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MODALITY AND IRONY IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Valentina CIUMACENCO

Free International University of Moldova (Republic of Moldova)

Abstract

The central figures in political communication are the participants and the strategies of persuasion and manipulation used as tools that influence perceptions, and behaviours. The aim of political discourse is gaining and holding power, the main instrument to achieve this aim is language. Thus, the language applied in political discourse uses a broad range of linguistic devices at the phonological, syntactic, lexical, semantic, pragmatic, and textual levels. One of the expressive means is irony, whose functions vary from attack and mockery to self-defense and entertainment and rely on communicative context, background, and the type of relations between the interlocutors.

Modality as the expression of the attitude of the speaker, or the expression of subjectivity and the speaker's opinions and emotions, has much more functions, especially in political discourse. Besides rendering a message, the politician has to defend his positive face or the image of his party while undermining the opponent's, sometimes using subtle weapons as irony.

This study examines the ideological and evaluative nature of irony and modality in political discourse. It aims at highlighting the linguistic constructions involved in ironic utterances and to reveal ideologies underpinning such structures. The key research questions focus on the role that modalization and ironic utterances play and how they contribute to the preservation of the speaker's positive image and the negative portrayal of the other.

Keywords: political, discourse, modality, irony, deontic, epistemic, image

INTRODUCTION

The category of modality in the general sense of the speaker's attitude towards what (s)he says, is one of those categories that "establish a relationship between the speaker and his enunciation" [1]. As was made clear by Palmer, this notion is quite vague and leaves open a number of interpretations [2]. Modality as a major exponent of interpersonal relations

has been extensively studied. It is mostly studied in a highly individual-centered view that individual speakers and their relations to one another are central, and social relations are built up through the linguistic interactions of speakers.

According to Nuyts, ‘modality’ is one of the ‘golden oldies’ among the basic notions in the semantic analysis of language [11]. It seems very likely that every language has some means of expressing the concept of modality. If this is the case, modality can be considered a universal category.

In what follows we will adopt a large definition of modality and define it as the category that refers to the broad domain of attitudinal qualifications, i.e., qualifications that convey the speaker’s stance toward, or the speaker’s evaluation of what is being said.

In most cases, a modal verb expresses the speaker’s or the author’s attitude at the time of speaking. Modal expressions allow us to talk (and modal concepts allow us to think) about states of affairs that are not present in the current situation and may never occur in the actual world [13]. In the linguistic literature, it is widely acknowledged that modal expressions may be used to communicate at least broad clusters of meanings: epistemic modal meanings, concerned with the possibility or necessity of an inference drawn from available evidence, and deontic modal meanings, which roughly deal with the necessity or possibility of acts performed by morally responsible agents, e.g., obligation and permission.

So, it is very necessary that we learn the meaning of the modal expressions in certain contexts. This paper aims at explaining the difficulties involved in the treatment of modals by presenting meaningful definitions through paraphrases that take underlying specific assumptions into account. Special focus will be given to various meanings and uses of modal constructions involved in ironic utterances based on the examples taken from different political speeches.

It should be noted that there is not much work on modality in the field of discourse analysis, particularly in political discourse analysis. Besides the function of expressing stance, modality also largely contributes to the establishment of the speaker’s commitment and authority, reflects the speaker’s ideology, and legitimizes propositions in political discourse, however, this is not quite explicit in the previous studies. This is also the

main reason why this paper intends to explore modality in the context of political discourse.

Rojo and van Dijk's study tackles 'the discursive and political strategies of legitimation', by positing 'three levels of legitimation: (a) pragmatic: various strategies of the justification of controversial official actions; (b) semantic: the ways a discourse represents its partisan view of the events or properties of actors as 'true' or as the 'facts'; and (c) socio-political: the way official discourse self-legitimizes itself as authoritative and delegitimizes alternative discourses' [15]. Though Rojo and van Dijk deal with legitimization strategies at three levels, their perspective is political rather than linguistic.

For Cap, legitimization in political discourse can be defined as the 'enactment of the political speaker's right to be obeyed and the linguistic justification of actions following this obedience'. He attempts to show that 'proximation' is 'one of the most effective strategies in accomplishing legitimization effects in political (interventionist) discourse' [2]. He gives an account of a tripartite model of 'proximation': 'spatial, temporal and axiological', which highlights 'the different conceptual relations between the entities localized inside the deictic center of the stage (speaker, addressee, the so-called inside-the-deictic-center entities) and the alien, outside-the-deictic-center entities. Chilton critically examines the view that epistemic and deontic are two basic types of legitimization in political discourse. The former has to do with 'the speaker's claim to have better knowledge, recognition of the "real" facts'; the latter refers to 'the speaker claims, explicitly or implicitly, to be not only "right" in a cognitive sense, but "right" in a moral sense' [3].

