

# The power of words – Powers and the words

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0. I will begin with an obvious idea – one of those obvious ideas that are so «obvious» that their real meanings are no longer thought of or are forgotten. Namely, that one of the most wonderful gifts afforded to mankind, and also one of its features, is the capacity of having and using «words» (Ws) (I am using this term in the general sense, as all the instances of verbal activities, and implicitly also nonverbal auxiliaries).

Certainly, this is a marvellously useful privilege offered to human beings: to be able to express themselves by Ws, to communicate especially with these flexible, mobile, malleable little human stones apparently made just of air or of graphic signs. An advantage only proper to humans, of which one realizes its benefit when deprived of its use.

Besides their help as tools for thinking – and maybe also, in Roman Jakobson's sense, for a mere «emotional» proper relief –, Ws give the opportunity of rendering a concrete and rich, and however a more or less economical and though precise form to interhuman communication. Psycholinguistics (PL) is a science of what occurs when human communicate, determined by their relationships and, as a matter of fact, by their psyche as influenced by the contexts of the communication act. A truism, one might say (though this was not selfunderstood by some trends in PL). But what is less obvious even for those who agree and use the above mentioned embryo of a definition for PL, is, maybe, its enormous obligation, as a science that should also realize and study the *consequences* of using Ws in communication, therefore the very essence of PL as a science, and maybe even, just by that, of its great responsibility. This derives from its obligatory study of Ws, but also of what is «*the power of Ws*», of what they can *do* (and I don't mean by that that the almost simplistic way of thinking in terms of the J. Austin's and J. Searle's «Speech acts»). I mean by that, what Ws *may express* – as I more recently wrote, «for the best and for the worse» –, i. e. not only for the benefit of (or at least does no harm to) the addressees of Ws, but also for malversations in the act of communication, for biasing communication by using Ws, by changing their known meaning for concealing reality, by using the seduction of certain Ws for deviating or even clouding one's personal thinking, behaviours, acts, by masking reality, manipulating the receivers, up to *forcing* a person to be a «receiver» against his/her conscious will *to be* a receiver.

1. The times we are living in are those of *intensive communication* – *oral* mostly and in writing especially through press. As I wrote somewhere else (1993b), referring to the new «Galaxy of communication», humanity has never talked so much as in our times. There must be huge uproar, a «vacarme» in the ether we are living in.

1.1. We live in an ocean of Ws, mostly spoken orally, in traditional communication, but also transmitted by technical means. Let us think of the *telephone* (such an accessible, common tool, that one does no more think of studying communication through this modern,

global «medium», as called by Marshall McLuhan (1962) (a «speech without walls» – 1964, 283). It was one of the first means to give Terra a miniature shape so to making it become the «Global village» (to quote again MacLuhan 1962). Think of the dissatisfaction, at a certain moment, for the silent movies and the great enthusiasm arisen by the «*talking*» movie. What to say about *radio*, the *broadcasting*, the purely auditive channel for conveying the same message to millions of persons in the same moment – as said by a Romanian humorist: «The one who talks [being] alone and is heard by everybody [by all the world]». And *television* does not make an exception. We can accept imageless voices – as in broadcasting –, but much less or even not at all if only having soundless television performance. And, with the rapid progress of the electronic era and of the *computer* age especially, let us realize that this device is also moving towards a «talking» one, with the «*multimedia*» programs, and let us think of the much pursued electronic «speech synthesis» and «speech recognition» (i. e. *oral* speech simulation and *auditive* reception of it).

1.2. These are now the ways of *transmitting* – in *oral* form mostly – the bulk of everyday news, of governmental or administration bulletins, of individual and group messages, of information generally. Among the socio-political-economic-financial-cultural events, one should notice the enormous development of oral debates in any kind of activities, of international organisms where one «talks», of so many instances when the «oral» dominates, and let me just mention a specific event in this «modern world», the many *negotiations* of any kind, up to the summit meetings.

