

# Wooden Language as a Form of Political or Media Communication - An Object of Interdisciplinary Study

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**Abstract:** *Analysing the uses of the wooden language in political and media circumstances first requires situating this concept in an appropriate field of scientific research. This field is indeed multidisciplinary, because the wooden language, as a manifestation of language and a phenomenon of communication inspiring speakers with "an ordinary rhetorical feeling" (Krieg-Planque), constitutes a kind of "metalanguage specific to political discourse" (Fiala, Pineira, Sériot, 1989 and Krieg-Planque, 2010), whose analysis thus places us at the crossroads of at least three different disciplines, but close at the same time: linguistics, discourse analysis and information and communication sciences (although the path can take us to sociology, rhetoric or political science). This interdisciplinary rapprochement, as explained by Claire Oger in a chapter of the book *Discourse Analysis and Human and Social Sciences*, opens up "possibilities of interdisciplinary cooperation in the study of communication phenomena", from a pragmatic and enunciative perspective targeting the practices and discursive strategies of the social and political actors who are at their origin. In this perspective, the study of the wooden language can involve us in a field of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary analysis at the same time, because it is a question in particular of analysing the modes of manufacture and manifestation of this element integrated in the material of political and social discursive reality.*

**Keywords:** *wooden language; interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary analysis; discourse analysis; information and communication sciences; political speech.*

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## **The situation of the wooden language in the context of current scientific research**

The analysis of the use of wooden language in political and media circumstances first requires placing this concept - linguistic tool - in an appropriate field of scientific research. This field is a multidisciplinary one, because wooden language, as a manifestation of language and a communication phenomenon inspiring speakers that leaves the impression of “an ordinary linguistic feeling” (Krieg-Planque, 2013: 189-203), constitutes a kind of “metalanguage specific to discourse political” (Fiala, Pineira, Sériot, 1989: 50-66). This approach thus places us at the crossroads of at least three different disciplines, but close at the same time: linguistics, discourse analysis and communication sciences (although this track inevitably intersects with disciplines such as sociology, rhetoric or political sciences). This interdisciplinary approach, as explained by Claire Oger in a chapter of the book *Analyse du discours et sciences humaines et sociales*, opens “possibilities of interdisciplinary cooperation in the study of communication phenomena”, from a pragmatic and enunciation perspective, aiming at the practices and strategies discursive, of the social and political actors that are at their origin (Oger, 2007: 23). In this perspective, the study of the use of wooden language can be the object of an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary analysis at the same time, because it is especially about analysing the ways of production and manifestation of this element integrated in the materiality of the real political and social discourse.

Since our research is only one stage of an extensive ongoing scientific approach that aims to identify the presence of wooden language in contemporary political and media discourse (with reference to the French space in the electoral context of 2022), aiming to describe the manifestations and uses of this linguistic tool, in the present presentation we will place the wooden language as an object of analysis within communication and discourse. Specialists in discourse analysis associate wooden language with discourse facts, based on language facts, which explain this “ordinary rhetorical feeling”, i.e. wooden language, so called by Alice Krieg-Planque in her works on “discursive materialities” or “discursive places”, referring to professional communication practices, such as repeating, transforming and reformulating statements and their content in a euphemistic manner, etc. (Krieg-Planque, 2007: 66-68).

### **Current research on wooden language: definition, key notions of wooden language, and perceptions of the term among scholars and lay users**

The term “wooden language” is a lemmatized lexical unit (composed of a noun + preposition + noun), where the noun “language” is determined by the substantive attribute “wooden” whose denominative meaning would be “dry”, devoid of substance, which has no durability or consistency. This metaphorical act of naming somehow anticipates public perceptions of this concept, and especially of discourses containing such language facts, often seen as lacking in credibility, superficial or implying some intention of concealment. In his work *Le discours politique*, Christian Le Bart refers to the wooden language of political discourse as a “criticisable, because sterile practice (“les petites phrases”, seduction, propaganda, “beautiful speeches”)” (Le Bart, 1998:3). If we look for the definition of this concept in the French dictionary Larousse, for example, we find that “wooden language” does not benefit from a specific entry, but from an entry as a lexical subcategory of the star term “language”, in the “expressions” section: “Wooden language: rigid way of expressing oneself that uses stereotypes and fixed formulas and reflects a dogmatic position; in politics, the dogmatic discourse revealing the absence of new ideas” (Dictionary *Larousse*). The works of some scholarly authors (lexicographers, discourse analysts) on the term “wooden language” show a certain unity in formulating the explanations of the term, which confirms a common perception. However, although it is mentioned in scientific works, the term “wooden language”, like that of “small sentences” - the phrase comes from the French “les petites phrases” (Krieg-Planque; Oger) -, is associated more to non-scholarly authors and speakers (such as journalists, politicians, political communicators, popular education committees in the French space, such as Le Contrepied/La Scop Le Pavé, etc.). We then observe that the wooden language is perceived as a form of the imposition of power and authority and that, in some scholarly authors, this concept is defined by referring to other terms, such as “recycled detached fragments”, “small sentences”, “increased” speech, euphemism, language stereotypes, etc. We quote here authors of academic works who have written about the wooden language, such as Alice Krieg-Planque, Claire Oger, Ruth Amossy, Dominique Wolton, etc.

