

# CONSTANTS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS: THE RHETORICAL FORM OF THE POLITICAL SPEECH, POLITICAL ADVERTISING AND THE ELEMENTS OF PRE-TESTING POLITICAL ADVERTISING

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## ABSTRACT

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The study provides a general image upon both political communication and the rhetorical-type elements characterizing this type of communication. An evaluation of the manner in which the techniques of political communication demonstrate their efficiency by means of markers of rhetorical-argumentative type – *i.e.*, form and context – viewed as pre-testing elements, is also provided.

**Keywords:** *electoral strategies, political advertising, political communication, pre-testing methods, propaganda, slogan*

## 1. PROPAGANDA VS. POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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According to the definition given by Georges Henin in the volume *Mică Enciclopedie Politică* (1969), propaganda is "an action of persuasion by instigation/incitement, aiming at substituting reason by impressionability, thus cancelling the demarcation line between what is true and what is false" – the definition being taken over by Gabriel Thoveron in his study *Comunicarea politică azi*. Against this background, Thoveron introduces the distinction between propaganda and advertising, the former being far more dangerous than the latter. Propaganda is situated at the level of cultural modification of the individual, its scope being of producing modifications of human attitude and behaviour, while advertising aims at convincing some consumers to choose one product or another. G. Thoveron considers political communication as a term which substitutes the one of propaganda. In the opinion of the cited author, such a substitution may really occur as, in most situations, during their election campaigns, the candidates propose quite similar electoral programs whereas, when the option for a person is substituted with that for an idea, „the looks of

the politician becomes an argument comparable to that of some wrapping colour". Practically, in the moment in which, during the election campaign, the electors are to be captivated not by the personality of a candidate, but by some idea to be imposed upon them, by means of a slogan of the type "more safety", for example, the imagine of the politician is already deteriorated. The reason here involved is that accomplishment of such a desideratum cannot be attained by a single person, but by a whole system, which makes indistinct the image of the politician, putting forward that of the group or political party to which he belongs. The argument of Thoveron is that the "commercial aspect of advertising displeases the politicians, which have the feeling that their imagine is presented as a sort of merchandise". This also explains why they prefer the notion of political communication instead of propaganda. Utilization of the term *political communication* has the advantage of not bearing the pejorative connotation of the latter one. Is really political communication synonymous to propaganda or, more precisely, can the term *political communication* substitute that of propaganda?

To answer such a question, a brief analysis of the term *communication*, as well as of that of *political communication* should be first made. Basically, *communication* is viewed as a *semiotic interaction*. The term *interaction* receives the meaning of reciprocal or collective action, expressing the influences willingly transmitted among individuals. Viewed as a specialized form of communication, *political communication* may be also grasped and analyzed *versus* two distinct, yet reciprocally related hypostases. The former aspect is materialized at the organizational and management level of a

society, the latter is focused on the exercise of power through exclusive utilization of signs. Another term to be considered is that of *political marketing*, a favourite notion of the American space, with special practical applicability through a series of specific techniques. Once applied, such techniques lead towards the expected results. For example, one desideratum is that the candidate should be known by an as large number of voters as possible. To this end, political advertising is mainly applied, as it offers a rigorous control of messages, as well as their distribution by the available means of mass communication, from the already traditional ones: written press, radio, television, up to the newest communication forms, such as mobile phones and electronic mail which, even if having gained considerable space in Romania, as well, are hardly or not at all used in election campaigns.

On the basis of the same synonymy between propaganda and political communication, Thoveron evidences the *laws and techniques of propaganda*, which he also calls *essential rules of political communication*, while mentioning that their validity is maximum especially during election campaigns:

- a) *the law of orchestration* – assuming the progressive repetition of themes during the campaign, and their adaptation to the audience;
- b) *the law of simplification* – making the message accessible for an as large number of people as possible. This law registers a descending tendency, as simplification of the political language causes its de-technicization;
- c) *the law of humanity and contagion* (also known as the “spiral of silence”) – people abandon their own judgements and opinions in favour of the other ones’ opinions, for not being excluded from the groups to which they belong;
- d) *the law of transfusion* – referring to the beliefs and preconceived ideas of individuals, for inoculating the idea that the ideas proposed to them derive naturally from their preconceived ideas.