1.3. But there is much more to add here, concerning the frequency and at the same time the *impact* of what is orally conveyed. There is much to be studied as far as the greater influence of *oral* messages is concerned, as compared with the written ones. For sake of spare of time, people are now more inclined to «listen» to news, than to read them in the newspapers (except probably the large brief titles on the first pages). Besides this matter of frequency of usage concerning the socially diffused messages, there is another feature one might notice (and I would draw attention on the necessity of studying it thoroughly, by experiments in PL). A written text is at your disposal, one can go back *and think about* it, while this is not possible (except if recorded on tape) for oral messages. It is known since thousands of years ago, that «*verba volant*», there is no time enough to grasp each word in its subtext, no time enough to *think much* while strings of auditive messages are conveyed and heard, and while special intentionally stress is put on some of them: so, if well structured – or created with a special intention –, the *oral messages may influence much more*.

2. *The power of Ws can be immense* – in a written but, even more, as I said, in an auditive grasping.

2.1. Ws can serve for conveying information rapidly and by that for creating and maintaining social contact, to serve in social life at large, in professional situations, in providing a help for cooperation, for supporting a sick subject.

A field research I made many years ago clearly demonstrated the useful role of language (1964). It serves for establishing cooperation generally speaking: it serves for instruction – up to the highest levels –, for planning and organizing activities in teams, for evaluating the results of work: from the trivial (on the building sites) «Come here with the wheel-barrow!» or

(on television, distributing the cameras for the various «lines») «Four on one, three on two!», up to the sophisticated dialogues in such vital activities as in the mines (e. g. in the beginning of each day, for organizing the work in a team, the engineer: «How do you propose to put [a certain tool]?», then follows a discussion with the team), or in an electric central, the operator is asked by the National Dispatcher: – «How much [megawattage] do you give from the central?» – «Eighty», then a brief but important dialogue follows for the coordination of electricity distribution.

2.2. In children also (in contradistinction with the ancient Piagetian thesis of the «egocentrism in child language» up to 7-8 years of age) I found, toward the end of the '50 (1961/1977) – and afterwards many researchers strengthened these findings – that they use language for cooperating. In organized games, such as «a visit to physician» or «preparing meals together», etc., they not only used dialogue, but the latter served for cooperation; or, in any case, they used Ws for helping each other: «Gina 2;7 «Want to sit on the chair. – Mihaela 2;8 Look, pull out the chair and sit on it. – Rodica 2;7 [But] it's not allowed!».

2.3. Such and other beneficial effects of the relation between language and social contact may also be mentioned in the behaviours of *physician-patient* (for anamnesis, for details on prescriptions, for therapy, etc.), or between *teacher-pupils* (generally in any instance of classroom interaction, etc.). An amazing situation in our times – of trends towards sophisticated technical means of developing human life – is that, mentioned before, of the tantamount role of *negotiation*, this language «probing» or even «groping», which mostly occurs *orally* and in *face-to-face communication* (see also Slama-Cazacu 1993b) and which does not only cover the area of trade or other economical activities or the «classical» diplomatic ones, but also the «summit» ones or those occurring between top personalities in hectic and vital situations, trying – even if not completely successful – to avoid war or any violent physical solution in a conflict. And finally another example, that of the *politeness formulas* (cf. also Slama-Cazacu 1986 a. o.), a typical instance of the positive role of language in social contact. No further comment is necessary for illustrating this role when apologizing («I beg your pardon») or wishing «Bon voyage» or saying «Thank you». The intent in using politeness formulas derives of course from a pragmatic necessity of interaction (*ibid.* 53). They are «lubricating» human relations. How nice it sounds (even if sometimes they are only «formal» in the sense even of hypocritical), such chain of politeness formulas generally still in use in Romania: «– How old are you? – Forty. – May you live (still) more. – Thank you, the same to you» or: «– Is your coat new? – Yes. – May you enjoy wearing it. – Thank you.» (*ibid.* 44).

