EXAMINING PANDEMIC PERSUASIVE DISCOURSE ACROSS ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN CULTURES

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The aim of this research is to study the transformation of public discourse and the adaptation of cultural norms in the context of Covid-19 pandemic. By conducting a cross-cultural analysis of the pandemic discourse, we seek to uncover linguistic and cultural variations in the communication strategies employed by public authorities of the UK and Moldova, and determine the role of cultural background in shaping responses to global health crises. The article explores the linguistic choices that construct social meaning within a specific cultural framework. We have adopted a critical approach to discourse analysis, by using insights from socio-cognitive and linguo-cultural theories. The findings may contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact that global challenges have upon different nations, the way culture is perpetuated and how persuasive strategies are adapted to shape public understanding of major social issues.

Keywords : *cognition, critical discourse analysis, cross-cultural analysis, cultural linguistics, pandemic, persuasive discourse*

Introduction

Discourse helps us make sense of our world. It is a great force in defining, interpreting, and perpetuating the cultural diversity that surrounds us. Moreover, linguistic comprehension fosters social engagement, and the availability of language is critical in enhancing affected individual responses in times of crisis.

Discourse analysis seeks to clarify why and how situational meanings vary from core meanings. The contexts that make these meanings are "rooted" in culture, the same way language is. Both reflect culture but differently. "We have a culture when a group of people living in a social, historical and physical environment make sense of their experiences in a more or less unified manner. […] They create objects, texts and discourses that other member of the group find meaningful." (Kövecses, 2010 : 1-2)

This article addresses the content of two public discourses, delivered by the head officials of the UK and Moldova (the Republic of) during the pandemic generated by Covid-19 virus. The samples are selected from among other similar speeches that can be accessed on the official pages of the two countries. The main purpose of the research is to explore cultural and sociolinguistic discourse studies for a cross-cultural discourse analysis that reveals the character of public discourse (with persuasive intent) and its relation to sociocultural changes.

In order to analyse the pandemic discursive practices, we need identify the distinguishing features between Cultural Linguistics (hereafter CL) and the socio-cognitive approaches, then compare the linguistic and cultural aspects that characterise the discourse of crisis. We aim, therefore, at shedding light on the importance of persuasive strategies in shaping the perception of reality during the pandemic, on the way discourse contributes to the creation of cultural responses by appealing to emotions such as fear, uncertainty, national pride, etc., and also on how it helps to shape a new reality, the so-called "new normal".

Cultural Linguistics, Linguoculturology and The Sociocognitive Theories

In order to realise our cross-cultural analysis of the pandemic discourse, we need to clarify the differences and similarities of the two studies: CL and Linguaculturology, to compare the cultural approaches to Van Dijk's sociocognitive model.

An interesting article to be brought into discussion is the research "On Linguaculturology and Cultural Linguistics", done by B. Peeters, a linguist of Australian National University of Canberra. It mentions that F. Sharifian's work (2017) was translated into Russian, and the term *Cultural Linguistics* was inaccurately replaced with *Culturological Linguistics.* (Peeters, 2019 : 169-70) Yet, it seems that, despite their almost identical research, these studies (CL and Linguacultorology) emerged simultaneously in two different parts of the world.

Another article, written by C. Foldes (University of Erfurt, Germany), provides evidence of the isolated development of the two schools. (Földes, 2023) As such, Linguaculturology was founded in Russia in the 1990's by N. Alefirenko. The initial aim was to promote cultural understanding and intercultural communication. It was originally developed as a school subject to meet the needs of foreign language teaching, Russian being a subject taught to non-native speakers. According to V.Vorobiev, Linguacultorology explores the relationship between language and culture, which is reflected as "an integrated structure of entities within the unit of their language and extralinguistic (cultural) content" *(Apud* : Földes, 2023 : 163). It outlines that language is built within culture, expresses culture and is also transmitted through culture.

Similarly, CL aims at examining the relationship between language and cultural perception. F.Sharifian, one of the founders of the field of cognitive linguistics, former Professor at Monash University of Australia, was the first to use the term *Cultural Linguistics* which he defined as a recently developed discipline with multidisciplinary origins that investigates the interconnection between language and *cultural conceptualization*. We can also find research related to *cultural cognition* in the works of famous scholars such as R. Lakoff, R.M. Keesing, Z. Kövecses, Th. Tenbrink, G. Steen and others. Z. Kövecses, for instance, states that CL is "dependent on the cognitive work of the people who constitute particular speech communities as regards their linguistic practice. Conceptualization rests on cognition. […] Cognition and culture cannot be separated." (Kövecses, 2010 : 308)