According to these laws, one may easily observe that reduction or substitution of the term *political communication* with that of *propaganda* is quite difficult to achieve. Political communication may also include, apart from the propagandistic election campaign (also belonging to this structure, without being, however, the only one), other types of election campaigns, such as: a) *campaign of progressively increased intensity* – evidencing the stage of settling a favourable climate and of electors’ motivation in favour of one decision or another; b) *blitz campaign* – its characteristic feature being mobilization of all resources over a short time period, for obtaining a favourable result; c) *campaign in several stages* – the interest of the voter is stimulated (the expectation effect); d) *opportunistic campaign* – including, on one side, the persuasion campaign, based on winning the adhesion of an informed electorate and, on the other, the propagandistic campaign:

„Based on considerable resources, a candidate may obtain immediate results by a propagandistic campaign, yet without any possible prediction on the subsequent behaviours of the electorate. In such a case, its unique chance is of resuming, at larger and larger scale, the campaign of emotional manipulation, without being ever convinced of the faithfulness of his voters. Metaphorically speaking, the champion of a propagandistic campaign should be a permanent seducer (a practically impossible task).”

It goes without saying that political propaganda has a well-determined position as part of political communication, being successful when addressing the emotional, non-rational side of the individuals; however, the area covered by the term *propaganda* remains infinitesimally narrower than that of political communication.

## **2. THE RHETORICAL FORM OF POLITICAL SPEECH**

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The main instrument of political communication is the speech – delivered within a

meeting, in front of the electorate, as an electoral poster, as a speech in the Deputy Chamber, at a press conference, as part of a poll made among voters, etc. As a matter of fact, any political speech aims at *legitimizing power*, which involves first putting forward of a message, its interception and understanding, followed by the reaction of the receiver in the direction indicated by the issuer. Most important in this context seems to be the message. A clear-cut distinction has been established among political messages, special mention being made of the fact that the two classes of political messages here involved are not necessarily disjointed: 1) *self-presentation messages*, through which the political position of a party, of an individual or of a political group, together with their values and objectives, are put into evidence. To this category there belong: entitling, logo-type, status, political program; 2) persuasion messages, aimed at convincing the electors. Here included may be: messages transmitted during audience programs, speeches delivered during meetings of the party, speeches at electoral meetings and at other public sessions, the political slogan, the political poster, political advertising, political press communicates, political interviews, messages transmitted at press conferences organized by politicians, interviews during TV debates. Among all these types of messages, the most rhetorical one, as a form of political speech, is the *slogan*.

„*Sluagh-Ghaien*, the battle call of a Scottish clan, has become a *slogan*. It is the supreme simplification – a sentence expressing, in a few, simple words, if not the whole message, at least its essential idea.”

Thoveron established some basic rules for the elaboration of a slogan, namely: a) the slogan should be short – according to this rule, it should not exceed 6 – 8 syllables; b) the slogan should be sonorous, to be easily memorized and kept in mind; c) the slogan should be original – to be easily noticed, to exceed as much as possible the common place; d) to induce to the candidate credibility, verosimilarity, in the absence of any electoral promises; e) to be complete and self-sufficient to itself; f) to be modern, to take

advantage of the context; g) to remain valid even under modified conditions. To be efficient or, more precisely, to benefit from its full persuasion capacity, the slogan should be corroborated with the electoral poster and the electoral clip as, in this way, the imagine of the candidate will become more coherent. If, basically, the slogan, the poster and the clip have the same content, the transmitted message will be better assimilated by the electorate, and thus capable of modifying the voter's option in the direction had in view, once known that, through repetition, credibility gets increased. Related to this aspect of slogan's performance as part of a discursive construction – namely, the political speech – the following citation is especially interesting :

„The slogan is a form of dissimulated language, establishing some distance between the reference to which the speech is directly oriented and the intentions related to its being intercepted by the reality of such a reference. Its aspect of dissimulated language is amplified by political speech, which hardly contains even hints of the denotative meaning of such an enunciation”.

