

Political Discourse on Blogs, an Expression of Identification through Habitus^{*}

Abstract : Referring to Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* and *fields* and making a brief reference to the concept of *identity* (as seen socially), this article aims to briefly show that “language in action” or “parole” comes as a natural marker of how political people represent themselves. The novelty of the attempt comes from the corpus of data analyzed – weblogs and websites belonging to members of parliament in France, the United Kingdom and Romania. The same corpus of data was used for an analysis of *incivility* and *reference to other* in political blogging, as seen in the same French, British and Romanian environments. Although Bourdieu’s concerns lie predominantly within oral language, our view is that written text appearing in the media can also offer a thorough insight into how a certain political person represents the world around them, the hierarchy between them and the opposite party or between them and the electorate.

Keywords: habitus, identification, political discourse, auto-representation, incivility.

1. Habitus, political identity and the interdependence of fields

Time has come when new media are no longer the exception, but rather the rule; this stands for politics as for anything else. In spite of not being an intensely researched area (in terms of discourse analysis or rhetorical analysis), the field of political blogging can be a huge source of inspiration to analysts.

Ruth Wodak (2009) talks about the role of blogs (or of media, in general) in the life of a politician and of how the existence of such a communication tool facilitates the interdependence of fields: politics, economy and the media (Wodak 2009, 3-4).

The author quotes Bourdieu in saying:

“Those who deal professionally in making things explicit and producing discourses – sociologists, historians, politicians, journalists, etc. – have two things in common. On the one hand, they strive to set out explicitly practical principles of vision and division. On the other hand, they struggle, each in their

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own universe, to impose these principles of vision and division, and to have them recognized as legitimate categories of construction of the social world (Bourdieu 2005, 37).

Discourse comes as a natural expression of how set principles are disseminated further to an audience that would eventually recuperate them as legitimate modes of action, as visions of certain worlds – those designed by the party credos. Furthermore, as Weininger asserts (Weininger 2005, 103), “social classes are discursive entities”. Mastering a certain discourse eventually translates into mastering the functioning mechanisms of the classes.

In all our daily interactions in everyday life, as well as in our professions and organizational activities, we have to acquire ‘the rules of the game’ and are socialized into these rules and the expectations related to certain professional roles. The political field makes no exception. Therefore, when it comes to *autorepresentation* or to *identification*, *habitus* plays an important role.

Habitus is understood as something that expresses, on the one hand, the way in which individuals ‘become themselves’—develop attitudes and dispositions—and, on the other hand, the ways in which those individuals engage in practices (Webb *et al.* 2002, XII). *Habitus* would be

“a way of moving between subjectivism and objectivism – since practices cannot only be understood in terms of narratives, rules, ideologies of a field (objectivity), nor in terms of individual, uncontextualised decision making (subjectivity)” (Webb *et al.* 2002, XII).

Practices are therefore both acquired and developed. As Filho and Praça put it (Filho and Praça 2006, 58-60), structures for the actions of the subjective are preexistent and fundamental for the later understanding of the world by the subject. *Structured structures* will operate as *structuring structures*, be it socially or discursively, for *autorepresentation*, *representation of the other* and *identification* work their way into the design of a summarized world view.

The better understanding of this is illustrated by the same two Brazilian professors of journalism (Filho and Praça), that try to demonstrate how journalism intertwines with practicalities that are both learned, integrated and modified, adapted according to contexts (Filho and Praça 2006). The authors begin by quoting Bourdieu in his saying that

“The field is a space of conflict and social struggle”. A natural law of the field says that “there is an organic tendency to preclude or hinder the action of any outside agents that are intent on subverting the rules” (Filho and Praça 2006, 48).

The political field makes no exception and neither does the speech uttered by MPs- rules inside the field have to be clearly stated and minutely respected. As will be discussed later, the vast majority of blog postings appear as

an expression of outrage or contempt directed towards a political adversary that has eventually made inappropriate assertions. The sentiment of class-identification is so powerful that, whenever there is doubt about the appropriation of rules inside (or outside) the field, the whole hierarchical chain of commands activates itself inside the structures and almost instantly fights “evil”back.

Journalists at work, the two authors believe, always act according to the tacit rules of behavior in the field; the accident of a famous football player, for instance, would most certainly generate the same type of media coverage, in spite of different individual particularities (Filho and Praça 2006, 65). As a conclusion, *habitus* shows itself as “raw material” for the professional eidos (Filho and Praça 2006, 60), the “invisible maestro” being always around. Their statement applies to the field of politics equally, as a brief discourse analysis shows it. Reference to the other and markers of incivility are universal, be it in a Romanian, French or British political context.

