

BOOK REVIEW

Andra Vasilescu, Mihaela-Viorica Constantinescu, Ariadna Ștefănescu and Șerban Hartular (Editors). *Insights into Romanian Political Discourse*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2024. Pp. i-xxxiv, 1-518. ISBN: 978-1-0364-1533-4

Reviewed by Adina Botăș , 1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia

The volume *Insights into Romanian Political Discourse*, edited by Andra Vasilescu, Mihaela-Viorica Constantinescu, Ariadna Ștefănescu and Șerban Hartular, published in 2024 at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, reunites researchers in linguistics and scholars from universities in Romania and the Institute of Linguistics of the Romanian Academy to present a comprehensive and detailed examination of the characteristics and specificities of present-day discursive practices of Romanian political discourse. In a collection of 14 case studies, organised in 4 parts, the book treats a multiplicity of genres, from a variety of perspectives, and provides a thorough understanding of the current socio-political status quo, as a natural result of the complex history of Romanian politics viz. political discourse ever since the foundation of the Parliament one and a half centuries ago, with all of the intricacies of the subsequent phases, particularly focusing on the post-Revolution period.

Rooted in consistent previous work (more than 110 studies by 30+ authors, referenced in a valuable inventory in the Editorial), the volume tackles new data, innovatively applying theoretical and methodological frameworks grounded in pragmalinguistic, interactional and rhetorical perspectives.

Part I – *Intersections between Politics and Language in Use* - comprises 5 chapters discussing various pragmalinguistic strategies used by politicians to construct and design political identity in the public sphere. In Chapter I, *Impoliteness Strategies in Some Romanian Presidential Debates*, Liliana Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu complements previous work with a novel analytical approach on presidential debates, proposing an examination of impoliteness strategies in two such events held in Romania in 2004 and 2009 between (1) Traian Băsescu and Adrian Năstase and (2) Traian Băsescu and Mircea Geoană. Premising that aggressiveness is usually appreciated in conflictive discourse as an unmarked form of impoliteness, the author traces the place and role of these strategies in debates focusing on on-record (direct) vs. off-record (insinuated) impoliteness strategies targeted at the identity of the opponent, as personal, collective and relational self, also considering face and ethos. The chapter provides both general remarks regarding the presidential debate as a genre but also specific additions highlighting the differences between the two events and

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the candidates' use of impoliteness strategies, and concluding that victory is probably not due to the use of one particular style (in both cases, Băsescu's aggressive impoliteness), but rather to an "evolution of the processes of progressive consolidation of democracy".

The second chapter, *Populism(s). The Romanian Case (2016)*, presents a theoretical framing and a pragmalinguistic approach to discuss the way in which populism was integrated in the political programmes of the four leading parties in the parliamentary elections of 2016. Author Andra Vasilescu proposes the concept of discursive populism as an instance of deceptive communication style, defined in terms of the (im)politeness strategies and macro-speech act underlying the discourse. Following a corpus analysis, she advances a metaphorical label for each type of populism identified in the analysed programmes, namely the euphoric populism of commitment (PSD), the dysphoric populism of radical change (USR), the subliminal populism (USR) and counter-populism (PNL). The chapter further enquires on whether the type of populism promoted by a party could predict its success rate in any way, progressing toward a positive response in the case of the analysed data.

Reinventing the Political. (Im)Politeness and Interdiscursivity in the Romanian Public Sphere Communication (Chapter 3) analyses the use of (im)politeness in an interdiscursive selection of texts concerning the appointment of the prime minister by the president of Romania, after the parliamentary election of 2016. Author Ariadna Ștefănescu designs a particularized methodological framework integrating political discourse analysis, the pragmatic analysis of politeness, and cyberspace communication to analyse official statements made by the president, a press editorial and an op-ed, as well as comments from the online environment, on the mentioned problematic topic. To contextualise the different types of discourses, the author describes the behaviours of the president, journalists and commentors within the communicative situation, distinguishing between "politicking" and "sub-polity", highlighting the different representations for the discussed situation, i.e. the uncertain equation, the incomplete dialogue and the road paved with obstacles, blackmail, providing insight into how the political meaning is reinvented along the analysed interdiscursive route.

