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Verbal Clichés and Their Use in Everyday Speech – a Few Semantic, Syntactic and Pragmatic Considerations

Cipriana-Elena PEICA[1]*

Abstract

The complexity of the human language manifested through the multiple forms of transmitting a message in a communication was, is and will be perceived by the speakers of a language, but at the same time it was, is and will be studied by linguists in general, and by pragmatists in particular. The major differences between what is said through a linguistic material and what is actually intended to be conveyed, and the countless ways in which this can be achieved are a rich study material. Linguistic ambiguities in daily conversations are also created due to verbal clichés which are so widely used in daily, political, and media discourse. In this paper, we will refer both to ***meaning****,* ***context*** *and* ***ambiguity****, the three essential elements for the creation, conveyance, reception and especially interpretation of a message, and to the importance of the semantic, morphological, syntactic and pragmatic features in the formulation of verbal clichés, in the formation of the wooden language.*

Keywords: linguistic clichés, wooden language, syntactic, pragmatic, everyday speech**.**

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1. Introduction

Linguistic clichés – stereotypical, banal, overused linguistic structures – are elements of the language that are used out of habit, sometimes out of convenience, but most of the times for the purpose of achieving a certain effect, often persuasive, doubled by the desire to create the impression of a high intellectual and cultural level.

2. Theoretical Background

Linguistic clichés, language stereotypes making up the *wooden language*, were and are an interesting subject of study which have become a topic of discussion in our country after 1989; at the beginning, the presence of the *wooden language* was attributed to the communist era, communist texts and discourses. Several researchers made observations and drew conclusions about this phenomenon, including George Orwell in his theoretical articles on the "newspeak" concept, Alain Besançon in his monographic works, Patrick Sériot, Françoise Thom, Tatiana Slama-Cazacu, Cristiana-Nicola Teodorescu, Monica ChivaMitrea, Victor Iancu, Radu Paraschivescu, Ilie Rad and many others.

Tatiana Slama-Cazacu, for whom the *wooden language* is a *universality in the Romanian context*[4 p55-100] and who introduced the study of the *wooden language* in our country, demonstrates that the *wooden language* is a linguistic peculiarity existing in any dogma, society or *Power* that feels the need to impose itself, it is a "terrible" tool for manipulation, dissimulation, persuasion, a *real danger* to communication and free behaviour in any regime, which can be reflected in any language and at any time in history, and it is a powerful *means of masking reality, manipulation by a communicationthat diverts* from its purposes in a normal society.

The author defines and explains the *wooden language* phenomenon by taking into account the factors of the communicative system, the functioning mechanism, the genesis, the causes, and the effects: "if I try to define the wooden language, I would describe it as a language subsystem that includes mostly lexical elements, but also phraseological units in the form of fixed expressions, frozen clichés whose meaning is determined by a certain "authority", largely used stereotypically-dogmatically as an expression of an ideology (or a simulacrum of ideological, economic, cultural and other subsystems that hold a power or an authority), imitated but also imposed by political power or by groups or individuals with such inclinations (even if in general the proponents or epigones of an ideological system do not always know the semantic meaning), then spread by repetition, frequent use in

various means of oral or written communication, thus annihilating the minds of the receiving masses that may become subject to a collective suggestion; the real intention or at least the achieved effect is to impose authority either through the secrecy or prestige of the obtained code, or through technocratic knowledge, to prevent another way of thinking and, in general, to hide, conceal the true reality, if it is not favourable." [3 p4-5]

3. Argument of the paper

This chapter consists of a key idea of the paper, which is to be substantiated or contradicted, with means of theoretical analysis (not empirical evidence).

We consider that our paper has an international importance because the *wooden language* is a *universality in the Romanian context* . The study of the *wooden language* demonstrates that it presents many linguistic peculiarity existing in any dogma, society or *Power* that feels the need to impose itself, it is a "terrible" tool for manipulation, dissimulation, persuasion, a *real danger* to communication and free behaviour in any regime. That fact can be reflected in any language and at any time in history, and it is a powerful *means of masking reality, manipulation by a communicationthat diverts* from its purposes in a normal society.