On one side, the slogan refers to some reality, possessing a direct meaning, which can be isolated by the others, while permitting the receiver to grasp what it is hidden beyond it – which shows the dissimulating character of the slogan. On the other side, the slogan may have other meanings, besides the directly hinted one. To exemplify this dissimulating side of the slogan, let us remember, without leaving aside the context – the situation created in France during the presidential elections of 1969. As known, in 1969, a referendum forces Charles de Gaulle to leave his position. Among the candidates, Georges Pompidou, who launches the slogan „il tient ce qu'il promet” („he does what he promises”). His runner up's slogan is „les jeunes veulent le progres” („the young ones want progress”). Between these two slogans, in the second presidential tour there appears a third one, launched by communists, the dissimulating meaning of which is clearly



evidenced: „Blanc Bonnet / Bonnet Blanc / S'abstenir / C'est Agir / Contre / La reaction“, that is a call addressed to communists not to vote, that is to refuse the election of either Pompidou or Poher.

The slogan may suffer some shifting of the accent as a function of the evolution, context and situation of the candidate for which the slogan has been elaborated: the slogan may have as a starting point: a) a person or even physical aspects of a person; b) the principles of the political organism which backs up the candidate; c) the achievements of the candidate. Another peculiarity of the slogan is its character of *polemic enunciation*: „On supporting some point of view, one necessarily contradicts the opposed opinions, promoted by other power centers.“ The polemic aspect of the slogan always acquires an external form, which permits its direct grasping; this is not related to the internal nature, by the very fact that it has been stated and used in an election campaign, where it competes with other slogans. For example, the slogan utilized by PSD in the 2004 campaign, during the local election of mayor of the Iași city: "A big city. A strong mayor" is not actually a polemic text. This meaning may be grasped when considering the contestants of the slogan here discussed as, actually, it suggests that "it is only our candidate that is the real strong one, and capable of managing a big city", unlike what remains to be understood for the other contestants: "the others are weak, wholly incapable of managing such a complex administrative mechanism." Omission or minimization of the importance of some of the slogan's function inevitably causes its imperfect and incomplete action, namely its maximum efficiency, which causes a chain reaction that may lead to the loss of electorate's trust, to prejudice candidate's image or to create a different from the initially considered one, possibly inducing a negative image of the candidate.

### **3. POLITICAL ADVERTISING: DEFINITION AND TYPOLOGY**

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One of the most simple, but not over-simple definitions of political advertising now in

circulation, belongs to E.J. Bolland. Its role would be simply of "including the messages of various organizations in mass-media, but not free-of-charge". Application of this definition in the field of political advertising involves some elements which characterize, to some extent, this space:

„Strictly speaking, political advertising refers therefore to the acquisition and utilization of advertising space, payed at the price of the market, for transmitting political messages to the large public. Among the communications means utilized to this end, mention should be made of cinema, advertising posters, written press, radio and television“.

The types of political advertising adopted in the election campaigns of România seem to imitate the American space. In his paper, entitled *Introduction in political communication*, Braian McNair adopts the typology provided by Devlin in 1986, which actually represents the effort of more than 30 years of research in the field. Devlin establishes eight types of political advertising. The first one (1) *primitive advertisement* - bearing a studied character, obviously prefabricated for TV spectators - does not appear, any longer, in the Romanian space in its TV form. Mention should be nevertheless made of a derivated form of this type, which neglects the traditional coordinates and spaces within which political advertisement is usually manifested. Included here may be the advertising clips downloaded in a virtual space, on YOUTUBE, where the prices are not very high, or directly on the candidate's blog. Usually, most of these clips have not been created by specialists, the "stage management" being quite easily grasped. In (2) *talking head-type advertisements* (the image showing only the head and shoulders of the speaker), attention is focused upon some debate theme, offering to the candidate the opportunity to transmit - visually - the impression that he is capable of solving the problems and that he accepts the challenge. The election campaigns of România resorted to such type of advertisement, put forward on large screens, in public spaces and areas of intense pedestrian circulation. (3) *Negative advertising*

shifts the stress from the communication of the candidate's political position to the destruction of some contestant's image. (4) *Conceptual advertising* communicates important ideas about the candidates, avoiding a too personal impact of the campaign, while planning the "major idea" about the candidate. For example, „Primarul Serios și DeVotat” – a PSD acronym as well as a play on words: „the mayor who deserves to have your vote” – placed on the right, upper part of the advertisement, red characters on a white background. The main image is that of the candidate, on which the message „Vă mulțumesc pentru încredere! Rămân Devotat Sectorului 2”, is being superposed. (5) Spots of the *cine vérité*-type – candidates are shown “interacting with people in real-life situations”, in the middle of their voters, at home or in their office. (6) *Testimonial spots* (I) – voice of the people – simple citizens express their opinion in support of the candidate. (7) *Testimonial spots* (II) – famous personalities of the political world, culture, show-business, sports and arts send messages in favour of the candidate. (8) *The neutral correspondent* – the voter is invited to express his opinion, on the basis of some apparently true affirmations about the candidate or about his contestant – rather frequently, on the latter one's actions – previously delivered to him.