Another perception of the wooden language aims to describe it as a kind of positive language made through figures of speech and other stylistic-linguistic manifestations, such as hyperbole, oxymoron, pleonasm, resorting to technical language, anglicisms and logos, all of which follow a logic of mitigating, erasing the conflictuality or opacifying the discourse, even

stabilizing the statements and increasing the visibility of the discourse through the use of ready-made, ready-to-use formulas. These are the discursive modes of operation of wooden language, mentioned especially in the work of the French researcher Alice Krieg-Planque, who dedicates a series of articles to the analysis of these types of “discursive places” or linguistic phenomena comparable to wooden language (Krieg-Planque, 2007, 2011, 2013). In addition to his contributions, we also cite two university magazines that have reserved entire issues for the study of the functioning of the wooden language, named in this way by the authors of the articles: the review *Mots. Les langages du politique* (n° 21 from December 1989) and number 58 of *Hermès* review from 2010 (*Mots*, 1989; *Hermès*, 2010).

***The wooden language between the polemical weapon and the form of non-communication. Possible approaches to the wooden language: analytical perspectives***

In her book *Stereotypes and Clichés*, Ruth Amossy describes the term wooden language (this time used in the plural, “wooden languages”) as a polemical weapon that avoids discussion, that blocks communication and understanding (Amossy, 1997: 114-115). This perception is also shared by Dominique Wolton, who considers wooden language (always taken in the plural, “wooden languages”) as a form of incommunicado, a failure of communication, “a fantasy of manipulation, a mixture of silence and humour, a factor of social crisis and lack of trust (the actors are unable to tell the truth), a factor of stiffening the discourse” (Wolton, 2015: 654-657). Beyond the aforementioned perceptions, the term wooden language is also used by ordinary, non-scholarly speakers who criticize political and institutional discourse sprinkled with prefabricated sequences (Patrick Sériot, 1986: 7- 32). This is also the case of the “Wooden Language Detoxification Workshops (Le Contrepied)”, a popular education initiative belonging to the French militant Frank Lepage within the Scop Le Pavé workshops. In his approaches, Frank Lepage denounces the predictable and conventional nature of political and institutional discourse, training the workshop participants to recognize the specific structures of the wooden language in various types of discourse (Lepage, 2007).

A possible approach to wooden language is the perspective on discursive genres, which correspond to the circumstances and conjunctures of the production of political discourse. This is possible through the analysis of a heterogeneous corpus, consisting, for example, of discursive elements from an electoral campaign such as the 2022 one in France (which is the subject of our ongoing doctoral research in the CARISM laboratory of the University of

Paris II Panthéon Assas): election campaign speeches, rally speeches, televised debates, debate between the two rounds, newspaper articles (*Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *Libération*), political party programs, interviews with candidates and journalists, etc. (Catau-Veres, 2022). The aim would be to describe the formal elasticity of the wooden language, its formal plurality and, of course, its functions and uses within the political discourse, depending on the targeted objectives: disqualification (Peeters, Bert, 2013: 196-210), denunciation, erasure of conflictuality (Krieg-Planque & Oger, 2010: 91-96), concealment, etc., but also its functioning at the level of socio-political and media discourse.

Moreover, analysing the wooden language as a discursive artifact, as an artificially produced element, would constitute another approach track, along with the effect felt by the public and various actors, following the way the wooden language is perceived: as an unwanted or parasitic linguistic object or if the researched effect is, as Krieg-Planque emphasizes in his work on linguistic formula and rigidity, that of a critical, militant, partisan, engaging or polemical style, of fascination and mobilization (Krieg-Planque, 2009: 203). In addition, another analytical perspective on wooden language could target the ethos of the actors who use it (identifying someone's image as someone brave, angry, sincere, serious, authoritative, moderate, etc.), allowing the establishment of a typology of actors that can be associated with a certain cultural profile: elite culture (euphemisms), mass culture (hyperbole). An interesting analysis of ethos in politics is proposed by Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, in her book *Les Débats de l'entre-deux tours des élections présidentielles françaises. Constantes et évolutions d'un genre* (L'Harmattan, 2017), where the researcher creates a monograph of this kind of discourse and dedicates an entire chapter to the three registers of persuasion: logos ("the battle of arguments"), pathos and ethos ("the battle of images") in the political debate between the two voting rounds (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2017: 311).

## Conclusion

It therefore remains to be determined, based on the corpus analysis, if the wooden language is a present linguistic phenomenon, or even pursued by social and cultural actors, or by politicians, especially during electoral campaigns, such as the one in 2022 in France, if the mechanisms are known, but especially what are the motivations that push these actors to use it or, as the case may be, to avoid it. The social perception of the wooden language (the name and the functioning mechanisms) would also be interesting to analyse, especially since, in current academic works, the analysis of this concept or similar discursive facts leads to the conclusion that the public space (the debate, in general) is undergoing a "deplorable" evolution,

because we are witnessing, as Alice Krieg-Planque points out in the conclusion of one of her works on “the little sentences” (“les petites-phrases”) in political and media discourse, the “degradation and degeneration democratic functioning” (Krieg-Planque, 2011, pp. 23-41). If this is the case, we wonder if the recurrent use of wooden language, as a form of communication, by social and political actors has anything to do with the “degradation of democratic functioning”. Moreover, the fact of naming this phenomenon and describing it, in order to be aware of it collectively, could probably contribute to increasing the axiological dimension of the political discourse in such a way that the allusion to the use of wooden language is no longer an instrument of moral judgment.

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