This could be tied to the fact that, in the political field, there is always interest for *credit*. Just as the monarchs used to do in the ancient times, political people nowadays try to win the sympathy of their voters; and, since *credit* is always based on credence and recognition, politicians try their best to make themselves noticed – and not in just any way, but in a manner that would prove them representative for their voters. “The politician derives his political power from the trust that a group places in him.” (Bourdieu 1991, 192). A twist in this phrase would say that people are represented properly provided that the politician actually enjoys true undissimulated credence.

Another thing that springs to mind when analyzing *identity* and *representation* is the poor quality of today’s representation in politics. Which is why, as people’s requests are less and less dealt with, the manner in which politicians strive to catch their attention improve (Morar 2001, 8). The more politicians appear on the scene, the rougher the competition and the more diverse the skills and the drive for proper representation. Hence, there is an evident altering of *auto-representation* and of *identification* for the politician.

The weblog is but one result of this constant striving for improvement. The *mélange* of fields is, once again, justified.

2. Bourdieu and Critical Discourse Analysis

In general, when tackling a chunk of what is considered to be “political discourse”, one can adopt positions and corresponding methods that, in the academia, are seen as belonging to different “research fields”. One of these positions is, of course, that of CDA (or critical discourse analysis) – a discipline parented by linguistics and by structural-constructivism (Jones and Collins 2006, 45) that concentrates on social implications of the political discourse: what gender, class or social position can transpose through language and what the consequences can be on a societal level. The relation between the historical, the

social and the discursive context is crucial when talking about CDA (Blackledge 2005, 9). Closely connected to CDA is PDA (or political discourse analysis) or “political linguistics”, a sub-discipline of linguistics focusing on the linguistic study of political communication (Wodak 2009, 6). The methodology normally used in PDA (and also in CDA) focuses on lexical-semantic techniques, sentence and text-semantic procedures, pragmatic and text-linguistic techniques and, finally, semiotic techniques (Wodak 2009, 7).

Rhetorical criticism, on the other hand, works with the text at hand, trying to find “an explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes” (Foss 2009, 6). Understanding rhetorical processes is, therefore, the sole purpose of criticism; techniques used involve “cluster criticism”, “fantasy-theme criticism”, “generic”, “metaphor”, “pentadic” or “narrative” criticism.

What this article presents is a short glimpse into what will constitute a thorough analysis of weblog postings belonging to MPs in Romania, France and the United Kingdom, with the aid of techniques parented by political discourse analysis, as well as by rhetorical criticism.

Bourdieu’s understanding of language regards something in-between discourse in context and the linguistic field itself. His concerns with language in context make him go so far as to actually assert that the “permanency” of rules of pronunciation, spelling and grammar are the result of social struggles between different class groups over language (Myles 2010, 12). Critical Discourse Analysis is a method often used by sociologists, as it deals with aspects of power, symbolic violence etc. There is a lot, Bourdieu believes, in the use of accents, in phonetic variations and in “isoglosses” that have been understudied in the analysis of language and the media.

Our interest here will not be of the same range, as paralinguistic or phonetic aspects preclude our area of interest. What we tried to realize was a connection between the language (i.e. political discourse) and *habitus*. “Linguistic habitus”, understood as producing a speech act at the intersection between “class habitus” and the “linguistic market” (Myles 2010, 21), was not among our schemata of analysis; the road we took was rather sociolinguistic – an attempt to show linguistic markers of habitus in chunks of political discourse online.

3. Identity and auto-representation as a result of habitus. Research and results

It is widely recognized that one’s identity is a result of the social practices that form the context of his existence as a man, as a professional, as a human being. What we would like to show is how language uttered on political blogs gives an idea of how politicians prefer to portray themselves as belonging to a group or as opposed to other parties. Obviously, this sometimes is done on purpose and othertimes comes just as the result of a subconscious *representation*

of the self in the socio-political context. A good example of this would be the “positive self-negative other” types of strategies political people tackle on their blogs.

Identity can be defined both psychologically and socially. For the latter, Bourdieu provided consistent implication, thus connecting it to the concept of “habitus”. Psychologically, identity can be pinned down to three categories (Berry *et al.* 1997, 48): values that the individual cherishes, based on the representations of what things are, categorical attributes by which they define themselves as members of social groups and personality traits.

