

## **From “Saying” to “Doing”. Conversational Maxims in Political Speeches**

Ilina-Mihaela STĂNCULETE\*

**Abstract:** This paper makes reference to Grice’s conversational maxims and their applicability to Călin Popescu Tăriceanu’s investment speech as Prime Minister. As Grice (1975) considers that “the conversational meaning of the words used will determine what is implicated, besides helping to determine what is said” (1975: 44), I am interested in analysing the Prime Minister’s investment speech from this very perspective of the meaning that lies hidden behind what he actually says. To this aim, I attempt to establish whether the Gricean conversational maxims are followed or flouted in the speech selected.

**Keywords:** Cooperative Principle, conversational maxims, investment speech, political discourse

### **1. Introduction**

Discourse may be considered a specific component of social relations, which changes and adapts to the context in which it occurs. T. A. van Dijk (1997:1) considers that it “usually refers to a form of language use, [to] public speeches” among other things. To extend, discourse as public speech represents the main way of expressing ideas, opinions or decisions which, in the case under scrutiny here, politicians want to pass on to their electorate.

Seen from T. A. van Dijk’s (1997: 14) perspective, discourse “may be described in terms of the social actions accomplished by language users when they

---

\* PhD student, Doctoral School of Humanities, West University of Timișoara, Romania  
. E-mail: [stanculete.mihaela@yahoo.com](mailto:stanculete.mihaela@yahoo.com).

communicate with each other in social situations”. It means that “language users speak in order to be understood and to communicate ideas, and they do that both as individual persons and as social group members, in order to inform, persuade or impress others, in order to accomplish other social acts in social situations, institutions and social structures” (van Dijk 1997: 16). When they send (and receive) linguistic messages, language users have to take into consideration some rules and strategies which represent the foundation of reliable communication. It is worth keeping in mind that “these rules and strategies are not personal, but socially shared, implicitly known and used in a speech community” (van Dijk, 1997: 16). If set rules are followed, communication is more efficient because almost everyone can follow the messages that circulate between senders and receivers. In other words, “the discourse of ‘social cohesion’ is a fundamentally moral and humane discourse which is oriented to people who have a ‘sense’ of belonging to a community” (Fairclough, 2004: 128).

Argumentation is an important integral part of discourse when it comes to fulfilling its social communication function. It is necessary to prove what is said, especially in the political area, in order to create an adequate framework of politicians’ intentions. Margareth Sandvik (2013:70) considers that “argumentation theory deals with one specific verbal activity – the production of arguments in support of a particular standpoint”.

Political discourse is concretized through generating certain reactions from the audience. So, it is very important to keep in mind that a well-constructed discourse represents the key for the right delivery of what is meant to be transmitted. The speaker is in the position to take the right decision in choosing his/her words for constructing the discourse, in order to make it clear and adequate to the context.

## **2. Analysis background**

The history of modern Romania has been marked by a number of major events. Probably the most important of them was the Romanian 1989 Revolution that led to the collapse of the communist regime in the country. The transition from the communist regime to democracy has brought about a number of changes regarding essential issues such as the mentality or organization of the society or the efforts made to connect at an international level.

The time span that is referred to in this paper is the period between 2004 and 2008, when Mr. Călin Popescu Țăriceanu exercised his mandate as Prime Minister of Romania. It is placed, as we can see, at a 15 years’ distance from the collapse of the communist regime.

It may be considered that this period of time is quite long and so Romania might be expected to have fully reached its status as a democratic state. However, as we will see in the mini-corpus analyzed, it may be noticed that the remains of the communist regime are still visible, at least in the sense that there is still a constant tendency in Romanian political discourse to draw comparisons between how things used to be in

the past and how they are currently running. Nevertheless, it is essential to mention that, though reference to the past is frequently made in political discourse, its core remains within the well-defined limits of democracy.

Of the many facets of democracy, one is connected to the idea of active participation of the citizens of a country in its political life, which is evidenced, for example, by the citizens' involvement in the act of governance, by the fact that politicians are elected by public vote to fill administrative and representation positions. This being the case, elected politicians have the duty to inform the citizens and to keep a permanent connection with them. Therefore, political discourse is considered a dialogue between the politicians and the citizens. It is obvious, however, that this type of dialogue does not always benefit from an immediate response from the citizens; the answer is coming, in the case considered in this paper, mostly at the end of the mandate, through the remarks and assessments that are presented and whose role is to value the strengths or to signal the weaknesses of the politician himself, of his ideas or projects, or of the system he represents.