F. Sharifian states that "*conceptualizations* have a cultural background, are encoded and communicated through constituents of human language". They refer to "essential cognitive processes that help us structure and understand the world". *Cultural conceptualizations* include *cultural categories, cultural metaphors* and *cultural schemas*, and result from the interaction between the members of a group. Though generated by an individual cognitive process, conceptualizations are expressed through language and shared within the speech community. (Sharifian, 2017 : 2-4)

R. Lakoff mentions that our experiences build different image schemas that provide meaning in terms of conceptual metaphors. In this regard, discourse is a multitude of meanings that create conceptual frameworks which act as behavior norms inside a particular culture. (Kövecses, 2010 : 309-310) Accordingly, cultural schemas represent beliefs, social norms and expectations regarding behavior, as well as other cultural elements regarding various aspects of our experiences.

In the previous article (Lifari, Grama, 2023 : 213-222), we discussed T. van Dijk's conception of *mental models* which are regarded as socially shared knowledge. (van Dijk, 2008 : 59-62) According to the scholar, *mental models* are "subjective representation of events or situations, in which a person participates at a certain moment of time, at a certain place with

other participants, engaged in a specific action and with specific goals". We make use of these cognitive schemes to make sense of the world. By planning and delivering a discourse, the locutor expresses and communicates certain models. The process of interpretation requires that the audience build similar models in their mind, which means that *mental models* "contribute to the construction of the common ground of participants in interaction." (van Dijk, 2008 : 588-589)

We can conclude that these are two different wordings for much the same concept. As previously mentioned, besides cultural schemas, conceptualizations include cultural categories and cultural metaphors. Cultural categories are primarily reflected in the lexicon of human languages: colours, emotions, kinship, events, etc. Cultural metaphors are grounded in traditions. Similar to conceptual metaphors, cultural metaphors relate to a form of conceptualization across different domains, known as the *source domain* and the *target domain*.

We also discussed the criticism that G. Steen and Th. Tenbrink brought to the idea of universality (Lifari, Grama, 2023), nurtured by R. Lakoff and M. Johnson. F. Sharifian supports this point of view by arguing that cultural metaphors are far from being universal. Z. Kövecses and R. W. Gibbs share the same view. Also, Ning Yu, Professor of Applied Linguistics at Pennsylvania State University, states that embodied metaphors emerge not from within the body alone, but from bodily interactions that are nothing but a definition of the cultural world *(Apud:* Sharifian, 2017 : 26). T. van Leeuwen adds that our perception of space is directly linked to social action, "to the way we use space in acting out social practice." (van Leeuwen, 2008 : 88)

Thus, prior experiences become part of the language while the present context, which is dynamic, indicates both past experiences and the current situation. The first one is in the mind of the locutor whilst the second one exists within the outer world as a result of action. Meaning results when the two forms of context intertwine. "Rather than being predefined, culture and cultural identity are […] emergent properties arising from the context of interaction." (Sharifian, 2017 : 134)

In contrast to the early universalistic approach of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, CL outlines individual cultural experiences. According to R.W. Gibbs, "bodily experiences do form the universal basis of our conceptual systems, including their metaphorical mapping, but the conceptual systems in themselves are culturally acquired, transmitted and mediated." *(Apud :* Sharifian, 2017 : 26)

G. P. Gee defines *discourse* as "a characteristic way of saying, doing and being." (Gee, 1999 : 47-52) V. Maslova states that discourse gives to cognitivists the key to understanding human behavior, much more than culture and society do. (2004 : 9) Despite the fact that within the process of globalization many cultures are marginalized, the examination of discursive practices can help us differentiate between certain cultural backgrounds. According to Ed. Sapir, "no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The world in which different societies live are distinct worlds." (Kramsch, 2003 : 85)

Cross-Cultural Analysis of Pandemic Discourse

In the article on cross-cultural and intercultural communication, S. F. Kiesling points out that doing *cross-cultural* research means comparing two cultures while the term *intercultural* refers to the interaction between two cultures. Yet, in practice, the two notions are used interchangeably. (Kiesling, 2015 : 620) Cross-cultural study of discourse distinguishes between *collective* and *individualist* cultures, although S. F. Kiesling argues that, on the account of their

diversity, cultures cannot be grouped into "binary categories, with few cultures landing in the middle." *(Ibidem :* 623)

The scholar mentions some of the main approaches in cross-cultural discourse, in terms of sociolinguistic objects: politeness, discourse strategies, narrative, the exercise and reproduction of social power, or challenges to it, which we will furtherly refer to when analysing the two samples of public discourse. The cultural contexts of the two countries under study, the UK and Moldova, differ in several aspects, which make the analysis of the pandemic discourse an interesting case.