Hart investigates the cognitive dimensions of proximization in the context of two case studies from Tony Blair's discourse considering the implications of 'epistemic proximation for the description of a conceptual relation between temporal and epistemic distance [7]. Hart argues that 'epistemic proximization can be characterized as a conceptual shift along the epistemic axis so that a situation comes to form part of the conceptualizer's epistemic ground'. To attain legitimacy and public support, political speakers, therefore, need to 'establish a conceptualization in which their premises for action are treated as true' through the means of epistemic proximization. They can either presuppose 'certain propositions as established fact' or 'ask the audience to place their trust in the speaker's evaluation' [7].

Cap, Chilton and Hart's theories about legitimization are fundamental to this study because their research is not only closely related to modality but also based on political contexts from a cognitive linguistic perspective, particularly the concepts 'the deictic center', 'distance' and 'epistemic proximization'. However, their studies do not involve irony.

In order to gain access to the speaker's attitude (especially in the case of irony), it is not only the modalized utterance that is sufficient, but also the underlying sentence and, last but not least, the situational context. A vivid illustration of this situation is demonstrated in Papafragou research based on an example extracted from a humorous text with a political theme that plays an important role in addressing the issue of modality [13]:

- (1) *Castro visits Moscow and is taken on a tour by Brezhnev. First, they go for a drink and Castro praises the beer.*
"Yes, it was provided by our good friends from Czechoslovakia".
Next, they go for a ride in a car and Castro admires the car.
"Yes, these cars are provided by our good friends from Czechoslovakia".
They drive to an exhibition of beautiful cut glass, which Castro greatly admires.
"Yes, this glass comes from our good friends from Czechoslovakia".
"They must be very good friends", says Castro.
"Yes, they must", says Brezhnev.

This is an authentic example that clearly shows how an utterance assumes different readings and interpretations based on interpersonal context. The speakers' statements achieve different effects on different listeners.

The ironic sense of this dialogue derives from the different meanings of the modal verb 'must' (epistemic and deontic) in the replies of the two politicians, depending on the context. In Castro's last remark, 'must' has an epistemic meaning (the sender makes an inference from previous data, which leads him to the possibility that the Czech Republic is sending all these goods as a sign of friendship), while Brezhnev's reply, terse and elliptical (there is no supporting verb, but it is recoverable from the context) paradoxically sends the addressee to the deontic dimension of interpretation.

This change of modal meaning is paradoxical because that meaning is contextually retrievable, from which we infer that Brezhnev's repetitive response should maintain the same modality as Castro's. However, despite

contextual retrievability, the interpretation is deontic (and must be deontic to achieve the comic effect).

There are at least two reasons why interpretation is done in this direction: the modal verb ‘must’ also has a deontic function, and Castro's own statement could be read in a deontic key if it had not been preceded by the given context, that may be interpreted as they are obliged to be good friends in order to demonstrate to the whole world the spirit of solidarity in the communist bloc. In order to interpret this anecdote in the sense intended by the sender, it is necessary to know the type of relationship established between the former Soviet Union and the countries of the former communist bloc.

Modal markers in natural language are context-dependent expressions and their meanings often arise through interpretation in the context of utterance. However, it is possible that the effect of this anecdote spoken in Romanian is not as strong as in English, or it can be achieved, but without relying mandatory on the modality difference game.

The polyfunctionality of modal markers seems to be motivated by the complex communicative strategies of speakers and their co-participants. As for the speaker, Coates contests the claim that “[i]n informal conversation, where participants are trying to achieve simultaneously the goals of (a) saying something on the topic under discussion; (b) being sensitive to the face-needs of the various addressees; (c) qualifying assertions to avoid total commitment to a point of view which they may want to withdraw from; (d) qualifying assertions to encourage the flow of discussion; (e) creating cohesive text, then it does not seem feasible to conclude „this form expresses ‘x and that form expresses y’” [4].

It is recognized that successful intercultural communication is impossible without the knowledge of background information, which includes communicative and cultural values, history and traditions [5]. Being an essential part of language culture, humor, and irony pose vast challenges for research.