4. Arguments to support the thesis

In the first stage, linguistic clichés had a real role of stylistic individualisation of expression, a role which we do not believe to be completely lost due to "weariness", because linguistic clichés still have the role of individualising everyday speech and from this point of view we can speak of a typology of clichés depending on the categories of transmitters and receivers. Thus, international linguistic clichés such as the *PenelopeCanvas* (meaning evasion), the *Sword of Damocles* (meaning imminent peril), the *Procustean bed* (meaning constraint), the *Caudine Forks* (meaning difficulties), *Diogenes's Lantern* (meaning unsuccessful search for a utopia), *Achilles' heel* (meaning a weakness) can be understood only by a group of specialised speakers who is familiar with certain concepts, while other linguistic clichés such as *From Annas to Caiaphas* (meaning making someone go from place to place to solve a problem which, in fact, will not be solved), *Noah's Ark* (meaning variety), *Washing your hands of something like Pontius Pilate* (meaning to avoid involvement), *Fata Morgana* (meaning illusion), *the Tower of Babel*

(meaning chaos) are used and can be understood by a larger group of speakers, given that most of them refer to biblical characters and facts.

5. Arguments to argue the thesis

Hilarious situations can be generated both by the improper use of verbal clichés in totally inappropriate contexts, which suggests that the person using them does not know their meaning, and by its misexpression.

5.1. Structure

The statement **"I can see the carrot at the end of the tunnel." (Stuart Pearce)** is an illustration of what has been said. In order to discuss the above-mentioned communication situation, we must start from data regarding the identity of the person who produced it and the context in which the above statement was made.

Stuart Pearce (born on 24 April 1962) is a former football player who was the manager of the *Nottingham Forest* team until February 2015. Between 2007 and 2013, he was the manager of the England national team.

The statement "I can see the carrot at the end of the tunnel." belongs to him and was made before an important game; it was studied (along with other statements) by Professor Oliver Hoener of the University of Mainz, who spent years studying football games and talked to top players to determine how much they thought of their moves before they acted. The British *Daily Record* newspaper notes that the German researcher has come to a shocking conclusion: players are better if they play without thinking! "A certain lack of thinking at the right time is useful", says the German professor, according toRealitateaRomaneasca page. [8]

Next, we will study from a semantic, syntactic and pragmatic point of view the reason why **Stuart Pearce**'s statement would fall into the "Football players say crazy things" category according to Professor Oliver Hoener and others.

In this case, Pearce's statement creates ambiguity due to the incorrect use of a verbal cliché, "to see the light at the end of the tunnel", which is also a way to create a hilarious situation because the pragmatic expectations are violated. The statement does not convey a real situation. At first glance, its communicative effect is funny because the person making the statement seems to have mistaken the simplified standard image which he used with a persuasive effect, thinking that he admirably imitated the manner of an orator if he used such an expression in his discourse. The fact that the symbolic *light at the end of the tunnel*, which has biblical meanings (the existence

of life after death, the existence of hope), is replaced by a word from the semantic field of vegetables – *carrot* – destroys the entire semantic load of the expression and fills with ambiguity the sphere of what the transmitter understands by it. The statement loses any significance, it becomes false because it loses its logical meaning.

From the syntactic point of view, the statement is perfectly valid. Even in a comparative analysis of the two: "I can see the carrot at the end of the tunnel." and "I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.", there are no differences from the syntactic point of view, only morphologically we can see a difference in the grammatical gender of the nouns replaced by Pearce (carrot = *morcov* in Romanian - simple common noun, *masculine*, while light = *lumină* in Romanian - simple common noun, *feminine*), but with no semantic, syntactic and/or pragmatic relevance.

However, even if from a syntactic point of view the statement is perfectly valid, semantics and pragmatics help us prove that it is meaningless, illogical, and creates only a funny situation with regard to the culture and the intellectual abilities of the person making the statement.

The "wooden language" phenomenon can also be studied both from a sociological perspective and from a linguistic perspective where attention is paid to the communicative component in which the meaning of communication appears to be altered either by omission or with the purpose of distorting and manipulating.

From the linguistic perspective, the analysis of the *wooden language* in terms of syntax, lexicon, and style proves to be particularly interesting. Among the morphological and syntactic particularities of the wooden language, Françoise Thom mentions the following: reduction of adverbial subordinates in favour of exaggerated substantivisation, absence of deixis, use of the imperative mode, occurrence of a verbo-nominal group instead of a simple verb, presence of comparative adjectives and adverbs, use of passive and impersonal constructions.