To compare the two cultures, we will refer to the macro and micro-levels of discourse, by focusing on the set of differences that seem most relevant to the main aims of the given research: background, semantic analysis, language choice and style, syntactic analysis and cultural elements.

We will explore the references, and values reflected by each discourse, and the ways in which leaders connect with their audiences, in order to shape perceptions, call for unity, and address the challenges of the pandemic.

We will analyse two speeches, by President Maia Sandu and, respectively, by Queen Elizabeth II. The first discourse was addressed in the spring of 2021, a year later from the moment when the pandemic generated by the fast-spreading virus Covid-19 started. The second one was delivered in April of 2020, in a special broadcast on coronavirus. For clarity, we will use the following conventions: D1 (discourse 1) for the speech held in Romanian, and D2 for the one in English. It is necessary to mention that in contrast to the Queen's long reign, Maia Sandu was elected president of Moldova in November 2020, half a year before the given discursive event. Also, it is relevant to specify that Moldova is a small country, characterized by collective culture.

The full versions of the discourses can be accessed on the official pages of the two countries[1], [2]. They were delivered much with the same intent, to encourage people to shoulder responsibility in order to fight against the virus. Thus, the common ground is created by the social and economic crisis generated by the coronavirus outbreak. Both speeches express empathy, emphasising the sense of loss and grief. The repetition "un an greu/ un an istovitor/ un an al tristeţii/ un an tragic/ un an plin de durere" (a hard year/ a gruelling year/ a year of grief/ a tragic year/ a year full of pain) and its equivalent wording in D2, "an increasingly challenging time/ a time of disruption", which are used right from the very beginning of the discourses, help to establish a better connection with the audience.

D1 expresses socially shared values like collective effort and obligation. It features an assertive tone, call for solidarity and individual responsibility. The language used by Maia Sandu is quite emotive, given the impact of the social and economic crisis on such a small third country as Moldova. To compare, the Queen's broadcast is more optimistic, meant to inspire and reassure the public during the challenging times. It reflects cultural elements such as empathy, unity and hope. Additionally, there are some other themes that influence the structure of the discourse: the importance of healthcare and citizens' well-being, crisis management and global collaboration (D1, D2), vaccination (D1) and national pride (D2), which are reflections of cultural heritage.

The use of passive construction and the third person in D2, as well as the generalizing

[1] *Maia Sandu, President of the Republic of Moldova, to address nation 1 year after the pandemic declaration* : https://sinteza.org/2021/03/07/discursul-maiei-sandu-la-un-an-de-pandemie-covid-19-in-republica-moldova/

2 *The Queen's Coronavirus broadcast: "We will meet again" :* https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52176208

words, clearly define the English as a nation who feel the pandemic more like a personal than a shared experience: "bătrâni singuri" (forlorn old people, D1) versus "*the vulnerable*" (D2), "cei pe care i-am pierdut" (the ones *we* have lost, D1) versus "*those* who have lost loved ones" (D2).

In D2 power is expressed through positive self-image: "the Britons of this generation were as strong as any…/ attributes of self-discipline/ an expression of our national spirit/ the pride in who we are/ our past, […] our present and our future/ an expression of our national spirit". In contrast, D1 blames *the others* for "the decisions that haven't been made in time or have been wrong". The use of passive construction here shows opposition, political interest and the commitment to fight the pandemic for the well-being of citizens: "din păcate a fost un an în care deciziile nu au fost luate la timp sau au fost greşite". Such a strategy helps to create the expected cognitive models, and aims at conveying the priorities of the leader.

Politeness in D1 is maintained through indirect requests. For example, instead of directly instructing citizens, the President conveys urgency by means of modality: "fiecare dintre noi poate face patru lucruri…/ trebuie să asigurăm/ e de datoria noastră/ este nevoie […] de solidaritate" (each of us can do four things…/ we need to provide/ it is our duty to…/ solidarity is required). The discourse strategy is intended to urge people to take collective responsibility. The style of D2 is more formal, associated with royal addresses, despite the fact that the Queen addresses the nation directly. It maintains a reflective and contemplative mood throughout the message, emphasizing the need for introspection.