3. But let us not ignore – as I said before – the *negative effects* of Ws. I will just briefly deal here with the «extremely» negative ones up to using language only for the benefit of an individual or a group and harming, even if «but» morally, «the other(s)».

3.1. By Ws one may *refuse cooperation*, up to *unfair competition* – or even go so far as acting only for the benefit of one partner or of a group. I will not argue by what some scientists gossiped in the past, about language, slandering against it. Let me however mention some of such statements deprived of a scientific basis, but able to make us ponder over them, and to challengingly think about «Ws». From the egocentric reasons of inventing Ws, as assumed by Gabriel Tarde: language was created for the gratuitous, loose pleasure to talk (Tarde 1922,

91, 92), or just for expressing feelings, or for affective-erotic needs (Jespersen 1925, 424), up to the almost dictatorial assumption that language was created by individuals who were able to command (Janet 1936, 115, 250, 260) and that it still serves for that aim (99); or that it serves for lying (Sturtevant 1947, 48) or – see the leading Romanian psychologist, descendant of French school, Mihail Ralea (1949, 148 a. o.) – that a main feature of human psychology, hence language too, is «simulation». These are generalizations – lacking an objective basis – of some real though partial aspects of human psychology. Because there are instances – let us not hide this fact – when language serves for lying, for masking realities, for persuasion in view of unfair goals, for manipulating masses not in their benefit. Because of that, language via communication, which derives from and expresses social contact, which is a tool for enhancing social contact, may also serve for denying its specific finality and lend in fact to extreme negative effects such as dissolution of true social contact, first of all by encouraging a conclusive distrust in communication, but also to a use of Ws for enhancing some Power or generally to do harm by Ws. Envisaged as a general phenomenon, the action of Ws appears to be limited, but analytically, even in these limitations, we may descry powerful negative actions of social reality (which in fact are due to some *concrete* individuals).

I will mention here an experiment which I performed (1969/1970) in order to demonstrate the power of social context (a situation, or a partner (P) e. g.) for changing the meaning of a word:

Scheme 1. Social contexts and their potential influence (cf. *Slama-Cazacu 1969/1970, 34, and 1997, present text*)

- Communication partners: P: relation E-R, network N; special case: external observer, experimenter: O
- Virtual linguistic code (language-code), ILS of the R:C
- The action of the message, of «words»: M or Ws
- Special social community and Powers: micro-group, momentary social environment, vocational milieu, ideologies at large, political parties, «Power» group or (great) ensembles, social ensemble: SSC and Pw
- Social-historical moment: SH
- Society: S
- ILS = Individual linguistic system, E=emitter, R=receiver

The power of the social context on language behaviour is enormous, though it has some limits: it depends on the authority of a factor or of any means of coercion even unobserved: in this case, of a microcontext, it was a partner who may play here the role of a social force (see Scheme). I tried to impose the insertion of a word (*chickens* or *barrels*) in a text where the general sense was contrary to the dimensions of the objects represented by those words. The subjects (students) did not accept, at first, a complete infringement of the well known meanings, they hesitated, but sometimes accepted however, to use these words with a contradictory meaning when I included in the experimental group a person who had a certain «authority» (an assistant-professor who enjoyed a good professional reputation).

3.2. We may extrapolate now these results – and also other data from personal research or performed by other authors – to a macrocontext where there are persons or groups with great authority, or a prestige attributed by snobbishness, or representing a political coercive power, then damaging effects for some individuals or groups may appear, by exploiting the potential-