Chapter 4, *Impoliteness in Forms of Address Used in Romanian Political Talk Shows*, is a corpus-driven conversational analysis of impoliteness in various forms of linguistic attacks from 30 episodes of talk show *România9*, moderated by journalist Ionuț Cristache in conversation with fellow-journalist and/or politicians. The analysis of impoliteness is based on two major pillars, morphological (allocutive pronouns, first names, interjections and various nominal forms) and communicative (self-correction, pseudo quotations, self-quotations and irony and sarcasm). Distinguishing between the presence and absence of intrinsic impoliteness in the analysed forms of address and following their migration towards discourse markers i.e. attention-getters, author Anamaria Gebăilă presents a series of observations concluding that, concerning distribution, address terms are more frequently used in initial parts of the talk show, in questions rather than responses, are employed in interruptions and as turn-taking forms while, concerning communicative function,

these forms shape power-solidarity relations between participants, determine distance and attitudes, signalling the social status and desired ethos of the participants.

Chapter 5, *Pragmatic Overtones in the use of Evidential Markers in Present-day Romanian Political Discourse*, is a microstructural analysis of 25 official transcripts of parliamentary debates from the last decade, employing a pragma-discursive approach to discuss the value of epistemic and evidential markers, as discursive strategies of political actors to achieve normalisation of their ideology and validation from the audience. Author Cecilia-Mihaela Popescu presents a thorough categorisation of evidentiality and epistemic modality, as well as their overlap (inferential evidentiality), followed by a detailed description of evidentiality markers in the Romanian language (self-legitimising strategies via sensory-perceptual evidentials, inducing full certainty as a self-assertion strategy via inferential evidentiality, “negotiating the truth value” strategies via quotative and reportative evidentiality). Evidentials are used to particularise sources of knowledge and points of view of the speaker, as means of persuasion or manipulation through stance/stance-taking, providing argumentative force, validating social face, also holding a polemical function in negotiating truth value of propositional content, ranging from objective to highly subjective representations.

The second part of the volume is dedicated to *Festive Speeches*, examines how political actors strategically embed ideology and emotion into ceremonial speeches, as a particular subgenre of political discourse, to link the festive occasion with long-term goals or political benefits. In Chapter 6, *The Rhetoric of Patriotism in Romanian Political Discourse. National Day Speeches – A Pragma-Rhetorical Analysis*, author Gabriela Stoica analyses conceptualisations and expressions of patriotism as a “politicised” emotion from the range of love, in 56 recent speeches held by various politicians on the occasion of the National Day of Romania (1st of December) between 2018-2019 and 2021-2023. Starting from a description of the diachronic dynamicity of the concept of patriotism from the mid-nineteenth century, through the first part of the 20th century, until the establishment of communism, which, according to the author, affected patriotism in a way which “remains to be dealt with”, the chapter aims to analyse how patriotism, as a sine qua non attribute of a politician, is reinstated in present-day (festive) political discourse. Following an in-depth analysis, the chapter presents a series of discursive characteristics of patriotism, e.g. lexicon of patriotic qualities, a paraenetic view of the past expressed through cliché structures, populist facets of patriotism associated with both euphoric and dysphoric emotions, revealing patriotism as a prominent feature of festive political speeches.

Chapter 7, *Romanian Presidential and Royal Christmas Messages*, is an analysis of 17 televised Christmas messages transmitted by three of Romania’s presidents as well as King Michael I, from the period 2009-2015. The aim is to explain the linguistic construction of personal and national identity and solidarity, through a pragma-rhetorical approach i.e. examining the main speech acts, lexical choices and rhetorical elements. As political and socio-cultural practice, the analysed

messages reveal a “decline of rhetoric”, despite the high focus on pathos, and a simplified argumentative content. Author Gabriela Biriş presents a historical overview of Christmas messages in Romanian politics, explaining the coexistence of royal and presidential messages through reference to both similarities and differences at a communicative and rhetorical level. While both are integrative and promote solidarity, presidential messages come out more as an institutional duty, whereas messages of the king sound more sincere, giving a touch of warmth, hope, dignity and respect, thus concluding that royal messages have higher chances to attain group solidarity, while presidential messages, being less empathic, have less success in achieving social cohesion.