### **3. Paul Grice's theory**

In 1975, P. Grice introduced a set of rules which he grouped under what he called the "Cooperative Principle".

Grice says that when we communicate we assume, without realising it, that we, and the people we are talking to, will be conversationally cooperative - we will cooperate to achieve mutual conversational ends. This conversational cooperation even works when we are not being cooperative socially.

(<http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/stylistics/topic12/14cp1.htm>.)

In his *Logic and Conversation* (1975), Grice introduced four conversational maxims, as follows: the maxim of quality, the maxim of quantity, the maxim of manner and the maxim of relevance, which, according to P. Brown and S. C. Levinson (1988: 5), "are not merely statements of regular patterns in behaviour; they are background presumptions, which by virtue of that special status are robust to apparent counter-evidence".

All these four conversational maxims are often broken, i.e. they are not followed; it is because of this that Grice introduced the concept of "flouting" the maxims.

In what follows, I am interested in finding out if these conversational maxims are followed or flouted in Călin Popescu Tăriceanu's investment speech as the Romanian Prime Minister. The speech was retrieved from the Chamber of Deputies' official website and could be found in full at the following link:

<http://www.cdep.ro/pls/steno/steno.stenograma?ids=5788&idm=5&idl=1>

### 3.1. The maxim of quality

The maxim of quality is, according to Grice (1975: 45-46), the following:

*Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.*

One may say that this first conversational maxim is followed in the targeted speech, as the Prime Minister offers sufficient arguments to prove what he states. He seems to be confident and takes responsibility for all the remarks addressed to his political opponents. In this sense, the following lines are illustrative:

- (1) În această perioadă la care v-ați referit, creșterea economică a României s-a bazat pe următoarele lucruri indiscutabile:  
[During this period you referred to, Romania's economic growth was based on the following indisputable things:]
- (2) Creșterea arieratelor și pierderilor în economie. În trei ani de zile, peste 8% din PIB a reprezentat creșterea arieratelor.  
[Increasing arrears and losses in the economy. In three years, over 8% of the GDP was represented by the increase in arrears.]
- (3) Avem în continuare prețuri administrate. Inflația a scăzut nu din motive economice reale, ci pentru că a fost ținut capacul bine apăsat pe oală și știți mai bine decât mine acest lucru.  
[We still have administratively-controlled prices. Inflation has decreased not for real economic reasons, but because the lid was held tight on the pot and you know this better than I do.]

The Prime Minister uses an accusatory tone to highlight the weaknesses of the previous government, which he proves, by examples and arguments, to be very familiar with (this is actually a “being on the safe side” attitude, since a politician should know perfectly well that s/he cannot launch accusations or make negative assessments if s/he lacks evidence, or is at least able to concoct some plausible supporting proof).

### 3.2. The maxim of quantity

The maxim of quantity is formulated by Grice (1975: 45-46) as follows:

*Make your contribution as informative as is required; Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.*

This conversational maxim is not always followed in the speech analysed, as the Prime Minister sometimes makes remarks that may be confusing for the targeted audience. In particular, he makes statements that seem to be detached from the context whose role is to counteract his political opponents and whose informative contribution to the message conveyed is thus unclear. See, in this respect, in example (4) below, the

introduction by the speaker of a quote from a poem that he cannot be sure the audience is familiar with:

- (4) Nu cred că este normal să penalizăm patronii. În esență, vreau să recunosc că avem o viziune net diferită, dumneavoastră, am impresia, când vă ascultam [...] știți, era o poezie pe care o recitați, probabil, în tinerețe foarte des, și cred că aceasta vine dinspre formația dumneavoastră politică. Poezia suna așa: „*Cei ce zac în închisori/ Sunt dușmani și trădători/ Moarte lor*”.
- [I do not think it is normal to penalise business owners. In a nutshell, I want to admit that we have a fundamentally different vision, you, I had the impression when listening to you [...] you know, there was a poem that you probably used to recite very often in your youth and I think this is based on your political orientation. The poem sounds like this: “*Those who lie in prisons/ Are enemies and traitors/ Death to them.*”]

