

Socio-Cultural Difficulties in Teaching Political and Diplomatic Language at the Preparatory Year*

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to present some of the social and cultural difficulties which appear during the process of teaching and learning political and diplomatic language at the Preparatory Year (Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest). The identification of the aforementioned difficulties is based on a six-year experience in teaching this specialised language to foreign students who intend to study in Romanian different scientific areas, mainly related to law and political sciences. The paper examines various situations in which the socio-cultural background of the foreign students becomes a barrier to the proper comprehension of political and diplomatic concepts, as well as to the corresponding terminology.

Keywords: teaching difficulties, specialised language, political and diplomatic language, foreign students, socio-cultural barrier

Preliminary considerations

The object of this paper is represented by some social and cultural difficulties which occur during the process of teaching political and diplomatic language at the Preparatory Year of Romanian. This programme is organised by the Romanian Studies Centre of the Faculty of Letters (University of Bucharest) and is addressed to foreign students who want to continue their studies in Romanian at various faculties.

The paper is in line with previous analyses concerning different aspects of the aforesaid specialised language taught to foreign students who want to pursue an academic career in law or political sciences (Grigore 2014, 2015). The present research aims to identify and to comment upon particular situations in the process of teaching and learning political and diplomatic language at the Preparatory Year. Those situations have often appeared in the course of the last six years

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of teaching this specialised language. They are based on the assumption that the socio-cultural barrier characterises any process of teaching a (specialised) language to students who are not native speakers. Also, this barrier causes several difficulties in the comprehension and acquisition of linguistic notions.

As far as the structure of this paper is concerned, the first section (*Short description of political and diplomatic language within the teaching process at the Preparatory Year*) takes into account a concise presentation of the general framework regarding the process of teaching the specialised language at the Preparatory Year organised by the University of Bucharest. The second section (*Socio-cultural difficulties in teaching political and diplomatic language at the Preparatory Year*) represents the extended part of the study and contains the analysis of precise situations in which socio-cultural aspects hindered the teaching process. The last part (*Conclusions*) states the final remarks resulted from the analysis performed in this paper.

Short description of political and diplomatic language within the teaching process at the Preparatory Year

Within the programme of teaching Romanian as a foreign language at the University of Bucharest, *Political and Diplomatic Language* course takes place in the second semester of the academic year, as do the other courses of specialised languages (Niculescu, 2014: 193–194). At that moment in time, the level of Romanian that foreign students should have achieved corresponds to levels A2–B1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Biriş, 2014: 7; Grigore, 2014).

In the first part of the second semester, the students who register for *Juridical* specialisation have the obligation to attend courses or lectures in which basic political and diplomatic terminology is studied. The duration of these mostly-introductory courses is almost ten weeks and is completed with a written exam. After the introductory lectures, in the second part of the semester, the students are taken over by a professor from the Faculty of Law (University of Bucharest), who is specialised in teaching *Political Doctrines* course (also see Niculescu, 2014: 194).

Together with the complementary *Juridical (Legal) Language* course, *Political and Diplomatic Language* course is dedicated to a relatively small number of foreign students. Every year, that number ranges from 10 to 15 students, who are distributed in the so-called group of Law. Generally, these students intend to follow in Romanian an academic path related to juridical or political field of studies. As a consequence, the effective specialisations for which students opt at the end of the Preparatory Year are *Criminal (Penal) Law*, *Constitutional*

Law and Public Institutions, International Law etc. (among juridical studies) or *Political Sciences* (as the main specialisation of the political area).

Based on the interrelation of the political domain with other scientific areas, there have been cases in which students who prepare for other specialisations or faculties (such as history, international relations, or sociology) have been distributed in the group of Law.

Except for the diversity given by the specialisation itself, differences appear with respect to the studies planned in Romania. Frequently, these are MA or PhD studies, and, very rarely, BA programme studies. Unfortunately, a dissociation between these academic paths is not made and all students ultimately arrive in the same group of Law. This fact results in yet another diversity concerning the syllabus meant to be studied in the first ten weeks of the second semester.

The task of teaching political and diplomatic language is further hampered by the absence of a didactic material (i.e., a textbook) devoted to the problems which the political and diplomatic terminology poses (Grigore, 2014). This state of facts characterises the teaching process of many specialised languages at the Preparatory Year organised at the University of Bucharest and elsewhere¹. The teaching of this specialised language does not benefit from bibliographical references either. Unlike the complementary juridical language, theoretical and/or methodological matters of political and diplomatic language have not been discussed by any major research until now².

