

The 'Asymmetric Threat' of Political Discourse

by Diamantis Kryonidis*

translated by Athina Avgitidou

Abstract: The linguistic vaccinations of political discourse (rhetoric) with terms that originate from special (specific) science vocabularies do not always result to clarity. On the contrary, they create conditions that eventually threaten citizen's freedom. [p. 137-141]

Language, perhaps the most important asset in the history of human development, allowed human to be released from the restrictions of the animal world and placed his culture's foundation.¹ Speech as means of communication constitutes not only a priceless but also an omnipotent tool, which political art² always utilized (through rhetoric, demagoguery etc), in order to convince, unite, but also intimidate dissenters and enemies.³ The rhetoric art developed by sophists constitutes a classic example.⁴

Nevertheless, the political discourse constantly needs new linguistic vaccinations in order to remain committed to its objectives and maintain its dynamic. A word or phrase, which is extracted from its usual conceptual horizon and serves politics, often suffices. Some other times, however, the 'committed term' is shrouded with scientific gravity (and objectivity), while political language is enriched by the scientific language's specialised vocabulary. These 'linguistic loans' from the science fields aim at adding in politics, determine the political scene of a country, and often characterise an entire era. "Deterrent war", "collateral damages", "asymmetric threats", "crimes against humanity", "terrorism" constitute only a sample of modern

terms of military science and international law utilised by politics.

However, the specialised scientific vocabulary is apparently utilised by political discourse in order to obscure (more often), lending a feigned sense of precision to a usually arbitrary political discourse. It constitutes, perhaps, the last shelter of politicians, the last hope of politics to explain, justify, but also cover its deficit, since the engagement of the new vocabulary does not often serve the virtue of discerning the political discourse at an ethical level. Hence, it is overlooked in our era that political discourse in a real democratic society should be primarily characterized by clarity, since its main mission, within the context of a public dialogue, is to explain and clarify.⁵ Otherwise, the political discourse becomes totalitarian, with the unique objective to capriciously impose the will of the politician who articulates it.

It is precisely this borrowed scientific vocabulary which does not contribute sufficiently to the clarification of political discourse, since the scientific language is not always easily comprehended, because it uses words with different than the usual meaning, old-fashioned or technical words. The citizens struggle to perceive the semantic horizon in front of them and often feel feeble towards the unknown vocabulary they are unable to spotlight with their “unspecialized” knowledge.⁶ Thus, the citizen is no more convinced by the political discourse but the authentic force of the borrowed scientific vocabulary, because he/she can barely comprehend it.

Consequently, the political language appears to ignore that clarity means to formulate not only with brevity but also plenitude the essential characteristics and content of a phenomenon, relation, idea or word, i.e., the characteristics which distinguish the defined from every other different or similar and that, under these conditions, the ambiguity of political vocabulary needs always specialization.⁷ The citizen who does not comprehend the content of political discourse, is impressed by a scientific ‘scent’ in which he reposes confidence. In an era of technological and scientific apotheosis, the specialised vocabulary of the scientific world constitutes a

first-class tool in the communication world of politics, which is recruited in order to rescue the marginalised, and usually long-gone, political language, by offering new meanings, but, however, without being fully comprehended.

In practice, the political discourse with its injunctive character eventually cultivates, as C. Tsolakis notes, an ambiguous, general, vague, tautological, mystical and semi-comprehended discourse. Skilfully and constantly, it seeks the establishment of a distance between the politician-transmitter (who is “wise, omniscient, omnipotent and of rare quality”) and the citizen-receptor, who should feel insignificant, inferior and for this reason depended by the transmitter.

Consequently, the incomprehensibility and ambiguity of political discourse provoke fear, insecurity and ultimately threaten citizen’s freedom. At the same moment that the everyday language is enriched and specialised scientific vocabulary of political language invades in our daily life, the threat of the unknown should not frighten us, because, if threat and fear constitute elements that politics has always utilised, the threats, however, were many times proved ‘empty’.

The political language which ordains, oversimplifies and categorises, can be another form of verbal violence or ‘asymmetric threat’ for the citizen. Nonetheless, the constant application of democratic principles, fighting spirit and pursuit of virtue as life’s objective can keep the hope alive that eventually Annibas will be lost!

* Ph.D. candidate of the School of Theology of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

1. Regarding the conflict of the language’s origin, see Stamati N. Alachioti, “HOW WAS LANGUAGE BORN”, (Sunday 30 November 2003), Newspaper ‘To Vima’, p. H06.

2. “The word [politics] has two meanings, since on the one hand it means a set of principles and rules, which refer to the pursuit of equitable state aims and suitable means for their achievement (in this case politics is presented as a theory), and on the other hand it means, those actions, in their entirety, which aim at the formation or at

least influence of state activities within the frame of a specific state (in this case politics is not considered as a theory, but practice)”, Ioannou P. Arabantinou, INTRODUCTION TO THE SCIENCE OF LAW, (Athens: A. N. Sakkoula Publications), (2nd ed., 1983) pp. 32-33. Cf. Platon, REPUBLIC, (Athens: Daidalos I. Zacharopoulos Publications), 29 Library of Ancient Writers (1955), 305E.

3. Collate the interesting analysis of the concept of the Political through the distinction between ‘Friend’ and ‘Enemy’ (which are not considered as simple symbols, but with their particular existential meaning) in Karl Schmitt. Karl Schmitt, THE CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL, (Athens: Critiki Publications), (1988), p. 45.

4. W. Windelband - H. Heimsoeth, HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY, MIET, Athens 2001, volume A, p. 80.

5. Euripides highlights also the virtue of clarity. See Euripides, ORESTES, 397 (Menelaos).

6. The field of possible interpretations (and consequently the difficulty of comprehending the political discourse) is even more expanded if we take into consideration the observations of semiotics, but this is beyond the present article’s scope. See indicatively Umberto Eco, THE LIMITS OF INTERPRETATION, (Athens: Gnosi Publications), (2nd ed., 1993), p. 22.

7. Argument *mutatis mutandis* from the Greek Supreme Court’s case law, which always requires the vague legal notions to be clarified.

8. I am not afraid of any of you, since I act with justice. You will not force me. Sophocles, Filoktitis (409), 1.251 (Neoptolemos) (tnsl.: I.N. Gryparis, Estia).

9. In 211 B.C., i.e., during the eighth year of the Second Carthaginian War, Hannibal appears outside the walls of Rome. The residents’ panic is eternally remembered by the cry: “Hannibal ad portas” [Cicero, De finibus bonorum et malorum (45), IV, 9]. Nonetheless, the walls of Rome did not fall and soon Hannibal was forced to withdraw.