### 3.3. The maxim of manner

The maxim of manner (Grice 1975: 45-46) instructs the speaker to:

*Avoid obscurity of expression; Avoid ambiguity; Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity); Be orderly.*

This conversational maxim is usually followed in the Prime Minister’s speech, as he is very perspicuous about the points in his governance program. He reminds the listeners about the most important of these points and he offers arguments with reference to the ways in which the objectives set will be met. Examples (5) and (6) are proof that this is done using accessible vocabulary, in rather short, coordinated sentences, in which adverbs such as “într-adevăr” (indeed) and “da” (yes), inserted at key points in the speech, have the role of indicating clear thinking, in addition to keeping the listeners connected to what is being said:

- (5) Într-adevăr, ne preocupă ceea ce se întâmplă cu relațiile de muncă și cu Codul muncii. Vrem să stimulăm munca, într-adevăr, și nu lipsa de interes pentru muncă și în acest fel va fi orientată și protecția socială.
- [Indeed, we are concerned about what is happening with labour relations and the Labour Code. We want to stimulate work, indeed, and not the lack of interest in work, and social protection will be shaped accordingly.]
- (6) În ceea ce privește liberalizarea pieței muncii, da, vă spun că vrem să clădim o relație simetrică între patron și salariat. Nici salariații nu pot să aibă drepturi mai mari decât patronii, și nici invers.
- [Regarding the liberalization of the labour market, yes, I am telling you that we want to build a symmetrical relationship between employer and employee. Neither employees could have more rights than their employers, nor vice versa.]

### 3.4. The maxim of relevance

The maxim of relevance (Grice 1975:45-46) reads simply:

*Be relevant.*

The maxim of relevance is obviously closely-connected to the maxim of manner, as avoiding ambiguity means, at least to some extent, to be relevant. So, the clearer and more concise the speech is, the easier it is to grasp its meaning. The conversational maxim of relevance is most often not flouted in the targeted speech. With minor exceptions, the Prime Minister stays on the topic and offers relevant explanations or examples for what he states. See, for example, how he does this in (7) below:

- (7) Vă rog să luați programul de guvernare, îl aveți pe bancă, și la capitolul „Relaxare fiscală” veți găsi exact ceea ce am spus: 5% impozit pe dividende, pentru persoane fizice, 10% pentru persoane juridice. Nu este nicio diferență între ceea ce am afirmat în campanie, în program și ceea ce spunem acum.  
[Please consider the governance program, you have it on the desk, and in the chapter “Fiscal relaxation”, you will find exactly what we said: 5% tax on dividends, for individuals, 10% for legal persons. There is no difference between what we said in the campaign, in the program and what we are saying now.]

In the introduction to this article, I mentioned the fact that observation or flouting of the communication maxims cannot be assessed based on simultaneous feedback offered by the audience. However, one barometer that can tell us whether the speaker addressed his listeners with all good communication intentions that Grice’s maxims touch upon is media’s reaction to what was said, as “the average public expects media to reflect a multifaceted reality as truthfully and objectively as possible, free from bias, especially the biases of the professionals engaged in recording and reporting events in the outside world” (Frențiu and Frățilă, 1999: 134). In the following section, I will take a look at such reaction to Popescu Tăriceanu’s investment speech.

#### **4. Media reactions to Călin Popescu Tăriceanu’s investment speech**

To illustrate the reaction of the media to Călin Popescu Tăriceanu’s investment speech, I chose an article from a Romanian newspaper of the time. I also consulted some transcripts on the Chamber of Deputies’ official website (<http://www.cdep.ro/>), in which reference is made to opinions regarding (the relevance of the points presented previously in) the Prime Minister’s investment speech. The article was published in *România liberă* at the end of Tăriceanu’s mandate and it briefly presents the achievements of his governance. (<http://romanioliberal.ro/actualitate/eveniment/bilantul-guvernarii-tariceanu-realizari-pe-toata-linia--134561>), while the transcripts contain others’ opinions about them.