As lexical particularities, the French author emphasises the polar, manicheistic organisation of lexical terms, the "organism metaphor"; in terms of style, Françoise Thom relates the stylistic features of the *wooden language* to the "precepts of the classical rhetorical art thanks to which the author used to gain the adhesion of his audience". [6 p68-69]

In Romanian, the morphological and syntactic analysis of the *wooden language* require some nuances. Thus, nouns come mostly from long infinitives, they are not always contracted from adverbial subordinates. Adjectives and adverbs appear both in the comparative form and in the relative and absolute superlative form.

Due to the special similarity between the imperative and the present subjunctive, in the Romanian *wooden language* the imperative mood and the present tense of the subjunctive mood are equally used.

Although there are opinions that morphological, syntactic and stylistic peculiarities do not characterise the wooden language in its essence and its most important component is considered to be the lexical component, including clichés and semantic subtexts, as their role is to highlight an unfavourable reality [1 p25], we disagree, especially when determining the essence of a language fact. In our opinion, the lexical component and the morphological, syntactic and stylistic components form an inseparable whole. Most of the times, the effects pursued when using linguistic clichés can be achieved only through a "collaboration" of the said components. To this end, we propose to analyse the stylistic role of two modes used in the Romanian wooden language: imperative and subjunctive. Thus, from a semantic point of view, the imperative mood expresses direct communication, the transmitter's desire or will to determine an action or to prevent it, and subjective attitudes and feelings through a dual system of verbal and paraverbal signals. Its role is to make the characters' discourse theatrical, dynamic; together with nouns or adjectives in the vocative case, it is an indicator of the style's orality.

As regards the other mood under analysis - the subjunctive, when it replaces the imperative it shows, from a semantic point of view, the transmitter's attitude towards the stated action, state, feeling, and its role is to emphasise subjectivity.

Therefore, in the light of the above, we believe that we could not argue in any way that only the lexical element would be the one to constitute the essence in the clichés used in everyday speech, such as "Let's do everything!", "Let's give our best!".

The verbs in the imperative mood or in the future tense of the subjunctive mood *with this function, some nouns with an implicit role of action, the abundance of long infinitives (delimitarea / delimitation, dezvoltarea / development, evaluarea / evaluation, restructurarea / restructuring, schimbarea / change, etc.)*, and the specific verbs *trebuiesă / we must*, *săfacem / let's do* are true *mobilising cliché expressions* of the *wooden language.* [4 p86]

Euphemisms and hyperboles are also present in the verbal clichés of the everyday language that they characterise. Thus, meetings, discussions can be and often are *incendiary*, an exam session can be and often is *full of temperament*, an offer is *exceptional, unique, not to be missed*, prices are *the lowest* in the city, *discounts* are everywhere, etc.

The abundant use of adjectives from the *positive sphere* [4 p86] is characteristic of the *wooden language*. This sphere includes adjectives such as *adequate, flexible, quality, priority, modern*, etc.

Regarding the use of adjectives in verbal clichés, we find interesting the periodisation made by CezarTabarcea for the communist regime in Romania. CezarTabarcea establishes three periods in the use of adjectives based on the lexical richness, the frequency of occurrence in texts, and the comparison degree of the forms used. The first period, between 1965 and 1970, is characterised by lexical richness, average frequency of use, and positive degree (e.g.: bold plans, good living conditions, high peaks); the period from 1970 to 1980 is characterised by lower lexical richness, high frequency and comparative degree (e.g: ever more bold plans, better living conditions than ever, higher peaks); and the last period is characterised by reduced lexical richness, exaggerated frequency of use, and superlative degree (e.g.: the boldest plans, the best living conditions, the highest peaks.[5 p10]

In today's everyday language, the above analysis is relevant if we relate it to the impact that the use of *wooden language* is intended to have, because the way of achieving it is the same, the only differences are the semantic information and the used lexicon; the stereotyped expression is maintained along with words, phrases or grammatical forms.

