

IRONY AND VIOLENCE IN POLITICAL LANGUAGE

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Abstract: This paper inquires elements of irony and violence in politicians language. This topic plays an important role in the behavior of voters. In the opinion of philosopher Quintilian irony represents “ the process to say the opposite of what you want to understand” (Quintilian 1974:36). Language is a form of manipulation of public opinion. Including ironies and violence aspects in political language may disturb sensitive people that can not accept “dirty games”. Words expressed against political leaders can affect the image of Romania. Also, violence in language may cause conflicts between countries. The situation that affected the most voters behavior occurred in the winter of 2012 when, across the country, they held street protests against government. Those protests had a political character carried out in order to to remove the current government. In the end people’s power won and the Prime Minister was removed. In this study I want to make a comparison between the reaction of romanian and international politicians according to the irony and violence in language during protests. The principle of violence and irony in language applies to every political protest. In this case people do not protest a simple reality, they express feelings, experience through language.

Keywords: irony, violence, language, protests, image.

In different situations the way we speak can reveal something about what we intend to do in action. We use the words we want to express what we think or what we wish to be interpreted. The concept of irony have been studied many years in order to understand what is the purpose for which people use this ironic language. Interpreting and understanding ironic language represents the ability to recognize mental states. Theorists across many disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, language studies questioned about how they can recognize a person's behavior, in terms of intention and how this is achieved through language.

In this paper I want to analyze the concepts of irony and violence in language during the protests that took place in Romania starting with 12 January 2012. Over several days Romanian citizens took to the streets to protest against the Government and the President. The scandal started from the law on the privatization of the emergency medical system. Doctors took to the streets to protest and soon were joined thousands of people across the country. Slogans used by protesters containing negative messages, defamatory, aggressive. The events generated a social and political crisis that was noticed including in the international press. Romania's image has been affected in a negative way by highlighting the imbalance and panic status.

1. The concept of irony in language

The way we speak reveals what we want to communicate. The most important part in communication is the way we use words because people have strategic reasons to make "language games". In my opinion irony can be integrated in the category of "language games" because it can be used as a trope to influence the other's behaviour. If we look into the history of this concept, it is very difficult to give a complex definition of irony. For example Soren Kierkegaard in his paper "The concept of irony" offers an important point of view.

"...irony [is] the infinite absolute negativity. It is negativity, because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not. The irony established nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it.... Irony is a qualification of subjectivity. In irony, the subject is negatively free, since the actuality that is supposed to give the subject content is not there."¹ (p. 262ff.).

In Soren Kierkegaard's opinion irony is definitely negative. Ironizing party, in a calculated and deliberate way, represents inoculating negative thoughts, feelings of hate and frustration. But when irony is verbalized can generate a sense of liberation, of freedom. Continuing this idea Gregory A. Bryant analysis the problem of irony from the psycholinguistic and developmental point of view. In all language use, the irony communication it is always

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *The concept of irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*, trans by Howard V. Hong, Edna H. Hong, Princeton University press, 1992, p. 262

dependent of the context and its effects upon the speaker. Understanding irony involves a coherent communicative interpretation. “This speaks to the important role of metarepresentation in understanding inferential communication in general, and indirect speech in the case of verbal irony.”² Another perspective that the author tries to explain here is that verbal irony examine the relation between what the other affords and what the speaker is trying to accomplish. Also the ironic insults he says that there are more polite than the ironic compliments. I agree with the author’s opinion because when a person want to make a compliment to the other is has to be sincere to be polite, but in the case of ironic compliments there is no polite thoughts.

Talking about verbal irony it is important to emphasize the paraverbal communication. When the speaker use this language form he it tends to have a particular tone of voice. Bryant (2011) says that sarcasm, which is a critical form of irony ”is associated with vocal dominance manifesting aslowered pitch and noisy growl-like sounds (Cheang and Pell 2008), whereas praise-byblame, a more light hearted kind of irony, is associated with rising pitch (Anolli, Ciceri, and Infantino 2002).”³

2. Linguistic strategies used in violent language

The other concept that I want to integrate in this paper is violance in language. When we held with street protests citizens use a violent language that expresses feelings of hatred, anger, frustration with the political class. The two concepts, violence and language, are linked to express the relationship between thought, language and action. Based on the concept of Austin, speaking is a speech act. We see the language as an action. In the conception of Brekle⁴ an action that happens between two or more individuals has the intention to injuring the other party by using violent language and phyhological pressure. According to the author ”someone wages war on others by means of words”⁵. The ”street voice” wants to obtain power, to change the people’s life by using words. In this case words plays a crucial role to make the desired effect.