In the article, we read that:

- (8) “Suntem singurul Guvern care am reușit să asigurăm cetățenilor o protecție socială reală. Politica noastră a fost una de reducere a discrepanțelor sociale și am convingerea că cea mai bună formulă de protecție socială nu este ajutorul de la stat,

care îl face pe cetățean să stea într-o poziție de umilință, ci este asigurarea unui loc de munca bine plătit”, a punctat Tăriceanu.

[“We are the only Government that has managed to provide citizens with real social protection. Our policy has been to reduce social discrepancies and I am convinced that the best form of social protection is not the help from the state, which makes the citizen stand in a position of humiliation, but is the provision of a well-paid job”, Tăriceanu pointed out.]

(*România liberă*, online)

Quote (8) above presents the Prime Minister’s point of view, but, as mentioned previously, somebody else’s opinion is necessary in order to validate or invalidate his perspective. Here is, for example, what Emilian Valentin Frâncu had to say about the same issue – social protection:

- (9) Executivul condus de PNL în ultimii patru ani este primul guvern care izbuteste să asigure cetățenilor României o protecție socială reală și o justă răsplată, la bătrânețe, pentru munca depusă de ei decenii de-a rândul. Din 1990 până în 2004, pensionarii au fost, în mod constant și dramatic, categoria socială care și-a văzut cel mai puternic erodate veniturile. De aceea, Guvernul Tăriceanu a avut în vedere ca pensia medie din sistemul public de pensii să crească. Și pensia a crescut cu 94% în termeni reali, respectiv cu 143% în termeni nominali.

[The government led by PNL over the past four years is the first government to succeed in providing Romanian citizens with real social protection and a fair reward in their old age for their decades’ long work. From 1990 to 2004, pensioners were, consistently and dramatically, the social category that saw their income seriously eroded. That is why one of the objectives of Tăriceanu’s government was the increase of the average pension in the public pension system. And the pension increased by 94% in real terms, respectively by 143% in nominal terms.]

<http://www.cdep.ro/pls/steno/steno.stenograma?ids=6530&idm=1&idl=1>

By taking into consideration both the Prime Minister’s statement and Mr. Emilian Valentin Frâncu’s opinion related to social protection, it seems that the initial engagement was ticked during the mandate, so that the Prime Minister’s statement concerning the intention to increase the pension level was validated as communicatively relevant.

- (10) „Setul de măsuri luat în timpul mandatului în ceea ce privește Justiția a avut scopul de a garanta independența Justiției, de a îmbunătăți și a asigura transparența actului de justiție. După cum știți, am luat decizii importante în ceea ce înseamnă lupta împotriva corupției, și mă refer la înființarea Agenției Naționale de Integritate. Prin măsurile și deciziile luate putem afirma că România a devenit un exemplu de urmat în domeniul luptei împotriva corupției”, a spus Tăriceanu.

[“The set of measures taken during the mandate with respect to Justice aimed to guarantee the independence of Justice, to improve and ensure the transparency of the justice act. As you know, we have taken important decisions concerning the fight against corruption, and I refer to the setting up of the National Agency of

Integrity. Through the measures and decisions taken, we can state that Romania has become an example in the fight against corruption”, Tăriceanu said.]  
(*România liberă*, online)

Example (10) contains the Prime Minister’s reference to measures in the area of Justice. Like in the case of pensions, he considers that corruption-related objectives were met during his mandate and he states this quite confidently. And so have other objectives, such as those aimed at making sure that the constitutional duties of the Superior Council of Magistracy are not passed to the president, as one finds out from example (11), containing Ujenciuc’s opinion:

- (11) Este de înțeles că numirea în funcție a judecătorilor și procurorilor a fost dată de Constituție în competența Președintelui României, în ideea că decretul prezidențial conferă acelorora un plus de autoritate. Dar nu este de înțeles să se ia din competența Consiliului Superior al Magistraturii o prerogativă care îi aparține în mod logic, dată fiind calitatea de garant al independenței justiției. [...] Noua reglementare în materie nu a făcut decât să se alinieze la prevederile constituționale și să dea sens conceptului de garant al independenței justiției, garant care în niciun caz nu poate purta numele de Traian Băsescu.

