Wooden Language - a Contemporary Tool in Political and Advertising Communication

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Abstract: Appeared with the totalitarian ideology, the wooden language remains a linguistic phenomenon frequently used in contemporary discourse. Used in contemporary thought circles, by advertisers, by communication agencies, by the media, by politicians, by polling institutes, etc., the wooden language pejoratively qualifies the discourse that contains it, provided that its specific structures be decrypted, as well as the intention of the issuer who wants to give the impression of authenticity, credibility and transparency. The issue of the use of wooden language in discourse presupposes a complex and transdisciplinary decryption process, which goes first through the identification of the means and procedures of realization, then through the identification of the functions that these linguistic structures hold at the level of discourse.

Keywords: *wooden language, totalitarian ideology, contemporary discourse, political communication, advertisement*

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1. Wood language, a transdisciplinary approach

Defined as a redundant and stereotypical discourse, whose goal is to represent an ideology, authority or power, used by politicians, managers, technocrats to hide a certain inaccuracy in the answer, to avoid answering difficult questions or to hide certain goals that *wooden language* or *doublespeak* (a term coined after George Orwell's concept of newspeak proposed in the 1984 novel, "cotton tongue", "oak tongue", etc.) should not be disclosed (Orwell, 1948). If the study of wooden language is not a new concern for researchers, the topic could still be considered topical, especially since this controversial linguistic phenomenon is often evoked or mentioned in the contemporary media to denounce a certain demagoguery in political discourse or as a weapon of intimidation of the opponent on television during an election campaign. Myth or linguistic reality, the wooden language is present, represented in various forms, received in the public space in various ways. These elements show that it occupies an important place in contemporary communication.

Long associated with socialist ideology and forms of expression of totalitarian power, propaganda and manipulation, the wooden language is a communicative device present in many areas of life: in literature, in business, in political discourse and especially in advertising. The importance and topicality of this concept are related to its multiple use in contemporary discourses, which invites the analysis of means of realization, especially as a method of argumentation and persuasion, as well as the functions and effects produced in communication of this type. This paper will focus on explaining the concept of wooden language in contemporary discourse, first presenting its definition, then its linguistic features and the rhetorical figures it uses to function, such as euphemism, hyperbole and metaphor, the functions of wooden language in discourse (discursive purposes and effects), concluding with some suggestions for avoiding the wooden language in discourse, when this phenomenon is aware of the transmitter and there are linguistic means that allow its avoidance.

1.1. Defining the term “wooden language”, perceptions and approaches in contemporary research

The definitions proposed by dictionaries for the term “wooden language” generally refer to some structural and semantic properties of the concept, as can be seen in the DEX definition quoting Florica Dumitrescu’s *Dictionary of Recent Words*: “Wooden language (Referent especially to the political discourse before 1989, regarding the Romanian space) Language that uses almost exclusively frozen formulas, emptied of content and expressiveness v. *verbatim* (from French *langue de bois*)” (Dex Online, n. d.). Another definition of the concept of language of wood can be found in *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* from 2004, which explains the same linguistic reality as “a frozen language of political propaganda; by extension, a way of expressing itself that abounds in frozen formulas and in uncompromising stereotypes (as opposed to open speech)”, from French “*franc-parler*” (Rey et al., 1967; 2004). The wooden language could therefore be explained by opposition with a speech whose defining features would be authenticity, honesty and sincerity.