² Gregory A, Bryant, *Is verbal irony special?*, Language and Linguistics Compass 6/11 (2012): 673–685, 10.1002/lnc3.364, p. 678

³ Ibidem, p. 679

⁴ H. E. Brekle, H. E. War with words. In R Wodak (ed.), *Language, Power and Ideology: Studies in political discourse.*(Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1989) pp 85-86

⁵ ibidem, p. 81

The importance of speech acts in analysing violence language is created by the interest of power with statements, questions, promises etc. The words put up together has the purpose to influence the politicians goals. The impuls of the „street voice” in protests is to destroy, to overcome shyness and to create a sense of fear.

In this perspective the author that I have mentioned before, Brekle, identified that the methods used to create violent language involve some basic features: stereotypes, negative name calling, selection and suppression of facts, reports of cruelty and slogans. I have used a part of this features as a framework for analyzing some of the features identified in the street protest that took place in Romania 2012.

On 12 January 2012 it began one of the biggest street protests in years. It happened because of health system law promoted by Prime Minister Emil Boc. The first event took place in Targu Mures then has been expanded in 51 cities carried on for several days. But the main purpose was to demand the resignation of President Traian Basescu and Prime Minister Emil Boc. An important role in then social networking had Facebook by the involvement in promoting „anti-system strategies”. As a result of these protests, the President sought annulment of health law promoted by the government and on 6 February 2012 Prime Minister resigned. Although the goal was the dismissal of the political class, the main objective of the event was Dr. Raed Arafat supporting his argument on criticism regarding liberalization emergency medical system in Romania. He vehemently opposed the law of health.

In what follows I synthesized the impact slogans that shook the image of Romania during protests:

Stereotypes	Negative name calling	Ironic slogans	Slogans
Bald comb country die.	Basescu in jail!	We are ill of Basescu!	„We die, we fight to defend SMURD”
Democracy without	Down with Basescu!	Base nor know how you begin to	Romania stand up your knees

authorization.		be like Boc!	
Basescu believes you are an asshole! You agree?	„Traian Basescu captain on Titanic!	Lost president and government. It declared null	Poetry is in the street!
The money for the culture he will give it for drink.	Butterfly flies in town!	We brought the boat to go the blind!	2012 end of their world!
„Young and restless”	Basescu after Ceausescu!	BOC, trumpery you have been, trumpery you left!	Privatization kill!
Please excuse us, we do not produce as you stole!	Basescu're a trifle!	Get out, you miserable dog!	SMURD saves people Basescu killing them!

The table above include four main figures analyzing items concerning irony and violent language produced in the winter of 2012 in Romania. In the first category I selected a few phrases that were chanted during the protests.

From these result, Basescu was stereotypically seen as a smug, drunk and bald. His physical aspects have always been mocked by the Romanian people. The President promoted a democratic state, but corruption is seen at a high level which is why citizens consider that there is no "permission" to function in a democratic country. The protesters believe that the President pursues only personal purposes, considering all Romanian citizens as "assholes". The slogan urges a street reaction. The protesters do not agree with how the budget is divided on culture. Culture is an important factor in promoting the country, not one that is repressed by the

President. For this reason, the “head of state”, is called “drunk” by the protesters arguing that the money for drink are taken from the budget for culture. The last slogan refers to young people who are not satisfied with the possibilities that the country offers them, for a prosperous and peaceful future.

The second category, “negative name calling” refers to the name of the President that is associated with diverse concepts such as butterfly, jail or the ex- communist President that had been killed. The “street voice” wants to emphasize that the President is not good for the people, it is like a “butterfly” that has to “fly away” and give liberty to the citizens. Also his name is associated with a “trifle” meaning that he has no importance, he does not represent a good image for Romania.

As I said in the first part of this paper, irony can reflect a negative way of thinking that can influence the image of a country. By the time of the protests there were several ironic slogans that in my opinion highlight the “street voice”. Here, using the mixture of words it is made an ironic comparison between the President Băsescu and the Prim Minister Boc. The President seems to look like Boc refers to the height, Minister Boc is low-rise. The analogy highlights that the President lost his power and credibility in the eyes of the people. Also having a President that is not able to represent honorably Romania, his name is connected to an illness. The protest begun for the purpose to remove the law of health and this can be the explanation which, in the opinion of the people, Romania is sick because of its leadership. The President and the Government has to be “null” to escape Romania from this illness. Withal the ironization of the two politicians continues with making them “blind” because the President has a problem with his eyes and the Prim Minister uses glasses. “Blindness” is also a health problem that is affecting government. In the opinion of the citizens the politicians must see all perspectives of the opportunities, not just half measures seen “with one eye”. Being associated with a “trumpery” can be seen that the Prime Minister is the President’s “puppet”. The “key” of the country is the President because he has all the power to decide. This is the reason for what the Prime Minister can be just a manipulation tool.