METHODOLOGY

The framework is applied in discourse analysis (statements made by some Romanian political actors) to explore the relationship between modality and

irony in specific contexts. I relate the discourses to Grice's cooperative principle and conversational maxims and argue that political utterances overtly and blatantly flout these maxims [6]. Analyzing the data both quantitatively and qualitatively demonstrates how different speakers express stances, reflect ideologies and (de) legitimize assertions or actions with different forms, values, and types of modality in political discourse. It is suggested that the adoption of different sources of evidential reveals the speakers' corresponding commitments toward their stance and marks the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of their stance. Some types of evidentiality reflect the speaker's ideology as they encode presuppositions about authorities, facts or shared knowledge.

In analyzing the role and functions of modality in the interaction with irony in political discourse, I rely on the hypothesis that these notions are integral elements in certain styles of communication. In general, political actors tend to communicate in vague and oblique ways in order to protect and further their careers and to gain both political and interactional advantages over their political opponents. This behavior of politicians is goal-oriented and instrumental in nature.

The roles, irony performs in discourse, are variable – from mocking to soothing, as well as entertaining or making a statement. The role of self-irony is most important, as it serves to discharge tension and save the face of the speaker. Modalized ironical stances may also express solidarity and minimize the distance between interlocutors, as well as enhance the distance and exclude outsiders, serving as a boundary marker.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Language is the only tangible vehicle to access knowledge as well as a powerful tool that influences perceptions, and behaviors. Any speech with the purpose of persuasion requires the most thoughtful choice of language and contextual adjustment. Thus, political discourse seems to be a clear piece of evidence where rhetorical language is seen in action. One of the expressive means is irony, whose functions range from attack and mockery to self-defense and entertainment and rely on communicative context, background, and the type of relations between the interlocutors.

According to Haverkate, irony is a conversational strategy whose essence lies in the speaker's manipulation of the truth value, it is the opposite of what one really believes [8].

This perspective can also be applied to some politicians' strategies of undermining their opponent's image by launching a series of inferences, thus pretending not to know the phenomenon in depth and thus raising the presumption of innocence (the opponent cannot accuse them of slander). Inference implies a deductive knowledge of reality, represented by the verb 'to think', which functions as an epistemic modulator, different from the speaker's knowledge expressed by the verb 'to know'. Consider the example below:

(2) *I think that Mr. Traian Basescu [...] was the last shiver of a long illness.*

This is an example taken from the speeches delivered during the parliamentary debates in Romania, held on April 19, 2007, on the removal of President Traian Basescu from office. The speakers were leading representatives of two major political parties: Mircea Geoană (Social Democratic Party - PSD) and Crin Antonescu (National Liberal Party - PNL), both in favor of dismissal.

In fact, this instance is a persuasive hedging strategy, the effectiveness of which lies precisely in the use of hedging to evade answering the question in a straightforward and complete way, the speaker indicates that there is not a full commitment by virtue of the *I think*, that signals less than full endorsement to the declaration.

The hedge-type expressions should be deemed examples of 'empty rhetoric' (often involving appeals to undeniable truths), rather than instances purposefully aimed at exerting rhetorical impact (having the force of mitigation, responsibility shift, etc.).

To the extent to which a speaker does not 'misspeak,' either through mistake or misadventure, hedging must be considered an intentional action in that the speaker chooses a linguistic device over and above the propositional content of the message which will affect the interpretation of the utterance, either by modifying the content of the utterance or its force.

According to Negrea, irony is the result of an intention of simulation, where meaning is not directly stated but implied, it is a "counterfactual representation of the world", from which we conclude that this procedure is not "a disingenuous act" but "a simulated act" [10].

The addressees understand the speaker's intention only because of context and intonation, the sentence taken out of situational context, rendered in isolation, does not guarantee the deciphering of the sender's intention, but only entails an effort of decoding, in the spirit of the supposed respect of Grice's maxims in language, according to which the speaker is supposed to provide pertinent, sufficient and sincere information.

It should be noted that irony, as a category of discourse, is a product of collaboration between the participants of the conversation: one part is responsible for producing irony, the other – for understanding it correctly. In the process of intercultural and interpersonal communication, it is necessary to absorb and understand national irony, be able to interpret it in the right way and react appropriately.