ties of Ws. Such effects generally derive from a certain «ideology» (a corpus of ideas or beliefs connected with a «Power»; in my view, «ideologies» are not only «modern alternatives to the use of material force and physical violence» – N. Fairclough, commented by Lemke 1995, 13 –, but on the contrary, an ideology may – though not always, as suggested by Lemke *ib.* 14 – support «violence», in any form, from intellectual, spiritual, moral to physical ones). Therefore, such means – or perhaps «stratagems» – may result as: changing the usual meaning of a word by imposing a distortion slyly, or cunningly introducing a new foreign form instead of another one – even if well known, frequent, traditional –, or introducing insidiously if not even forcibly deviated patterns of communication, or «clichés» that do not say anything, or anomalous dialogues where there is no balanced and free exchange of replies. These are some of the forms I studied in the last six years: either as the «non-dialogue» of the political interrogations (Slama-Cazacu 1993a), or some «Press-conferences» where there is no true dialogue or a succession of questions and (brief) replies, but the «authority» has the privilege of very long monologues – as «introductions» or as long answers, «explanatory» mostly (Slama-Cazacu 1992b). Or (Slama-Cazacu 1992a, etc.), in Romanian, the abuse of foreign (especially English) terms – even incorrectly used, such as *manager*, *sponsor*, *staff*. This last category of studies demonstrated how, by such a «stratagem», unpleasant realities are covered, how a linguistic «cosmetics» is used for changing the compromised image of an object, a fact, an action, by political Powers or economic or technocratic ones, or by «publicity» (which hypocritically was considered in a Romanian, in 1990, radio spot as «Publicity does not do harm to anybody»): *butic* (*boutique*), for a miserable little shop, or (publicity, on TV) «We are selling TV sets [this was said in Romanian, then, as if a good unexpensive type, for those not knowing English] *second hand*», etc. From foreign terms, barbarisms are created with a morphological native language mask, for covering unpleasant facts and by that rejecting ancient compromised words: Rom. *disocupat* ‘unemployed’, instead of *şomer*, a *disponibiliza* ‘to hire’ instead of a *da afară*, *eveniment rutier* ‘highway event’ instead of *accident* (instead of many terms which might have evoked, after ‘89, the coercive achievements, but very few exactly knew what these terms mean, though much employed).

Last but not least, let me mention the clichés of the «*langue de bois*» (Slama-Cazacu 1991/1992a, 1994a), the ideological or political (or having in any case a political substratum) stereotypes. They have a large gamut, from the totalitarian clichés of communist epoch in Eastern Europe countries: (quoting from Romanian, in English translation) *class fight*, *constructive criticism*, *a rich life* (usual slogan of Ceausescu, while one starved and it was a low standard of life), up to the new ones after 1989: *compensation* (of salaries, much behind inflation), *liberalization of prices*, *transition* (epoch) (unclear what it means, when it ends).

«*Langue de bois*» – as reality demonstrated – is not a «product» of (communist) totalitarian epoch or parties only, though it was much more developed in that context than in any other one. One of its devices – changing name or meaning for an event or a (too) well known word – was also acting when, in Germany, in the 60s, one changed the name for foreign emigrant workers in order not to «offend» them, and one created the term *Gastarbeiter*, or in Italy there is in use: *Collaboratrice familiare* («Colfa»), for ‘servant’; or, in Brazil, I was told in 1994, for covering the former President Collor de Mello situation, the English term *impeachment* was used by some mass media, or such terms were used as clichés: *modernização*, *perfil político* (in search of a so-called new ‘political profile’), *privatização*, *reforma fiscal* (the same, I was told, in Mozambique, etc.) (Slama-Cazacu 1993, 86). Old democratic parties, as the Liberal Party in France, are not exempted of such forms (cf. «nos dirigeants libéraux ont parlé une langue de bois», *apud* «Mots», 1989, 11). And in the old Romanian democratic regime, a bril-

liant politician, C. Argetoianu, in his *Memoirs* written in 1943 (1991, vol. I, 35), clearly writes about «the lying clichés of the Romanian politicianism», as those found in a text written by an outstanding liberal, I. Bratianu, in 1913, concerning the peasants who were called to go to war: [they] «are going to death» with «serene heroism» with «sublime devoutness», «joyful hurry to leave their unfinished harvest» – in order to «(joyfully) go to war»<sup>1</sup>.