[It is understandable that the appointment of judges and prosecutors in office was placed by the Constitution under the authority of the President of Romania, so that the presidential decree should give them more authority. But it is not understandable to remove from the competence of the Superior Council of Magistracy a prerogative that belongs to it logically, given its quality of guarantor of the independence of justice. [...] The new regulation in the field has only aligned itself with the constitutional provisions and made sense of the concept of guarantor of the independence of justice, a guarantor who under no circumstances can bear the name of Traian Băsescu.]

<http://www.cdep.ro/pls/steno/steno.stenograma?ids=6530&idm=1&idl=1>

Ujenciuc’s words given above prompts one to believe that what Tăriceanu communicated as being Justice-related plans for the future was perceived, at least in this instance, as well-meant and truthful.

Overall, Tăriceanu considers the period when he hold the leading political power a successful one, as he indicates in his statements in example (11):

- (12) „În cei patru ani de guvernare, ne-am asumat responsabilitatea echității și securității sociale a populației și am acționat pentru stimularea creșterii economice. Am acordat toată atenția categoriilor defavorizate, armonizând sprijinul care a fost mult peste cel acordat de guvernul trecut. În cei patru ani de guvernare, am promis doar ceea ce am știut că putem să realizăm. Sigur că e ușor să dai oamenilor speranțe, dar am considerat că trebuie să-i tratăm cu respect și să le oferim certitudini, și nu promisiuni fără acoperire”, a mai afirmat Tăriceanu.

[In the four years of governance, we have assumed responsibility for social equity and social security and have acted to stimulate economic growth. We have paid all attention to the underprivileged categories, harmonizing the support that was far above that granted by the past government. In the four years of governance, we only

promised what we knew we could achieve. Of course, it is easy to give people hope, but we thought we should treat them with respect and give them certainties and not promises that could not be kept”, Tăriceanu said.]

(*România liberă*, online)

In example (12), a different voice, that of Andrian-Sirojea Mihei, praises the achievements in the period when Tăriceanu acted as the Romanian Prime Minister:

- (13) Deși la nivel internațional se înregistrează o criză economică, în primul trimestru al acestui an România a înregistrat cel mai mare salt din 1990, având o creștere economică de patru ori mai mare decât media pe Uniunea Europeană, apreciază Southeast European Times, creșterea economică medie a țărilor Uniunii Europene fiind de circa 2,4% în aceeași perioadă, conform statisticilor Eurostat. Tot conform Eurostat, România s-a clasat anul trecut pe locul 15 pe lista beneficiarilor investițiilor străine directe, acestea cifrându-se la 7,3 miliarde euro, anul acesta estimându-se a depăși 10 miliarde euro.

[Although there is an economic crisis at an international level, in the first quarter of this year, Romania made the biggest step forward since 1990, with an economic growth four times the EU average, according to Southeast European Times, the average economic growth of the European Union countries being around 2.4% in the same period, according to Eurostat statistics. According to Eurostat, last year, Romania also ranked on the list of beneficiaries of foreign direct investments, amounting to 7.3 billion euros, this year investments being estimated to exceed 10 billion euros.]

(<http://www.cdep.ro/pls/steno/steno.stenograma?ids=6521&idm=1,06&idl=1>)

This other voice validates Tăriceanu's own assessment of his and his fellow politicians' success so one is inclined to believe that, once again, he did not make (too many) false promises and groundless statements when he presented his program as the newly appointed Prime Minister.

Like in his investment speech, in the speech that he delivers at the end of his mandate and which is reproduced in *România liberă*, there are not many occasions when he flouts Grice's conversational maxims. He offers sufficient arguments to prove that the greatest majority of his governance program objectives were met, so the conversational maxim of quality is followed. Secondly, the conversational maxim of quantity is also followed as the information provided is most of the times sufficient to construct his speech with all the details and evidence necessary to make sense to the audience. Thirdly, the conversational maxim of relevance is also followed as the speech remains mostly on the subject. The Prime Minister talks only about the governance program, he does not introduce other major elements to divert the listeners' attention. Finally, the conversational maxim of manner is followed as the Prime Minister is not ambiguous in expressing his ideas. He is very focused, his speech flows naturally and his opinions are presented in an orderly manner.