#### **4. PATTERNS OF TESTING POLITICAL ADVERTISING**

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The essential characteristic of the political speech is its ambiguity/equivocation: one never knows whether one faces a question or an answer, a situation created by the type of language employed. As, whichever the occasion of its delivery (public meeting, party session, political slogan, poster, promotion actions, etc.), the form of the political speech remains a rhetorical one, it is mainly based on rhetorical figures of speech, first of all the metaphor. Michel Meyer defines it as “an identity which cannot be interpreted *ad litteram*”. According to Fontanier, the metaphors may be considered among the tropes possessing the ability to:

„...put forward an idea under the badge of another one, more striking or better known, which, as a matter of fact, is related to the former exclusively by some concordance or analogy”.

The theoreticians of group  $\mu$  evidence, in the case of the metaphor, some modification of the semantic meaning of a term, and not only its simple substitution. The starting premise is that, in the case of political speech, the metaphor is present both in the question and in the answer, which explains the impossibility of distinguishing between what may be considered a question and which is the reply to it, at the level of political speech. From this perspective, political advertising launches, in front of the audience (the audience of any politician being formed of persons having the right to vote) alternatives and solutions to the various problems identified by each candidate or political party. One problem may and has to be approached by various answers and solving strategies. In the case of political speech, this becomes possible by combining the speech with the political doctrine to which the speaker adheres and recommends to the others. The elements responsible for the image of a party appear in the following order: the *logo* (*trade name* or identification of a product of some company), organizational culture, and – basically – the political doctrine. The fundamental element, the political doctrine, should transgress organizational culture (as solving of all problems should be made according to the political doctrine) and, equally, the public image. In the case of a political party, the *logo* is extremely important as, theoretically, it should express and induce, on the basis of the possible interpretations it might receive from the part of the audience, a positive attitude, expressing acceptance of the political organization and confidence in it. According to a study of Frank Thayer:

„the symbols for a successful corporation will efficiently bring in one's mind the positive and motivated answers already formulated in the mind of the subjects, together with those already acquired in an early stage of their cultural education”.

An analysis centered on form and context, performed at the level of political organization's image by means of the *logo*, evidences that the metaphor interposes between the organization and the public (weak identity): the eye, the rose, the arrow, the bear, etc. For example, the image of the National Initiative Party is a Carpathian bear. As a metaphor, it represents force, power. Analysis based on form and context criteria might be employed as a pre-test for appreciating the value of the advertising political speech, considered by its *logo* as a whole. The role of the pre-test in advertising is:

„of measuring the extent to which the spot is understood by the TV spectator. It also permits checking of the quality of spectator's attention, spot's credibility (does it inspire confidence or not?) its impact (will it induce a buying behaviour?) and the degree of its memorization. Actually, the pre-test remains the best way to avoid the irreversible or difficult to correct errors of the client”.

In most cases, the pre-tests are used, as advertising means, for consumer goods, spots transmitted by TV or those included in magazines for the products sold by mail. The broadcasted spots may be pre-tested by the following methods:

- 1) *the folder method* – insertion of the spot to be tested in a false advertising moment, after a pre-established step. The technique permits to analyze the perception, attention and identification of the message;
- 2) *the split-run method* – insertion into a support of several versions to be tested during the same advertising moment, which permits a comparative analysis of their extent of memorization, perceiving/catching, credibility and attention;
- 3) *the clucas method* – presentation of a message to be subsequently tested sequentially, or repeated presentation during the same advertising moment. In this way, the perception, attention and credibility of the message are checked;
- 4) *the method of family discussion* – presentation of the spot to be tested to a representative

family, which permits measuring of: efficiency, memorization, credibility and perceiving of the text;

- 5) *the schwerin method* – presentation of the message that should be tested alone in an advertising moment, during a short program, thus permitting to appreciate the attitudes and behaviours of the audience *versus* the spot.

