information.

The advertising campaigns are heterogeneous in terms of thematic, strategic aspect, of that of the message, of structure, etc. A pattern exists in the election campaign in the press, with an extension to other types of campaigns as well (which we will deal with another time) which can be analyzed from the perspective of a rhetoric of persuasion: the title of the newspaper article must include a quote, a confession (this equates with the “overexposure” of the candidate - on the tribune, on the theater stages/arenas/in the public spaces etc., during the election campaign.) The positive image is maintained through the dynamic attitude (cognitive metaphor, verbs of action), through the vector of credibility. The journalist emphasizes (through quotes or hyphen, etc.) either in the title or in the subtitle the confessions of the politician, which refer to values, ideas, beliefs. The quotations belong to the same props of persuasion. In addition to the quality to inform, they are the quintessence of a government or political program, etc. The metaphor of persuasion used in the media discourse should not be confused with the jargon type variants nor with the language of sports or the military which have their own meanings in the research field.

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