The identity of the human being (and, therefore, of the politician) can be seen as a mix of his relationship to the party and to the left or right values that the party promotes, the values that are dear to him and that, most of the times, coincide with those of the party, and his own personality traits.

Identity and discourse seem to be well connected, since narratives in the economy of a group unveil much of the manner in which the group represents itself. As De Fina puts it (in Drew *et al.* 2006, 356), narratives (and, we believe, discourse in general) are loci for self-representation because they build *story-worlds* in which narrators introduce themselves and others as figures and use categories to define their identity. Thus, stories are responsible for providing a vivid image of the world of the story-teller and his group. The author makes her point by illustrating the saga of Mexican immigrants referring to their current situation in the States. The same can be stated when inventorying group and self-representations, as opposed to representations of the other (party).

Discourse allows a conceptualization of representations of the other and of the self as including membership categories and associated defining properties (who are we? who are others? what do others call us?, [...] how do X usually act?) (Drew *et al.* 2006, 357).

In *Language and symbolic power* (Bourdieu 1991, 188) Bourdieu asserts that the tendency towards autonomy and towards the partition into minuscule sects is built into the constitution of a body of specialists possessing specific interests and set up against each other in competition for power. These specialists appropriate the media means characteristic to the group whose force they intend to mobilize in view of their being elected at a certain point. In the case of our Romanian, French and British politicians, sects are more or less coagulated and the opposition more or less evidenced.

Every strategy a politician adopts corresponds to a difference of habitus and interests (or of economic and educational capital and of social trajectory) (Bourdieu 1991, 188). The author underlines the existence of two types of political models in the economy of the party: *the powerful, dominant ones* that advocate the adoption of an original style, of a distinctive and unique approach that may lead to some unpleasant compromises and the ones whose only purpose is the “broadening of the party’s clientele”, the strengthening of the party’s positions in view of a basic, grassroots renovation from top to bottom (Bourdieu 1991, 191). Otherwise said, means of expression adopted vary in accordance to a

politician's position and expectations. It is why, when Bourdieu refers to *reproduction* and *representation*, he claims that "the subjective hope of profit tends to be adjusted to the objective probability of profit" (Webb *et al.* 2002, 23-24).

Websites (that function as weblogs) and weblogs were scrutinized for half of the political class in the UK and in France and for the whole political class in Romania (929 members analyzed). The criteria taken into account were diversity, actuality and interactivity (meaning those weblogs that contained areas for "discussion" or for expression of viewpoints; sections such as "news" were not taken into account).

We eventually settled for 56 websites after having scrutinized the available weblogs or website for the specific criteria; the 56 were considered representative for the main political parties existent in a country of the three. Parties chosen were the Union Mouvement Populaire (UMP), Le Nouveau Centre (NC) and the Parti Socialiste (PS) in France, the Conservative, the Labour and the Liberal Party (in the United Kingdom) and the Liberal-Democrat Party (PDL), the Social-Democrat Party (PSD) and the Liberal Party (PNL) in Romania's case. The main categories enlisted were "sarcasm/irony", "intertextuality and double-voiced discourse", "metaphors", "presuppositions and implicatures", "allusion", "direct accusation/emotional display", "counterbalance of the other's action" and "identification" per se. All of them are representative of the way in which party credo and class identification materialize into the discourse of people that mostly retort to blame, sophisticated argumentation or irony when depicting the opponent. Most of them were inspired from Sobieraj and Berry's study on incivility and outrage in politics (Sobieraj and Berry 2011) and from Nugus' article on rhetorical strategies of political parties in Australia (Nugus 2008).

Methods of discourse analysis were inspired from Johnstone and Eisenhart (2008, 6-14), Paul Chilton (2004) and Chilton and Schaeffner (2002). Out of the categories above mentioned, only 2 will be exemplified that were eventually present in 26 texts.

4. The use of metaphor in the portrayal of party duties

Political people often make use of metaphors in order to express their beliefs or to mobilize for action. The most frequent metaphor found during the analysis was that of the conquest, or of the fight that has to be undergone in order to eliminate the enemy – the other parties in the game.

For example, the Romanian PDL members talk about the need to unite in front of the adversary (3 out of 12 texts mention the words "alternative", "pact", "undermine", "antagonistic"), whereas the British liberals go so far as to mention the need for "gloves coming off in the fight to protect vulnerable people from Labour's [...]". The words "fight" appear 4 times in Romanian texts (3 belonging to the PSD and once in the PDL's discourse), 6 times in the French

discourse (out of 6 times, 3 belong to the UMP representative to Chantal Bourragué when drawing the balance sheet on Sarkozy's mandate and 5 times during British utterances (out of 5, 3 occur in Labour's leader Milliband's speeches to his colleagues).