3.3. Such forms and «strategies» are not only diffused due to coercion, snobbishness, or tricky actions of the promoters, but are also used due to their *frequency* which *reinforce* them – in a party for example or in the totalitarian regimes –: and in any other regimes their use is also due to *imitation*, which is in its turn an aspect of social contact. Coming from «outside» an individual, «some mild imitation» may have the same result as *compelling by fear: a compulsory manner of expression*, the recourse to Ws by a Power to reinforce its power, by misusing the potential power of Ws.

4. *To conclude*, therefore: The impact of Ws may be «good» – and even «for the best» –, as well as «for the worse»<sup>2</sup>, so as *to damage* individuals, groups or even a country, and to destroy by that the social contact itself and trust in language too. Both of these sides have to be thoroughly studied and also large masses should be made conscious of them, so as to enhance the «best» and to protect against what «deviates» from the genuine function of communication by language.

Who should do this study and act for improving the consequences of what is found by research, which even reach – let us not avoid such words – *ethical* aspects of social life, some deontological facets of sciences dealing with Ws with human communication?

Several years ago (1980), I thought one should think of PL in terms of its aims at *improving* communication, and I wrote about aspects to be improved such as avoiding too many hesitations in discursive messages, or intentional stuttering in order to make one's own speech seem «natural», «spontaneous», or to avoid such a hurry in expression up to skip over many sounds or overlap each other.

These seem to me useful aims for applied PL, but not enough. I would even put as a challenge, for PL at large – and not just for the «applied» PL –, what follows. When finding the paramount power of Ws, should one, in PL, just state it as a «selfunderstanding» fact and not going on with further research? The great power of Ws might turn against humanity. We do not know enough about the psychological and psycholinguistic ways this great power of Ws is acting.

Should the scientist have the attitude of a «cool» witness of the results of research, or should the data also be evaluated from the viewpoint of some overt or insidious harmful effects on individuals or on «the social reality» at large produced by various Powers? Who should raise the awareness of such effects, if not the scientist who is entitled to do so precisely because of expertise in field studies, thorough and in fact objective studies? The paradox of this modern status of a scientist can only be understood as being but «apparent», if scientific research is included in a deontology where the in-depth scientific study is not secluded, but closely connected with all reality's contingencies which make the study be scientifically correct, hence truly objective.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. also R. Koren, L. Scliar-Cabral, B. Spillner, S. Stojanova, in other countries or regimes, as Brazil, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Israel, Russia, in *IJPL*, 1997, n° 2 (Round Table).

<sup>2</sup> Shimon Perez was right when asserting (1995, *apud Mots*, 1997, n° 50): «In a democracy one governs via words. Words may be daggers but they can also heal. It depends on how they are used.»

It might be asserted that a scientist should not be dealing with so-called «ethical principles», even if aware of them, that she/he should look «coolly» to the object of study of research. But I do not think that such an assertion is correct, not only from the ethical point of view, but also from the *scientific* one. If a scientist notices a certain reality, he/she *is obliged*, has compulsorily the scientific duty to reveal it. And by this disclosing, to – why not? – *evaluate* it: possibly, not with respect to personal, subjective «moral» criteria, but by reference to *the effects* (maybe harms) on the individual(s) and the Society.

An act of communication may seem to be «correct» and even «positive», but its *aim*, the *personal target*, may be «immoral», in the sense that it is damaging Society, or just *one part* of it, one individual or more. I am referring here to *the modality* of acting of the relation between language and society at large or one individual or another, when *one* (one part) wants to «*trick*», to «*mask*» reality, hence exploiting the finality of communication by using (Ws), language for his/her or their group benefit in the detriment of the other(s). The «ostrich's attitude» of a scientist, of ignoring such realities, yielded the clouding of many facts, had the result that many *real* facts were not noticed by modern science of communication.

I think therefore that scientists should not be «ashamed» to support and even to try and save what still remains of «humanism» in this strange end of a millenium.

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