In D1, Maia Sandu mentions the help offered by Klaus Iohannis, President of Romania, the collaboration with EU, the WHO and the companies that produce vaccines, which suggests resilience and determination as well as the importance of collaboration and global effort to face the pandemic challenges. The lexical choices highlight once again the sense of urgency and the call for action. The speech is full of repetitions which adds to the importance of the message: "am pierdut/ trebuie să luptăm/ trebuie să ia decizii corecte/ este urgent/ din prima clipă/ e de datoria noastră" (we have lost/ we need to fight/ they need to take the right decisions/ it is urgent/ immediately/ it is our duty), etc.

On the contrary, D2 calls for reflection and meditation: "increasingly challenging times/ financial difficulties/ enormous changes/ a return to more normal lives/ self-isolating […] may be hard/ an opportunity to slow down, pause and reflect in prayer or meditation". To render the complex ideas, the Queen appeals to metaphors. Time is perceived as a shared difficult journey, where the progression of time aligns with the challenges faced while global cooperation: "increasingly challenging time", a "common endeavor". Also, the official appeals to emotions and pathos, by recalling a similar situation of the past, related to World War II, and reminding the nation about its past and glory.

It is much more difficult to convince people of the need and urgency of self-isolation when the community is really small, and people know each other. Moldovans boast on old traditions like big reunions and family gatherings, on every important life event or different holidays. Given the precocious situation during the pandemic, D1 features various linguistic expressions and conceptual metaphors, intended to make the discourse persuasive and effective.

The pandemic is presented as a common enemy (virus), creating a framework of *us* (people) against *them* (virus): "un an de când luptăm cu pandemia/ în lupta cu pandemia, singurul nostru duşman […] este virusul/ vom reuşi să oprim pandemia/ singura şansă să învingem virusul" (a year since we have been fighting against the pandemic/ in the war against the pandemic/ our only enemy is […] the virus/ we will manage to stop the pandemic/ the only chance to defeat

the virus). Time is similarly perceived as a journey. The metaphorical use of "an care pare cât un secol" (a year that seems like a century) contributes to conveying the prolonged and challenging nature of the previous year, by appealing to the sense of time. The speech is intended to reinforce the call for solidarity, against the shared adversary.

Both discourses reflect the ongoing challenges faced by the two countries as consequences of the pandemic, with an emphasis on the impact of lives that were lost, and on the effort to control the crisis. Time is equally viewed as a journey full of obstacles. Yet, D2 is more emotional and persuasive, with a focus on the urgency of vaccination as a preventive measure. Metaphorical language is used to describe the profound impact of the pandemic period. D1 emphasises the battle against the virus and the burden on healthcare workers while D2 focuses on the experiences shared as a united nation.

Conclusion

As a characteristic way of being, discourse plays a significant role in shaping social reality. It shows the significance of linguistic and cultural values in creating persuasive strategies that resonate with different audiences. If discourse reflects language habits within a social group, metaphors, then, are not universal. The embodied nature of metaphors is closely linked to cultural interaction.

The examination of CL and Linguacultorology confirms the parallel development of the two studies, with an emphasis on the complex relationship between culture and discourse. CL is mainly interested in examining cultural categories, metaphors, and schemas that unveil aspects of cultural cognition and its embodiment in language. By combining insights from both theories, Cultural Linguistics and T. van Dijk's sociocognitive approach, we have analyzed two samples of public discourses, delivered by the heads of state of the UK and Moldova during the Covid-19 pandemic. The comparative analysis at micro- and macro-levels reveals distinctive features in linguistic choices, style as well as cultural references.

The two discourses express a common ground by tackling the social impact of the pandemic. Both of them show deep empathy and reflect human values such as solidarity, shared effort and resilience. The two leaders apply different strategies to connect with their audiences, in order to shape perception and response to the pandemic crisis. The linguistic features, from politeness strategies and style to metaphoric expressions, serve as cultural markers, and reflect the priorities and the values that each speaker strives to reinforce.

Maia Sandu's discourse (D1) adopts an emotive and assertive position. The President aims at raising awareness about the urgent need of vaccination, by calling people to shoulder responsibility in the fight against the virus, which reflects the collective culture of Moldova. The discourse emphasises the resilience of a small country against significant adversities, the importance of collaboration and external support. In contrast, Queen Elizabeth II's speech (D2) is more formal, has a reflective tone and is characterized by historical references, which reveals the stoic spirit and pride of the British nation. The discourse is clearly intended to inspire unity and hope among the population.

To conclude, discourse is a means of conveying cultural identity and cognition. The insights discussed in this article can contribute to our comprehension of how different cultures construct meaning and interpret experiences. Given the context of the pandemic as a global challenge, understanding the cultural dimensions of crisis discourse becomes a subject that deserves a deeper investigation in that it somehow fosters human values such as empathy and solidarity, and enhances the response to social crises.

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