When irony appears in conjunction with modal expressions, the text becomes more difficult to be interpreted by the reader and even more by the translator, as can be seen from the following instance:

(3) So, I think Ponta can't be a politician, because he has the impression that in politics you can lie with serenity, knowing well that you are lying. You can talk nonsense when you don't know and have bad information.

(This is an example taken from the speech given by Traian Băsescu on 6 July 2012 on the occasion of the suspension).

The verb 'can' in the utterance '*Ponta can't be a politician*' may be interpreted as ironic because the dynamic modal sense (considered pseudo modality in the 2008 Romanian Grammar) refers to the capacity, the ability to be a politician, an ability that is denied to him.

The conjunctive mood, considered a modalized resource in its turn, contributes to the ironic sense of the fragment because it refers to the future, to a possible, virtual world, implying that Ponta would not be a politician at

present, although the public knows that he is, even though this corresponds to the public portrayal.

Through this irony, Ponta's positive image is threatened, but at the same time, it is politely mitigated by the epistemic use of the modal verb *think*, which refers to a universe of beliefs assumed by the speaker but not necessarily shared by others.

Also ironic is the utterance '*You can talk nonsense when you don't know and have bad information*' because the deontic use of the verb '*can*' leads to the idea that having bad information is a mitigating circumstance, the only one in which lying is allowed. The real meaning the speaker wants to convey is that in politics you are not allowed to lie.

Also, the reference to possible worlds by the epistemic adverb *maybe*, the alternation between the possibility of Victor Ponta confessing his academic journey (which includes the eventuality of refusal) and the presentation of the academic misconduct as a reality, as an already produced, undeniable event, are part of the strategy of irony considered by Kierkegaard that of simulating both knowledge and ignorance of facts [9]:

(4) In the meantime, maybe he can also tell you about how he was a master's student in Catania, that's what I meant by Dottore.

The mockery of political opponents is ironically disguised and demands background knowledge for its interpretation. This is not the first time that this strategy has been applied to mock the opponent through the knowledge/ignorance game. In the following example, Traian Băsescu presents himself as the only one who knows a rule that should work in the political world, namely placing national interests above personal interests. The marking of the speaker's superiority and the highlighting of his positive image is achieved by alternating between the deontic verb '*want*' in the first person of the main sentence and the imperative mood of the direct completive sentence '*to know that*', on the one hand, and the truth value of the subordinate sentence is more important than achieving political goals:

(5) I want you to know that there are more important things than achieving political goals: and one thing that is infinitely more important is the stability of the country and reputation of the country.

In the press release of July 13, 2012, Crin Antonescu also uses epistemic modal expressions in the interaction with irony, with reference to the general political situation in Romania:

(6) And if, of course, fortunately, in Romania the rights and freedoms for the press, for politicians, for each one of us are so broad that they also make room for the possibility or freedom to misinform, to manipulate, to lie, there is, also fortunately, the right and the obligation for me to tell the truth and in this sense, some things must be categorically clarified.

The first use of the epistemic adverbial locution, fortunately, has an ironic meaning, especially because the phrase refers to opponents, indirectly accused of manipulation, lying, while the second use of the same locution underlines the positive image of the speaker, presented as a defender of a value such as truth.

Also ironic is the invitation:

(7) Mr. Traian Băsescu, order your people to stop defaming Romania.

The irony lies in the fact that the imperative mood usually refers to the real world, to what the speaker wants to be done and what he believes can be done, whereas Crin Antonescu uses it rhetorically, without really expecting Traian Băsescu to obey this exhortation.

As the above example has shown, the use of imperative also has the role of enhancing the positive, superior image of the speaker in relation to the addressee (who appears in an inferior position) and thus affecting his positive image, in this case referring to the suspended president.

The mockery of political opponents is ironically disguised and demands background knowledge for its interpretation. A vivid illustration of this situation is demonstrated in Basescu's speech (...), when he gradually and skillfully refers to his opponent, as it appears from the following modalized example, an extract from the TV show debate – 2004 Romanian Presidential Campaign:

(8) "But I think in an election race maybe it's good to say something like that. I was talking to colleagues at the beginning of the campaign. Hey, what a curse on these people that they have to choose between two former communists? Between Adrian Nastase and Băsescu. In the mirror

I look at myself and say: "Hey, do you have respect for the Romanian people, Basescu?" - I was wondering. I say: "I do!" Did you make a mockery of the Romanian people?". "I didn't feel like I ever did." But the big problem you and I have is not only that we were both party members, that was the state back then.