Consequently, a course material (which is found as a manuscript at the present time) has been used for the last six years in the teaching process of political and diplomatic language. This course material has been permanently revised and improved according to the students' demands and the difficulties involved by various scientific domains such as diplomacy, history, international relations, law, political sciences, sociology etc.

As to the subjects discussed, this course material takes into consideration the ten-week structure mentioned above. Thus, the

¹ The publication of a textbook reserved to medical terminology (Biriş, 2014) should be mentioned as one of the recent didactic materials used in the complex process of teaching and learning specialised languages by foreign students. Moreover, it should be specified a textbook dealing with the specialised language of Algebra and Mathematical Analysis, which is in course of preparation at the Romanian Studies Centre in the Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest (Niculescu, 2014).

² For the process of teaching juridical language, the specialised bibliography (Moldovan (Editura) 2012) registered not only bibliographical references about methodological aspects (Stoichiţoiu, 1988), but also proper textbooks (albeit out-dated ones: Voica, Fotca, 1994; Toma, 1996).

material is divided into two large sections which cope with external politics, as well as internal politics (Grigore, 2015). The first section contains four units: 1. *International Community (I). The United Nations. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation*; 2. *International Community (II). The European Union*; 3. *International Community (III). The Council of Europe*; 4. *Monarchy vs. republic*. Other four units form the second major section of the material and their numbering continues the precedent units: 5. *Political parties in Romania*; 6. *The Parliament of Romania. The Senate. The Chamber of Deputies*; 7. *The Government of Romania*; 8. *Romanian Presidency*. A special course is added to these units and its purpose is to revise the matters which have been discussed throughout the lectures in order to take and successfully pass the final written exam.

The sheer enumeration of the titles present in the syllabus proves a consistent stock of terminological information and concepts. They are intended to offer an overall and, simultaneously, faithful picture of the political and diplomatic language. One can easily notice a certain degree of emphasis laid on terms which denote concepts denoting international organisations (especially, to European institutions). In addition, the emphasis affects terms which refer to contemporary Romanian politics. This emphasis is justified by the desire to acquaint foreign students with scientific notions that have a high probability of being used during the future lectures that they are going to attend at the faculties of law or political sciences.

The problems which have raised the awareness up to this point of the analysis are particularly caused by extra-linguistic factors. Apart from them, there is a problem due to a very important, yet, heterogeneous feature, given by the geopolitical and cultural background of each foreign student who belongs to the group of Law. Until now³, the majority of students who form this group came from countries outside the European Union (Afghanistan, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burundi, Cameroon, Chile, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Vietnam). The names of the countries underline a variety of cultures (including traditions and mentalities), societies and political systems (with different forms of government and political regimes).

The multitude of societies and cultural backgrounds gathered each year in the group of Law usually acts as a barrier in the proper comprehension of the concepts employed in *Political and Diplomatic*

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Language course. Subsequently, the socio-cultural barrier hinders the learning and efficient assimilation of political and diplomatic terminology. The direct results of this action are the difficulties in producing new sentences and texts, starting from the scientific stock which is being taught.

Socio-cultural difficulties in teaching political and diplomatic language at the Preparatory Year

One of the main difficulties which have appeared because of the socio-cultural barrier is the acquirement of notions and terms about European Union (EU) institutions, their procedures and legislation etc. This difficulty accounts for those scientific contents which have entered Romanian language as a consequence of Romania's admission to the EU, an event which happened on January 1st, 2007. The scientific contents are treated in units 2 and 3 from the syllabus which has been detailed in the previous section (*supra*).

The complexity of EU terminology makes it less accessible even to a native speaker of Romanian, who possesses an average knowledge of his or her mother tongue. However, for a non-native speaker, the situation grows in complexity, due to his or her status as a person who must acquire correctly and in a relatively short period of time notions and terms that will be present in the future lectures delivered in Romanian.

In this situation, the socio-cultural difficulty starts from the fact that the foreign students who are EU citizens are outnumbered by those who are non-EU citizens. Each year, the majority comprises students that come from Arabic-speaking countries and, thus, from a Muslim cultural background (i.e., either Middle East or North Africa). Additionally, an important number of students that have attended the course recently came from Central Africa or South America.

The understanding of all mechanisms which ensure the very existence of EU institutions becomes difficult for these students whose origins are not only outside the European Union, but outside Europe. The difficulty resides in the fact that non-European students do not have this sort of extra-linguistic realities in their geopolitical and social environment. In other words, the absence of extra-linguistic realities triggers a rough conceptualisation of scientific contents about the EU, while its comprehension is done in an intricate manner.