Apart from the metaphor of the fight and that of the cavalier having to fight the evil, the metaphor of the "famiglia" is also encountered. The Conservatives see themselves as belonging to "a conservative country" and have to stay together as one, so that "the opponents won't try and divide" them.

Alongside with metaphors of the fight, the topos of the "road opener" occurs in Romanian discourse of PSD leaders. The alliance with the liberals is presented to the electorate as "the savior" that will come in "the thirteenth moment" (Ponta, the PSD leader) and save Romanians from "the great naïve" that is Băsescu.

The presence of the same main metaphors in discourses geographically (and ideologically different) supports the idea according to which political and discursive practices are universal and simply change shape according to the context in which they are uttered.

5. Direct accusation/emotional display

Emotional display is very common when referring to political opponents. Strategies known as "positive self vs. negative other" or "in-group vs. out-group" are meant to delegitimize the other (Chilton 2004, 45).

When it comes to Romania, a great deal of the discourses belonging to the opposition mention the word "incompetence"; the Labour leader also makes use of it when referring to the conservative government. Further on, lack of honesty is also mentioned ("When was Boc an honest man?"). In return, PDL seem to be less harsh in accusations, by only claiming that "the PNL leader avoids responsibility" by attacking those that accuse him.

The case of France is rather peculiar. If the vast majority prefer to abstain themselves from making direct accusations, when traces appear, they compensate for the rest of the data corpus. If the UMP claim that the socialists are "imprecators" and "divided between temptations both secular and communitary at the same time" ("le PS aura enfin tranché entre sésentations, tantôt «laïcistes», tantôt communistes – J.F. Copé), the socialists go so far as to discreetly mention the existence of eventual propositions that "stink of class contempt" - no party is mentioned whatsoever.

The UK faces us with some direct attributes projected towards the other: the conservatives are simultaneously "incompetent", "chaotic", "out of touch" and their policies are "foolish" and "short-sighted" (Milliband, the Labour leader); moreover, they tend to "turn their backs" on the progress previously made in certain directions. All in all, it all comes to a certain lack of responsibility and organization.

The Conservative party, on the other hand, accuses the former Labour government of "having relied too heavily on financial services", of "opportunism" and "lack of clarity about anything whatsoever".

The Liberals are anything but courteous when, during a local election of a leader of the Council group, the new candidate sees himself as an alternative to "Labour's stewardship of this borough, their ill-conceived cuts and their mismanagement" (Lynne Featherstone).

Titles that seem to display marks of incivility were not very numerous: the Romanian leader of the liberal party entitles one of his website postings "We don't have a prime minister; not that he were bad, we simply do not have him", whereas another liberal member mocks the government's impossibility of managing their alliance with the Hungarian minorities by asking "how does one say <to show the cat> in Hungarian". Last but not least, the PSD leader entitles one of his weblog postings "Romania's naives", making an evident reference to today's government. He is followed by the Labour leader in one of his postings saying that "This government is chaotic, incompetent and out of touch". The French remain rather discrete in choosing their headlines.

As a general remark, people tend to restrain themselves from making brutal personal accusations when belonging to the ruling party. A possible explanation of this could be that their position is a privileged one and, hence, there is no need of constant monitoring of the other's actions. At the same time, whenever engaging in offensive discourse towards political opponents, MPs stick to the same categories and schemes of discourse, regardless of the party parenting them.

A common sense stereotype would have led us to expect more brutal accusation towards the other among the Romanian and probably less among the French. This is due to a certain "tradition" of the political class (diplomacy) in France and almost completely lacking in the post-communist eastern-European Romania. Surprisingly, the French are quite straightforward when it comes to political dissatisfaction and so are the British. If the Romanians prefer to keep accusations metaphorically, the British go all the way in claiming the opposite government as "chaotic" or "out of touch".

Nevertheless, all the three countries remark themselves by a very rude discursive rhetoric of incivility. The fact that the same categories can be identified in speeches belonging to political people with very different educational or political background shows us that a certain pattern exists. Without any doubt, *habitus* cannot be universal and cannot express itself in the same manner, without any other specific factors intervening. One thing is certain: a specific type of political behavior exists and manifests itself on a very large scale. Are linguistic and social practicalities standardized by the environment (in our case, a political one)? And, if so, *how much* does *habitus* have to do with it?

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