From a linguistic perspective, wooden language corresponds to a form of discourse, not a language seen as a closed system, spoken by a specific group that could not communicate with other human groups (Krieg-Planque, 2017). The linguistic facts regarding the wooden language, which are important for a linguist, refer to the use of the wooden language (methods of realization, techniques used, functions at the level of discourse). This linguistic phenomenon has been and continues to be the subject of research, as evidenced, especially in France, by the works of researchers such as Françoise Thom or Christian Delporte (*Une histoire de la langue de bois*, 2009). Researchers agree that when talking about wooden language, reference is made to “specific uses of language, in special situations and contexts, which actually characterizes speech (...). People who speak the wooden language are not specific groups, but speakers who find themselves in different communication situations (discursive genres, types of interactions) and for this simple reason mobilize a certain way of expressing themselves” (Krieg-Planque, 2017). It is what analysts call a “common, spontaneous rhetorical feeling” that we find in the discourse of elites,

politicians or public figures, institutional communicators, technocrats, managers, advertisers, etc. with a persuasive, manipulative, or denouncing purpose in the literary pages of writers such as George Orwell (1948) or Eugène Ionesco (*Rhinocéros*, 1959), the emblematic work for the “theatre of the absurd”, which describes an imaginary epidemic of *rinocerita* (the term belongs to Eugène Ionesco, in French *rhinocérîte*), a disease that frightens the inhabitants of a city and metamorphoses them into rhinos; it is the tragicomic metaphor of the installation of totalitarianism on the eve of the Second World War in Europe, highlighting the dangers of conformity which, making individual thinking disappear, gives way to totalitarian regimes, whose emblem is the wooden language). Seen as the language of power, drawing its juice from totalitarian ideology, the wooden language in the Orwellian vision “*mimics obedience*”, “flourishes that *double think*, moral ambiguity, schizophrenia on a national scale, cultivating ambivalence and duplication, the aesop language. The new “language” (*newspeak*) maintained double-meaning speech (*doublespeak*), proceeding Orwellian: propagandistically manipulating “hypnogenic words” and *fundamental lies*, accepted with a protective role (adaptation, defence), beautifying reality; but being aware of the fault that separated the propaganda arsenal from the uncomfortable truths” (Rachieru, 2012, p. 2).

Countless research articles are dedicated to this concept in the world today, and in the virtual space can be identified web pages that aim to expose the wooden language in speeches and to train the general public in identifying and combating this controversial communication phenomenon. In France, for example, in the virtual space, both on YouTube and on Dailymotion, there are several initiatives of some Internet users, such as *Le Stagirite*, to identify and characterize the wooden language, seen as a series of “passive towers, assumptions and euphemisms that combine in different communication situations” (Le Stagirite, 2017). Also, we mention here the initiative of a popular education activist, Franck Lepage, who became famous due to a “gesticulated conference” in 2007 on the subject of wooden language (the conference entitled “Franck Lepage: wooden language decrypted with humour!”) in which he makes a demonstration of the multiple combination of lexical units limited in number (eg, democracy,

partnership, local decision, proximity, citizens, etc.) to construct different discourses by recycling the same abstract concepts or nouns (Lepage, 2007).

Considered by Françoise Thom as a form of “anti-language”, an “automatic thinking system, a machine speech that hypnotizes the spirit and paralyzes reason”, this linguistic phenomenon is interesting especially from the perspective of identifying the methods of realization, the functions performed at the level of discourse, of the effectiveness of the message that contains it, that is of the effects produced on the receiver (fascination, fear, sympathy, adhesion, etc.) (Thom, 1987, p. 211). In addition, his presence in the discourses of politicians of totalitarian regimes, but also in the democratic-liberal ones, in diplomatic discourses, in the media universe and in that of political and public communicators, in marketing, in Advertising, in the communication strategy of enterprises, even in the everyday language of people in general, shows that the wooden language is a polysemantic linguistic phenomenon, complex and very flexible in terms of use and effects on the receiver.