Part three, *Exploring Overt and Covert Aggressiveness*, examines aggressiveness as a defining trait of Romanian political discourse, analysing how linguistic resources are used to articulate multiple types of attacks on political opponents. Chapter 8, *Verbal Disagreement and Aggressiveness in Romanian Parliamentary Debates during the Pandemic Period*, analyses 43 transcripts of physical debates from the pandemic years 2020 and 2021, mostly motions of no confidence, typically marked by conflictive communication. Based on a noticed tendency towards disagreement and aggressiveness, the chapter analyses the increase in aggressiveness during the pandemic period. Anchored in the impoliteness theory and previous studies revealing a preference for aggressiveness, as an identity trait of the legislators’ ethos, the analysis shows that the pandemic period amplified sensitive topics in the parliamentary debates. Author Carmen-Ioana Radu identifies three main factors that increase disagreement and aggressiveness in the analysed dataset, i.e. the amplification of sensitive topics because of the crisis situation, enhancing aggressive discourse through right-wing ideology, and the exacerbation of negative emotional aspects involving health issues and death related to Coronavirus. The chapter concludes that Romanian legislators pretend to be concerned with the truth mostly as a matter of building public image, more frequently engaging in disagreement and conflict than agreement.

Chapter 9, *Conflictual Communication and Repair Strategies in a Romanian Parliamentary Debate around a Motion of No Confidence*, by Adriana Costăchescu, analyses the communicative (offence and defence) strategies used in a group of speeches during a “particularly stormy” parliamentary joint session held by both Chambers of the Romanian Parliament on October 5th, 2021, which led to the fall of the Cîțu government and the formation of a new political coalition. The focus is on three relevant speech acts, i.e. irony, sarcasm and insults, and several strategies from the range of the image repair theory, i.e. blame transfer, defeasibility, good intentions, bolstering and *mea culpa*. Conducted in the language of political jargon or “politichese”, the analysed discussion is revealed to be poor from a rhetorical point of view resembling a ‘dialogue of the deaf’, yet resourceful for the analysis of conflictual communication, presenting numerous expressions of humorous irony and sarcasm, manifested through modification of proverbs, mocking nicknames, code-switching and confrontations on cultural topics. Ultimately, the analysed speeches

are deemed interesting through the illustration of a phase of demonization of the adversary seen as an enemy rather than an opponent.

Chapter 10, *Insults and Offence in Romanian Parliamentary Debates. A Metapragmatic Perspective*, by Mihaela-Viorica Constantinescu, is a corpus-driven analysis of fragments from “various parliamentary genres” i.e. a corpus of around 300000 words encompassing parliamentary debates, motions of no confidence and political statements, produced in the period of February 2021-September 2023, and selected by metapragmatic labels pertaining to insult and offence. Starting from a description of insults and offence from a speech act theory perspective, insult is localized as part of the illocutionary component i.e. an illocutionary force, while offence is regarded as a perlocutionary effect, mostly depending on the uptake of the target/hearer. The chapter presents a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of the performance of insults and claiming offence in the selected texts, highlighting pragmalinguistic functions of asserting superiority, manipulation, restricting expression, and (self)victimisation. Focusing on cultural specifics and the moral dimension of offence, the author identifies the recurring themes of thief, hypocrite, and shame, concluding that, in the Romanian Parliament, verbal aggression is tolerated and primarily used to bolster personal image. The chapter offers valuable theoretical insights and original classifications, supported by extensive examples, concluding that negatively appraised behaviour is considered a threat to democracy and the society at large, disrupting the norms of the community of practice and its role as a model for the society.

Chapter 11, *Unparliamentary Language in Disguise: Information in Excess, or Overspecification, as Strategic Maneuvering*, by Anca Găță, aims to identify features of potentially offensive phrasing in political statements of MPs, approaching empirical data i.e. manually selected excerpts from official transcripts of seemingly impolite political statements in regular sittings of the Chamber of Deputies. Starting from a comprehensive description of the practice of political statements and using a linguistic, pragmatic (im-/politeness theory), rhetorical and pragma-dialectical (argumentation theory) approach, the analysis tackles overspecification, as strategic manoeuvring of covert impoliteness strategies, identified by the criterion of semantic/pragmatic superfluity in the formulation of the sentence/utterance. Overspecification is characterised by pleonastic wordings, superfluous terms leading to information in excess in sentences which could be considered complete without that addition (in violation of the Gricean maxim of quantity). Several examples are analysed in which overspecification takes the form of irony and sarcasm used with a goal of discreditation e.g. mock politeness, producing an attention shift towards the humorous/ridiculing side of an utterance rather than the burden of proof for the accusations launched by the speaker, generating implicatures through overt insincerity, and rendering the attack stronger with avoidance of direct responsibility.