Mention is therefore made of some modalities of testing the efficiency of the advertisement, even if this refers mainly to products to be sold, being therefore hardly applicable to political advertising: 1) *retail trade* – when launching an advertisement for some product, its efficiency may be quantified by the increased sales in the following days, for each of the promoted products 2) *test towns* – involving the utilization of test towns or districts. The texts and the graphical aspect are tested, then the sales performed after the advertising action are compared with those registered in similar towns or districts, in which the advertisement had not been diffused; 3) *key numbers* – a method applicable to mail sales, involving the utilization of key numbers on the advertising leaflet.

Analysis of both form and context provides an interrogative extension on the elements characterized by a weak identity, present in the political speech and not only. In this way, several errors referring to the correctness of the transmitted message, to its credibility or coherence may be eliminated. For example, the National Initiative Party has preferred the image of the Carpathian bear as its *logo*. Analysis of the context may reveal that positive attributes, such as force, power, intellect, traditionally related to the Carpathian bear, are no longer expressing the elements of the experienced culture. Nowadays, for the inhabitants of România, and equally for the tourists coming to visit it, the bear is the poor creature coming down from the woods to find something to eat in the dumping carts of the big cities (in April 2008, the whole world was surprised to see that in România, in Braşov, a female bear and its three whelps entered an apartment situated on the third floor of a block of flats, looking for food. The animals



remained captive for several hours, causing numerous damages, until specialized intervention occurred), kills domestic animals, cripples or even kills people living in the mountain or tourists (an American tourist died after having been attacked by a bear, in the woods surrounding the town of Brașov). Extension of analysis upon the context, comparatively with other similar situations might have also evidenced that the image of the bear had been hardly present in election campaigns, and always with negative connotations, for example in the election campaign of Reagan, in 1984, with reference of the foreign policy. A severe voice off an advertising spot was announcing a danger: *there's a bear in the woods*. The spot was interpreted as an element that may „manipulate the fear of communism and of the *Soviet bear*”.

In the local election campaign of 2004, in Iași, the candidate of the Democratic Party to the chair of mayor appeared in an advertising *cine verité* spot broadcasted by the local TV networks. The metaphor-concept (weak identity) of the spot was that of the hero; the transmitted message was: „our mayor – our hero”. The advertising spot – actually, quite professionally elaborated – presented the candidate in the dawn of an exceptional day, as announced by its colourful sky, walking in front of one of the most famous monuments of Iași: the Palace of Culture. Especially striking was the quite irregular bearing of the candidate, the collar of his shirt almost dirty and, as a result of a fall, a plaster on the forehead. The voters were thus reminded that the „hero” had already participated to other two electoral battles, when he was defeated, however he is once again ready to gain, if receiving their votes. The extension on the interrogative question „who is the hero?” suggests a person capable to make not rational, but passionate decisions. Or, it is known that people need heroes in exceptional situations, during acute crises, when risky decisions have to be taken. The context in which the spot had been inserted did not require a hero, but a balanced, rational person - which was far from being similar with the situation of France with

Charles de Gaulle, immediately after the second world war, when this candidate gained the election campaign putting forward his heroic image.

As to its form, the slogan „our mayor – our hero” (2004, PD – local elections in Iași) is similar to the slogan „our friend – our choice” (2008, PSD – local elections in Iași), both of them reminding of the much better known formula of the slogan „our client – our master.” Usually, the form of the electoral slogans maintains the one with which people are familiar and which they prefer as, in the shop owner/seller – buyer relation, the latter becomes the master. Implementation of a new content in the old form of the slogan leads to an error at the level of its memorization, namely the form of the message is remembered, but not its whole content, so that it will be completed with the old one. The partially-memorized message is therefore transformed into a mixture of the two forms, either „our client – our choice” or, even worse, „our friend – our master”.

This type of analysis permits to avoid errors caused by the form or context in which messages are being inserted. At the same time, analysis might be viewed as one of the pre-testing methods, having the advantage of not requiring its development in a different location or neutral persons for analyzing the political speech, while it may correct or improve projects not yet developed at large scale.

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