Irony and the violence in language can be observed in the slogans because they show anger and frustration of the citizens against politicians. Most allusions refer to death and the end of the world. Mobile Emergency Service for Resuscitation and Extrication (SMURD) has the primary role to save lives, but political leadership, through the privatization of the system, kills human freedom. The responsible for this fact is the President because the power to remove the law of privatization is in his hands.

Given these ironic and violent “language-games”, Romania’s politicians reacted. The president's reaction was expected because many insults have been addressed directly. He took 12 days to declare: “The President said that Romanians are unhappy "rightly" and they need "more explanations and solutions" “⁶. It can be seen that his opinion is peaceful and in line with “streets” ideas, but also the answer is elusive. He did not offer concrete solutions, he only places the culpability of other actors from the Romanian political scene brand. "I could see Antonescu and Victor Ponta supporting, no more, no less, chairman resignation, resignation of the government, parliament resignation. I mean, Romania ungoverned"⁷. One legislator, defends the President delaraction saying that the Romanians deserves its fate. “Bravo Basescu. Romanians protesters, worms deserved their fate!”⁸. The irony of this statement is that he interpreted the President’s declaration making the analogy with “worms”. Worms are moving through crawling, which means that people struggle to survive crawling the system through difficulties. A few days later, Foreign Minister Teodor Baconschi also spoke about the protests in Bucharest and the rest of the country. In his view, the year beginning will be crucial for Romania. “Option is simple: reform, responsibility, safety or regress, populism, he beat her. The choice will bet the worthy Romania, working Romania, Romania thirsting for the future, not slum violent and inept rounding, the miners once behind heirs Security “⁹. We also note in this statement that people in the street are again accused and blamed. In his opinion only those who work to build a strong

⁶ <http://www.gandul.info/stiri/traian-basescu-reactie-dura-dupa-12-zile-de-proteste-atac-la-iliescu-antonescu-ponta-maine-voi-avea-o-interventie-cu-romanii-9171870>

⁷ Ibidem

⁸ <http://www.cotidianul.ro/bravo-basescu-romanii-protestatari-niste-viermi-care-isi-merita-soarta-169748/>

⁹ http://www.realitatea.net/cum-arata-protestatarii-in-ochii-guvernatorilor-viermi-si-mahalagii_904997.html

country can save Romania, not those who take to the streets and use accusative and violent language.

Protests effects were observed in the international press. For exemple Reuters stresses violence in the Romanian capital on Sunday evening, telling both verbal and physical clashes between policemen and protesters¹⁰. Also BBC informs about the political problems “The rallies began in solidarity with a popular health official who had quit in protest against health care reforms.”¹¹ . Another well known journal says that “Protesters calling for President Traian Basescu's resignation and early elections blocked traffic in the capital's University Square. Many waved flags with the centers ripped out to symbolize the 1989 communist revolution. Others carried signs reading "Liberty" and "Down with President Basescu.”¹². The discussion reach New York Times journal who writes that “The protests, in their fourth day, were the most serious since President Traian Basescu came to power in 2004. They are the result of frustration over public-sector wage cuts, reduced benefits, higher taxes, cronyism in state institutions and widespread corruption.” All this internationally information affect Romania's image denoting frustration, uncertainty, instability. The violence in the protests was not only in language but also physically. In my opinion journalists from The New York Times examines the best image created by protests revealing frustration and corruption. These two elements are translated into the slogans exhibited in the street.

Concluding remarks

This paper aimed to analyze the concept of irony and violence in language during the protests that took place in Romania in 2012. It was the most implacable street manifestations in the last years. Language represents a social reality and in this case it can be seen that the reality was violent not only in language, but physical too. Violent language is more than communication, is how people understand the world and create the world. During the protests the world created showed the dark side of Romania, a country marred by corruption, hatred and frustration. Everything begun from a simple law that has turned into a snowball that buried

¹⁰ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/16/romania-protests-austerity-idUSL6E8CG00K20120116>

¹¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16565123>

¹² <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/01/14/world/europe/romania-protests/index.html>

Romania in a few days. The result was the resignation of Prime Minister Boc and annul by the president the privatization law of the emergency medical system. The purpose of “street voice” was reached, but people were denigrated by politicians who once have called on by their vote. Hearing the annoying reaction of the president and the analogy with "worms" who deserved their further increased the citizens’s feeling of hatred towards the political class. People took to the streets to demand change, to remove corrupt in Romania under the domination they think they are. “The street” received a partial change because the president has not resigned as expected. His statement was more indifference even more as he waited 12 days to make a speech on this serious political and social problem. Street violence and ironic slogans have internationally tarnished the image of the political class. The press took up posts protesters highlighting the hatred of the government. Words are the best instrument of power, in this case the power is owned by the “street voice”.

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