2. Linguistic characteristics and functions of the wooden language in contemporary discourse

This presence of the wooden language in multiple types and discursive genres invites to an identification of the main linguistic characteristics of the phenomenon, referring at the same time to the ways of accomplishment in different contexts. Invoking the polysemy of the wooden language, Joanna Nowicki and Michael Oustinoff, in an analysis of this concept from 2015, explain the need to use the wooden language in certain circumstances in which the speech should follow the credibility, without having to tell the truth: “These circumstances undoubtedly concerned all areas, including the rule of law: in the United States of America, the Fifth Amendment is invoked to remain silent in order to avoid self-incrimination; the doctor must first ask himself if it would be necessary to tell the truth to the patient, if this gesture would not aggravate the disease; diplomacy, like politics, could not exist in a framework defined by perfect *transparency*” (Nowicki & Oustinoff, 2015). Thus, a first feature of wooden language would be the use of *storytelling* in communication, especially in advertising discourse, where consumers are more attracted to the brand story than to

informative discourses, the more so as the story plays the game of transparency, pursuing credibility, not the truth. The wooden language in advertising storytelling is evident by the stereotypical way of structuring and presenting the story, following the two components of the story, seen as a story or history, in the vision of narrator T. Todorov: the logic of actions and relationships between characters (Todorov, 1975).

In advertising, storytelling aims to tell the story of a customer's need and works according to a fixed structure organized in two stages, presented in detail by Wilfrid Gerber, Jean-Christophe Pic and Alina Voicu in *Le storytelling pas à pas*. The first stage refers to the decryption of the story to be told: identifying the action scheme (with the initial situation - node - actions - outcome - the final situation) and the actantial scheme (of the distribution of the characters' roles: sender, heroes, adjuvants, opponents, valued object and the recipient). The second stage consists of the story itself, following five key elements specific to the advertising narrative: capturing attention through a question, captivating the audience by telling a story, the climax or culmination where the problem is solved, the end of the story and the presentation of arguments by presenting offers of products or services, offering technical details as arguments (Gerber et al., 2013, pp. 115-123).

The story in advertising is romanticized, aestheticized, easily slipping to manipulation, because the border between story and reality, between truth and fiction remains difficult to demarcate, the goal being to convince the customer to buy the good or service as the only solution that could cover his need, as in the following example, which presents the story of two young women working in the cosmetics field, the creators of a French cosmetic cream brand: "It was two years ago. I was (Clementine) with Camille at a dinner, we were talking about our professional activity in the cosmetics field and we realized that we had common ideas. The first was that we each had a thousand cosmetics in the bathroom and that we only use two. We realized there was a problem here; both from an ecological point of view and from a marketing perspective, and that we both felt the need to return to what is essential to correct this problem. In addition, we realized that the cosmetic formulas on the bath plates were incomprehensible and we told ourselves what is not normal not to know what to apply on the skin(...)". This is how the cosmetics brand Les Petits Prodiges appeared in 2017, based only on

natural ingredients and which has a strong ecological message behind it. It is a dialogued, convincing story that identifies two needs: skin health and ecology, proposing a single solution: a unique, natural and ecological beauty product (Martinese, 2017).

Another feature of the wooden language present in contemporary discourses is the use of rhetoric, but not in the sense of the art of arguing to gain public support or assent and to give authority to discourse, as seen by the ancients (Plato, Cicero, Aristotle). The use of rhetoric in contemporary discourse assaulted by the wooden language is done in order to “speak well”, to decorate the discourse, it is “an art of non-demonstrative or coercive dialogue” that marks the discourse since the second half of the twentieth century (Valade, 2010, p. 35). Thus, we find especially in political discourses a lot of metaphors, hyperboles, repetitions, emphatic structures that include values and desideratum, all these being used only to arouse emotions and provide an idealizing vision of reality. We will refer here to the political discourse of the 1980s in Romania, marked by totalitarian ideology, representative of the elements that make up the wooden language previously evoked: “The election victory of the Front of Democracy and Socialist Unity is a *new and vibrant expression* of the *strength* of our worker-revolutionary *democracy*, of the *strength* of our socialist *society*, of the unity of the whole people, which, under the leadership of our *glorious* communist *party*, consciously builds its own or the *future, free, welfare*, the future of socialist and communist society!”; “There have been years of intense work, of *great achievements*. Our country has gone through a *glorious road of achievements*, going through, in a short period, several historical stages in its steady advance towards the *high peaks of the communist society*” (Ceausescu, 1985). To complete these examples, we refer to a contemporary Romanian political discourse, which confirms the ubiquity in speech of the wooden language that permanently recycles clichéd linguistic structures opposed to transparency, which say how reality should be, following credibility and not truth: “wave of enthusiasm”, “love of country”, “change of mentality”, “measurable results”, “national consensus”, “decent life”, “new beginning”, “aspiration for freedom”, etc. (Iohannis, 2014).