An illustration of this type of difficulty is the structure *community acquis* or *acquis communautaire*, which denotes the body of common rights and obligations that is binding on all the EU member states. The *acquis* is made up of the content, principles and political objectives of

the Treaties; the legislation adopted pursuant to the Treaties and the case law of the Court of Justice; declarations and resolutions adopted by the Union; instruments under the Common Foreign and Security Policy; international agreements concluded by the Union and those entered into by the member states among themselves within the sphere of the Union's activities (Definition – *Acquis*). In addition to this, it is considered that the *acquis communautaire* is formed as a basis of the judiciary management in the EU member states (Pinteală, Tenț, Sima Pinteală, 2009: 10).

The explanation of the complex meaning that the structure *acquis communautaire* has is done in a complicated manner, interrelated with other abstract and specialised terms (e.g. *agreement, declaration, legislation, resolution, treaty* etc.). To explain the structure *community acquis* in a clear manner, it is necessary to correctly decode and thoroughly learn the other terminological units. Only after this initial phase is achieved can the student pass on to the accurate definition of the concept under scrutiny.

Another example of socio-cultural difficulties in teaching political and diplomatic language is determined by the partial (and, generally, mistaken) knowledge of some concepts. The situation starts from the existence of three distinct European institutions with similar names – the Council of the European Union, the European Council and the Council of Europe. The frequent mistake made by foreign students is to perceive the three denominations as total synonyms, and, hence, to consider that they refer to the same European institution.

Nonetheless, the error can be explained with strong arguments. On the one hand, the mistake is based on the presence of the adjective *European*, derived from the proper name *Europe*. This could be the cause for the confusion between the structures *European Council* and *Council of Europe*. In case the meaning of *European* does not become instantaneously obvious (although this is a rare possibility), the students can consult *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române* (namely, *the Explicative Dictionary of Romanian Language*, abbreviated *DEX*, 1998). This is the major lexicographical source recommended by the Preparatory Year professors for learning the grammatical genders and various synonyms. The students resort to the traditional version of *DEX*, 1998 or, very often, to the online version, though the latter is not fully accepted by linguists.

Irrespective of the chosen version, foreign students find the adjective *European* defined in the following way: “which belongs to Europe or to Europeans [...], related to Europe or to Europeans” (*DEX*, 1998: s.v. *European – my translation*). Therefore, the meaning that the adjective

has is almost identical to the one provided by the noun in the genitive case (*of*) *Europe*, which, in Romanian, has the same form as the dative case (*to*) *Europe*.

On the other hand, the foreign students who come from countries situated outside the European continent share the unanimous (yet, mistaken!) opinion that the European Union is the only political organisation of Europe, due to its importance in economic and international relations. The confusion between the Council of the European Union, the European Council and the Council of Europe is, thus, motivated by an extra-linguistic reason (i.e., the origin in another geopolitical region) and it is intensified by the lack of a thorough knowledge of all European institutions.

As a matter of fact, the structures *European Council* and *Council of European Union* (frequently replaced with *Consilium*) designate two different institutions of the EU, while *Council of Europe* refers to a separate international organisation (i.e., it is not part of the EU at all). Nevertheless, the structure *European Council* defines an institution concerned with the general political direction and priorities of the European Union. The institution consists of the heads of state or government of the member states, together with its President and the President of the Commission (*Council – EU*). At the same time, *the Council of the European Union* denotes an institution representing the member states' governments. This institution is also known informally as the EU Council and it is where national ministers from each EU country meet to adopt laws and coordinate policies (*Ibidem*).

Other difficulties in the process of understanding scientific notions are linked with cultural facts, because they refer mostly to historical matters. This type of difficulties (basically, cultural ones) are identified in the contents associated to units 4 and 5 from the course material. The units deal with the main forms of government (namely, monarchy and republic) and political parties, respectively.

However, some foreign students encounter many problems in understanding concepts such as types of monarchies throughout the history of Europe (*dukedom, empire, kingdom, principality* etc.), types of monarchs (*emperor, king, prince* etc.) and components of Western European aristocratic hierarchy (*baron, count, duke, earl, marquis* etc.). The problems appear as a result of those students' origin in an essentially Islamic culture, corroborated with an unsystematic knowledge of universal history⁴.

⁴ The matter of aristocratic hierarchy of Western Europe also occurs in a unit subsequent to the one about the forms of government, namely, unit 6, whose central topic is the

First of all, the problems which happen are explained by the fact that many Muslim countries do not have (and did not have whatsoever) monarchies identical to the European ones, but specific forms of government such as *caliphate*, *emirate*, or *sultanate*, and, accordingly, rulers like *caliphs*, *emirs*, or *sultans* (see *DEX*, 1998: s.v. *caliph*, *caliphate*, *emir*, *emirate*, *sultan*, and *sultanate*). The differences deepen even more with the varied means of defining terms which denote European and Muslim leaders. In Arab cultures, the latter are seen as successors of Prophet Mohammed (*DEX*, 1998: s.v. *emir*), whereas, at least during the Middle Ages, a European ruler was perceived as God's anointed one⁵.