From there I think going from close to close, maybe this discussion shouldn't have happened. Maybe it was time for a different kind of candidate than the two of us to come before the Romanians. It's true, I didn't live from political work, but I was a party member. But the big drama is not that I was a party member".

Under (8) we have reproduced the much talked about moment of the mirror, a moment that was considered by specialists to have ensured Basescu's victory. It can be seen that Bănescu uses the personal pronoun 'you' to talk to himself, to question himself about his intentions toward the Romanian electorate and people. The emphatic use of the personal pronoun 'you' underlines an antithesis between Basescu and Nastase, this time the presupposition is that, unlike Adrian Nastase, he, Basescu, respects the Romanian people and has not mocked them.

It should be noted that Basescu's reference to the curse of Romanians having to choose between two former communists, became one of the most memorable moments in the history of the final televised debates of the Romanian presidential campaigns.

The final confrontation in 2004 brought with it a well-thought-out moment, a political maneuver won by Traian Bănescu through Adrian Nastase's lack of reaction, namely the "two former communists" moment.

Self-interrogating, Basescu implies some unpleasant things about his opponent but does not attack him directly. In this Basescu - Basescu dialogue, the candidate uses language typical of everyday conversation, typical of the ordinary man. In this way, the candidate underlines his own membership of the mass of voters: he too is an ordinary, honest man who is trying to help his people. It is also interesting to move from a self-referential 'you', if we can call it that, to an 'I' disjunctive, more strongly antithetical because of the use of 'we', interspersed between two occurrences of the pronoun 'I', in which Basescu seems to be trying to underline a link between

himself and Nastase, and then to underline once again the incompatibility and the total antithesis: "It's true, I didn't live from political work".

This may be because, unlike the root modality, the epistemic modality is closely related to the speaker's attitude toward the truth of the proposition under the scope of the modal. As Perkins points out, the epistemic modality basically reflects the state of lack of knowledge, which seems to be ironic in view of the fact that the term epistemic itself derives from the Greek word *episteme* for knowledge [14]. The lack of knowledge, or more precisely an incomplete body of knowledge, appears to bring about the speaker's different attitudes about the embedded proposition – i.e. the speaker's degree of certainty. The degree of certainty can be expressed by using various kinds of modal verbs, as illustrated in the above example.

Delivering a political speech (monologue) gives politicians the opportunity to enhance their positive face, although they may also protect their negative face by avoiding awkward commitments, and take the opportunity for face aggravation, by attacking their political opponents.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of irony can easily become a tightrope walk for the speaker between being friendly and funny or being rude and offending. Irony can also be challenging for the addressee if a situation is ambiguous and if he or she, therefore, must find out how a remark is meant to be understood. Since irony is an indirect way of saying what one is thinking it often leads to misunderstandings or awkward situations. However, irony might also be used very well-directed and purposeful.

The functions of irony and the frequency of its usage depend on the communicative values and the picture of the world, which form national mentality. Communicative values are reflected in the language and influence the choice of strategies and expressive means. The irony is one of the instruments which is aimed at reaching the communicative intention of the speaker and performs a number of functions.

Irony has certain peculiarities in political discourse. The research showed that political discourse in most cases conveys criticism, attack, and mockery, diminishes the opponent and portrays the speaker himself in a favorable way.

Politicians use irony mainly for self-defense, to prevent criticism, or close an unpleasant topic.

The effect of irony in political discourse depends on both parties – the speaker and the addressee and is presupposed by a number of factors, such as cultural, and national peculiarities, individual characteristics, background information, social level, etc. The irony is a useful device, contributing to the success of communication, in case it is used appropriately and skillfully and interpreted correctly.

Modality in itself is not creating the irony, but it introduces irony: when speakers resort to modality, they do not do so to disguise their critical intent, although modality can function as a mitigator of beliefs that could be interpreted as offensive accusations or as manifestations of the speaker's authority if they were uttered directly, especially through the use of epistemic modal markers of probability.

Irony can be introduced both by epistemic and deontic modal expressions, depending on the intentions of the speaker. Since irony implies the manifestation of the speaker's attitude towards fact and one's own statements, it can be studied from the perspective of modality.

If the modality does not imply irony, it remains to investigate whether irony always involves modality, since it is associated in most definitions with the speaker's attitude towards the content of their own enunciation.

The functions of irony and its relationship with modality have largely been ignored in political discourse studies. However, it is necessary to explore further how other modal types function in the process of legitimization in political discourse and interact with irony.

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