In chapter 12, *Irony and (Im)Politeness in Romanian Parliamentary Discourse. A Diachronic Perspective*, Liliana Hoinărescu examines two datasets, one from the Old Romanian Parliament (19th century) and one from the contemporary one, looking at both the production of and responses to ironical

utterances, from a historical pragmatic perspective, integrating sociopragmatic, rhetorical and argumentative elements. The chapter presents a detailed diachronic evolution of the Romanian Parliament and concept of democracy in Romania. In the data from the 19th century, irony is revealed to be used as a rhetorical, persuasive and critical instrument. The analysed examples display use of humorous irony, facetious remarks vs. persiflage, sarcasm and implicit calumny or insult, wit, inadequate jokes and flippancy, notably avoiding personal attacks and claiming the confidence of its public. In the 21st century parliament, the analysed data display more aggressive irony, vulgarity and condescension, mockery and gendered impoliteness, all used to affirm the speaker's superiority and outline differences rather than points of conciliation with the other, with informality as a communicative strategy. Considering its forms of expression diachronically, the study confirms the high sociopragmatic versatility of irony.

Part four, *Participatory Politics*, comprises two chapters examining protest slogans and memes as instances of discursive creativity and civic attitudes towards politicians in innovative forms of expression. Chapter 13, *“Like Thieves in the Night”. A Pragma-Linguistic Analysis of Protest Slogans in Romania* by Răzvan Săftoiu, Adrian Toader and Emanuela Tudorache, examines protest rhetoric in 300 slogans from the #rezist movement against corruption, triggering an unprecedented civil mobilisation during the winter of 2017, from a pragma-linguistics and dialogic perspective, in a broader context of crisis communication. Starting from a presentation of (post-communist) protest history in Romania and the incidents that triggered them, e.g. corruption, healthcare reforms, environmental concerns, all attracting anti-government rallies, the 2017 public reaction is described as one of the major events in modern Romanian history, which strongly impacted public discourse. Protests are considered a particular form of crisis which are inherently dialogic, i.e. actions and reactions at the same time. The analysed dataset displayed linguistic creativity and preference for the use of rhyming slogans to express indignation towards the political class through a strong critical position of the people who advocate for a better political future in Romania.

Chapter 14, *Romanian Memes on Controversial Policies: Visual and Verbal Strategies of Political Critique*, by Bianca Alecu, is a qualitative analysis of a selection of 6 memes on the controversial topic of the tax exemption for IT personnel in Romania, under public scrutiny during 2019-2023, collected from Facebook and Reddit. The aim is to uncover verbal and visual strategies employed in multimodal political stancetaking and generally better understand the complex relations mediated through memes, as digital user-generated content. Seen as forms of civil protest, memes are discussed in terms of visual imagery and techniques, with an examination of significant verbal choices, layers of meaning, overlexicalisation or elliptical phrasing, intertextuality, rhetorical composition in representing of political actors and objectification of the represented humans. The chapter highlights elements of meme literacy which the observer needs to possess in order to grasp the meanings of the discourse, presenting memes as a new way to voice attitudes and

emotions of the general public with significant implications for present and future societies.

In sum, this substantial volume is the first of its kind to offer a comprehensive examination of Romanian political discourse specifically addressed to an international readership, marking a significant contribution to the field. Its interdisciplinary perspective, offering both theoretical depth and insightful analyses, as well as its clear, consistent structure render it an essential resource for linguists, discourse analysts, researchers, educators, students, as well as professionals and general public interested in media, communication, and political studies. By illuminating the cultural particularities and multifaceted functions of political discourse in Romania, the volume opens new avenues for cooperative research and invites further scholarly dialogue across national and disciplinary boundaries.

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