Secondly, one can remark the confusions caused by the existence of two different means used to encode the same referent. For instance, the word *emir* is the Arabic equivalent for *prince*, a fact which leads to an inter-linguistic synonymy. Therefore, the native speakers of Arabic tend to use the more familiar term of *emir* instead of the Romanian word. In order to correct this situation, the students are constantly told that Romanian has kept the word *emir* with a narrow meaning, because it only designates a prince who rules over a Muslim country. Accordingly, the inter-linguistic synonymy which has been identified is only a partial one.

Thirdly, another cultural difficulty is shown in unit 5, which is assigned to Romanian political parties. A *multiple choice* exercise is centred upon a text which provides a short history of Romanian political parties during the 20th century. At some point, the text informs the reader about the growing influence of the extreme right in Romanian politics during the period of time between the two World Wars. The text continues with the example of the Iron Guard (i.e., an extreme right political party) and draws a comparison between this Romanian party and Adolf Hitler's Nazi party in Germany or Benito Mussolini's Fascist party in Italy. In relation with the latter one, the text specifies that Mussolini was called "Il Duce" (namely, "The Duke").

Parliament of Romania. The purpose of an exercise suggested in this unit is to evaluate the students' reading comprehension starting from a written text. That text details the similarities and differences between the Romanian Parliament and the British one. Within the category of similarities, it is found the bicameral structure of both legislative organs, while the organisation of the British Parliament in the House of Lords and the House of Commons is among the differences. On this occasion, the meaning of the term *lord* is brought into discussion. The term becomes a hypernym of a semantic paradigm which is composed of *baron*, *count*, *duke*, *earl*, *marquis* etc.

⁵ Cf. the particle *Io* (< *Ioannes* = God's anointed one). This particle is found in official Romanian documents from medieval times and precedes the name of a Moldavian or a Wallachian leader, so as to show his divine right to rule over the country.

A cultural difficulty is shown here through the use of the word *duke*. The cultural barrier can cause misunderstandings if the notion *duke* has not been well assimilated by the foreign students in unit 4. – *Monarchy vs. republic*. Beside the aforementioned cultural barrier, a stylistic barrier appears, through the metaphorical appellation of “The Duke”, which was awarded to Mussolini by his followers. The political leader himself did not belong to the Italian aristocracy and, subsequently, was not a duke in the true sense of the word. Nonetheless, his political power resembled that of the influent dukes who ruled over the Italian states during the Middle Ages.

Conclusions

The present research commented upon some of the difficulties which have occurred in the process of teaching political and diplomatic language in the Preparatory Year (Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest). The recurrent situations which were analysed have in common the socio-cultural barrier, which frequently poses problems to foreign students, especially to those who come from Arabic-speaking countries. The problems that foreign students have concern the proper comprehension and efficient assimilation of basic political and diplomatic terminology.

The socio-cultural difficulties have been identified throughout six years of teaching that specialised language to foreign students who intend to pursue an academic path in law or political sciences. Due to the absence of a suitable textbook, the teaching process was based on a course material, which was handed in to the students who form the group of Law.

The six-year experience in teaching *Political and Diplomatic Language* course has revealed that the socio-cultural barrier affects two sides of the basic level in political and diplomatic terminology. On the one hand, the students have their origins in different societies, which are far away from the European continent and the European Union, from a geographic and geopolitical perspective. This distance implies the absence of extra-linguistic realities characteristic to the EU, which are difficult to be comprehended by non-EU citizens (see the case of the structure *acquis communautaire*). Furthermore, there are confusions between terminological structures which seem to denote an identical referent. Without a prior knowledge of the way in which the European Union and the Council of Europe are organised, it becomes possible the situation in which a foreign student considers that some structures like *The European Council*, *The Council of the European Union* and *The Council of Europe* are synonymous.

On the other hand, the contribution of the cultural background is seen particularly in relation to types of monarchies (with special reference to the ones in the history of Europe). Neither the types of monarchs nor the aristocratic hierarchy in Western Europe are easier to be understood by foreign students. On the contrary, they seem to be more difficult for Arabic-speaking students, who are familiarised with other types of monarchies (e.g. *caliphate*, *emirate*, and *sultanate*). Sometimes, even partial inter-linguistic synonyms, such as *emir* and *prince*, or metaphorical appellations (e.g. “Il Duce” for the Italian leader Mussolini) become sources for further confusions related to cultural background.

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