Other characteristics of the *wooden language* are the use of the famous *deci (so)* in the beginning of an answer, and the correct and/or incorrect use of foreign words as a result of a misunderstood linguistic freedom, but also of a high degree of snobbery, doubled by the desire to bring novelty at all costs.[4 p4]This sphere includes also linguistic clichés that are words created or adopted unjustifiably and which might disappear for they are unnecessary and represent only a needless loading of the language, mistranslations from a foreign language or words that have a correspondent in Romanian, hence an unjustified loading of the language; given the $DOOM_2$ experience, if promoted and left "unamended", these words have a good chance of becoming absolutely unjustifiably... standard. If in 1992 the word *vizavi (across)* and its spelling became a verbal cliché, ridiculed and considered to be a barrier to normal, effective communication, 13 years later the $DOOM_2$ imposed this word and its *Romanianised spelling* as standard.[2 p848]

6. Dismantling the arguments against

Although contested, linguistic clichés are very present in the current language, they are a linguistic reality more and more present and stronger. Every day we hear expressions like *a-şi face treaba (to do your job)*, *a-şi/a nu-şi da*

ok-ul (to give/not to give the ok), *a (nu) fi cool (to be/not to be cool)* , *a (nu) fi în trend (to be/not to be in trend)*, *sauceva de genulacesta (or something like that)*, *a da tot ce e mai bun din ceva/din cineva (to give the best of something/someone)*, *a se tulburaapele (to disturb the waters)*, *a (nu) lua cu asalt (to storm/not to storm), a (nu) se ascundedupadegete (to accept/not to accept something)*, *iarna nu-icavara (winter is not like summer)*, *a avea un cuvântgreu de spus (to have an important say in something)*, *convertibilitatealeului (convertibility of the Romanian Leu)*, *autonomia (autonomy)*, *privatizarea (privatisation)*, *liberalizareapreţurilor (price liberalisation)*, *economia de piaţă (market economy)*, *Reforma (Reform)*,*Tranziţia (Transition)*, *piaţaliberă (free market)*, *scenariu (scenario)*, *scad/se topescpreţurile (prices fall/melt)*, *celmai bun/celmaimicpreţ (the best/lowest price)*, *vizavi de o problema (concerning a problem)*, *a se capacita (to capacitate), Oraşul de peBega (the City on the Bega)* etc., which are correct expressions, but some of them are overused and this has turned them from words into banal expressions. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that the *wooden language* is a way to signify, communicate, and this entitles us to say that it has a specific way of organising linguistic signs, which generate social effects. As far as the interpretation of the *wooden language* is concerned, account should be taken both of the linguistic reality and of the socio-cultural reality, the cultural context. Only in this way a clear image of the language fact under analysis can be obtained.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, we would first like to point out that we agree that the taking over of structures is not only a sign of "convenience", but it also reflects the psychological reason for generating a *wooden language*, the speaker's intention to draw attention to the fact that he/she is a part of a (social, political, intellectual, etc.) group, that he/she "knows", that he/she "is competent", that he/she wants to say something, not necessarily because it is important but to achieve a certain effect – or, in a broader sense, it can be the spontaneous manifestation of an individual's insufficiently controlled mimetic predisposition; however, we would like to stress that often the cataloguing of language facts as clichés is also the result of a tendency towards formalist analysis generated by the desire for hypercorrectness. On the one hand, the concern to express oneself in accordance with the standard rules is understandable, but on the other hand language as a whole must be treated with pedantry and reverence, because colloquial or literary expressions with a well-defined meaning have been imposed over time. Turning language facts into clichés too easily is due to the fact that the degree of culture is decreasing and therefore the number of those who

understand certain fine meanings is decreasing. However, linguistic clichés will exist, for it is a known fact that stereotypes are indispensable to the functioning of human memory and thinking, but blocking those that indicate culture and sophistication will automatically open the door to those coming from environments where expressions like *la tăţini-igreu* or *of, of, măi, măi* make sense.

Secondly, as far as the analysis of linguistic clichés is concerned, we have said and demonstrated that focusing on only the syntactic, semantic or pragmatic element in the analysis of the *wooden language*, or making an exhaustive analysis of one component to the detriment of the other two is not possible without endangering the validity and the conclusions of the research because "at this level of textual meaning, the cognitive experience stored in the semiotic verbal system is amalgamated with that acquired by other semiotic systems or codes and with symbolic thinking or symbolisms to the second power. Such symbolisms may include mythological and folklore symbols, artistic symbols, some forms of ideology that do not express rational structures [...]".[7 p52]

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