It may also be noticed that the Prime Minister does not point out the weaknesses of his mandate and, even more than that, he indirectly suggests that the journalists who

report on his achievements should understand that he has been a successful leader. In this sense, the following lines are illustrative:

- (14) Întrebat de presă despre minusurile guvernării Tăriceanu, primul ministru a precizat că cele mai importante angajamente din programul de guvernare au fost îndeplinite, acestea vizând creșterea nivelului de trai, investițiile, sănătatea, agricultura, justiția sau învățământul.  
„Sunteți jurnaliști și ar fi păcat ca eu, prin ceea ce spun, să vă iau pâinea de la gură. Așa că vă las să trageți concluzia”, a spus premierul, citat de Agerpres.  
[Asked by the press about the minuses of Tăriceanu’s governance, the Prime Minister stated that the most important commitments in his governance program had been fulfilled, these having aimed at raising the standard of living, investments, health, agriculture, justice or education.  
“You are journalists, and it would be a shame for me, by what I say, to take the bread out of your mouth. So I will let you draw your own conclusions”, the Prime Minister said, quoted by Agerpres.]

It may be speculated that the conversational maxim of quantity is flouted as long as the Prime Minister focuses on the positive aspects of his governance only – the other side of the coin is normally needed to get a clear picture of the whole. Nevertheless, insistence on achievements while leaving what has not been achieved aside is common practice in politicians’ speeches but this does not mean that the latter escape the attention of the audience. An indication that the public is aware that there are negative parts to Tăriceanu’s governance is an example such as (14), containing Baban’s rhetorical questions about these:

- (15) Prezentând toate realizările acestui guvern, premierul a declarat nonșalant că promisiunile electorale din 2005 au fost îndeplinite în proporție de 95%. Care guvern? Care program? Care realizări însumează 95% dintre angajamentele programului de guvernare?  
[While presenting all the achievements of this government, the Prime Minister declared nonchalantly that the 2005 election promises were 95% fulfilled. What government? What program? What achievements account for 95% of the governance program commitments?]  
(<http://www.cdep.ro/pls/steno/steno.stenograma?ids=6535&idm=113&idl=1>)

Once such rhetorical questions are asked, it becomes clear that at least part of the Prime Minister’s statements concerning his own evaluation of his success were made flouting Grice’s conversational maxims.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, the Prime Minister’s investment speech seems to have been delivered with both flouting and observation of the conversational maxims, as some of the reactions in press that I have mentioned here highlight the fulfilment of the

governance objectives initially stated, while others question it. This, in its turn, means that, though post-speech reactions may be a barometer indicating the validity and sincerity of what has been said, they cannot provide a black or white impression of these. What can ultimately validate what a politician once says is what happens in society, i.e. in the extralinguistic context to which the linguistic one is connected.

## References

1. Brown, Penelope and Stephen C Levinson, *Politeness. Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 (1978).
2. Dejica, Daniel. 'Towards a New Model for the Identification of Thematic Information in Discourse'. In Superceanu, R. and D. Dejica (eds.) *Comunicare profesională și traductologie*, Lucrarile conferinței internaționale, 29-30 septembrie 2005, Timisoara. Timisoara: Editura Politehnica, 2006. pp. 103-110.
3. Fairclough, Norman, *Analysing Discourse. Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge, 2004.
4. Frentiu, Luminița and Loredana Frățilă, 'Promises and Pie-crusts are Made to be Broken'. In *BAS. British and American Studies*, vol. IV (1), 1999, pp. 132-143.
5. Grice, H. Paul, *Logic and Conversation*. In P. Cole and J. Morgan (eds.) *Studies in Syntax and Semantics III: Speech Acts*, New York: Academic Press, 1975.
6. van Dijk, Teun. (ed.), *Discourse as Structure and Process*. London: Sage Publications, 1997.

## Online resources:

- <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/stylistics/topic12/14cp1.htm>.
- Chamber of Deputies' official website:  
<http://www.cdep.ro/pls/steno/steno.stenograma?ids=5788&idm=5&idl=1>
- <http://romanioliberal.ro/actualitate/eveniment/bilantul-guvernarii-tariceanu-realizari-pe-toata-linia--134561>