Beyond these, the wooden language is also marked by redundant, clearly pleonastic structures that counted in the juxtaposition of two terms

with meaningful connections, in order to value one of the two terms and to make the discourse credible: participatory democracy, social relationship, useful vote, real economy, strategic partnership, declarations of complacency, partisan interests, sustainable construction, etc. (Iohannis, 2014). In political discourse the use of anglicisms and other neologisms to modernize and energize his discourse to make him ambiguous: meeting, black, inputs, lock-down, team-building, focus, prioritization, etc. The same can be said about the use in political discourse of expert jargon, composed of a technical vocabulary inaccessible to the general public, which is associated with euphemisms to mitigate the negative impact that a term or expression could have on the audience. Thus, today we no longer say “ruling class”, but “elite”, we no longer say “boss” or “employer”, but “entrepreneur, leader”, even “coach”, we no longer say, for example, that a military attack registered “dead”, but we say that there were some “collateral damages”, we no longer say “dismissal”, but “restructuring of positions” within a “social plan” etc.

The issue of the use of wooden language in discourse presupposes a complex and transdisciplinary decryption process, which goes first through the identification of the means and procedures of realization, then through the identification of the functions that these linguistic structures hold at the level of discourse. Obviously, these functions are determined and marked by a criterion of intentionality related to the sender, its motivations in relation to the receiver. Beyond the concealment of the truth, in favour of increasing the credibility of the speech, there is also the intention to arouse the emotions of the receiver to attract his adhesion, to give the impression of an intelligent speech, so that later, once the ground is ready, to be able to announce some measures (in the political discourse), or to be able to propose the saving solution to cover a need of the consumer (in the advertising discourse). Another function of the wooden language is the ambiguity the message, to mitigate inequalities, renaming a certain reality in positive terms, or the impact of terms considered offensive or even to avoid certain reasoned answers with examples, statistics or clear evidence (depending on the wooden language present especially in the campaign debates in the second round of elections).

3. Conclusions and suggestions for avoiding the wooden language

Appeared with the totalitarian ideology, the wooden language remains a linguistic phenomenon frequently used in contemporary discourse. Used in contemporary thought circles, by advertisers, by communication agencies, by the media, by politicians, by polling institutes, etc., the wooden language pejoratively qualifies the discourse that contains it, provided that its specific structures be decrypted, as well as the intention of the issuer who wants to give the impression of authenticity, credibility and transparency. However, the decryption by the general public of these prefabricated linguistic structures requires an objective analysis organized in workshops, based on the completion of specialized works and a series of exercises to identify the wooden language in the context: identification of euphemisms and the reason for their use; identifying in a press article or in a political discourse the structures of the wooden language; writing an advertising text using the wooden language and rewriting it without clichéd structures, in a natural language; making a quick speech using 10 terms chosen from a political speech and considered to be representative of the wooden language, etc.

But beyond labelling the wooden language as the bearer of a message of lies, of rigging reality, of concealing the truth, being “incompatible with the ideal of transparency of democracy, with the free expression of public opinion”, it remains an interesting phenomenon, open to research, due to its ubiquity in contemporary discourse, but especially in the centre of the political struggle where it is a weapon of threat to the political opponent or a tool for manipulating public opinion, with strong persuasive valences.

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