

# (De)Constructing Leadership through Ritualised Discourse

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## Abstract

*This study deals with the notion of leadership, envisaged broadly as the quality of a head of state to lead his people towards a common goal while conveying the image of a role-model by both his actions and statements. During his presidential term, a head of state is confronted with many institutionalised contexts where he is expected to issue an official speech. From the numerous official speeches that a president is likely to deliver, I have chosen to dwell on one of the most ritualised discursive sequences, namely the presidential greetings on New Year's Eve, in order to highlight how the presidential ethos is built through discursive and extra-discursive elements. In this context, I have taken into account the greetings of the Romanian ex-President, Traian Băsescu, from the period 2004-2013 (he was elected twice) with a view to analysing both the purely discursive devices (speech acts, appellatives, semantic content emphasized) and the extra-linguistic elements (place where the discourse is delivered, communication channel). The analysis aims at answering the following questions: Can we consider the presidential greetings and the choices made within and outside the discourse itself as indirect evidence of the diminution of the public support that the president had benefited from? Do the greetings emphasize the president's effort to adapt to his audience while maintaining the tradition of a well-established ritual?*

**Key words:** *presidential address, discourse analysis, epideictic rhetoric, ethos*

## Introduction

The present study starts with a contextualisation of presidential greetings within the category of ceremonial speeches and within the broader area of presidential rhetoric research. It also focuses on the way leadership is built through this type of presidential address. The second part provides a brief account of Traian Băsescu's evolution on the Romanian political and social scene. This part mainly deals with an analytical approach of the series of

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speeches delivered by the president on the same occasion (New Year's Eve) between 2004 and 2013 in order to highlight, in keeping with the diachronic perspective, how rhetoric is put to good use so as to "exercise power" (Windt 1986: 106) but also to adapt to the audience's expectations and beliefs.

In this paper, I am not taking any stance, nor am I expressing any judgemental point of view regarding Traian Băsescu's political office; I dwell on his ceremonial speeches from a rhetorical and linguistic perspective; the hypothesis being that the changes performed over the years in the presidential greetings in terms of both intra and extra discursive features represent a form of adapting his rhetoric to the audience, who gradually loses its confidence in the leader.

### **1. Constructing leadership through ceremonial speeches**

According to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, ceremonial speeches are placed within the realm of epideictic rhetoric, which generally deals with virtue and vice, and aims at praising or more rarely at criticising a person or ideas (cf. Robrieux 2012: 25). In this paper, I adopt the perspective on the epideictic rhetoric provided by Perelman and Tyteca (1992: 67), according to which the epideictic discourse is meant to increase the commitment to certain values. Drawing on Perelman and Tyteca's argumentative function of the epideictic discourse, one may state that ceremonial speeches are bound to raise and enhance the audience's commitment to a set of values that the speaker has already committed to (or presents himself as someone who has adopted them).

From awards presentations and speeches of acceptance to speeches of tribute and eulogies, ceremonial speeches are deeply rooted in the very occasion that generated the speech act, and conform, according to each and every type, to a series of constraints related to the content and its organisation, including types of speech acts to be accomplished or linguistic stereotypes to be used, duration, moment of speech.

Presidential epideictic rhetoric becomes manifest in speeches brought about by: the country's national day, opening ceremonies, commemorative events, etc. Although the primary goal of such speeches is to bring to the fore fundamental values and virtues, the president more often than not uses them "in the service of his individual image (re)construction." (Parry-Gilles & Parry-Gilles, 2000: 432) In other words, he puts to good use the entire arsenal of the epideictic rhetoric (topoi,

pathos-oriented sequences, symbols of collective identity) to craft his image as a leader who aims at binding people together due to these generally shared principles and in opposition to the well-known proverb *Divide et impera*. Successful leaders are those who allow for the enforcement of positive changes for the community, by seizing all opportunities likely to occur in society and to favour these changes. We therefore agree with George C. Edwards III (2016) who states that

To succeed, Presidents have to evaluate the opportunities for change in their environments carefully and orchestrate existing and potential support skilfully. Successful leadership requires that the President have the commitment, resolution, resiliency, and adaptability to take full advantage of opportunities that arise (George C. Edwards III, 2016).

Presidential greetings on New Year's Eve can be ranked among the most ritualised ceremonial speeches, in the sense that their repetitive nature and identical context (the idea of a time of counting one's achievements and of settling future goals does not change, despite different social and political contexts) ensure their quasi-standardised form. This is a particular form of presidential address that the president willingly assumes as part of his duties towards the people he leads.

In the general context of the retrospective view over the year that is about to end, the president usually presents under a favourable light the accomplishments made possible due to the steady collaboration between the presidential office and the citizens. Thus, he forges the ethos of a competent and skilful leader and aims at instilling this image into people's mind by taking advantage of this festive moment when everybody is more prone to forget about negative aspects of life and focus on (future) positive matters.

By taking into account a series of greetings delivered by the American presidents George W. Bush (GB) and Barack Obama (BO), and the French presidents Jacques Chirac (JC) and Nicolas Sarkozy (NS), I am able to retrace a general model of presidential address in terms of linguistic content and its organisation, as well as in relation to the pattern of communication chosen by the speaker. The choice of dwelling upon both American and European presidential speeches is motivated, on the one hand, by the need to ground our model on representative political offices and, on the other hand, by the fact that Romania shares strategic goals (as part of both NATO and EU) with the above mentioned countries.

In this context, presidential greetings can be considered “institutional actions” which are granted symbolic value (much like decorating an official or inaugurating a building); they are largely publicised and afterwards are “valorised by means of the iconic representations of the event” (Krieg-Planque 2012: 23). Photos of the president delivering his speech (usually sitting down in front of the desk and having the national flag in the background) together with the most memorable excerpts of his discourse are published and/or commented upon in both digital and print media.

The general model of the President’s New Year’s Day message could be the following:

- *the salutation*: it can take the form of a standard appellative (for instance, in the French discourse the phrase “mes chers compatriotes” is frequently used) or the form of the traditional new year’s greeting “happy new year”;
- *the contextualisation of the speech act*: it is made either by means of a metalinguistic comment meant to explicitly highlight the type of act (“Je suis heureux d’être avec vous ce soir pour vous *souhaiter*...”) or by chronologically placing the speech act (“L’année 2012 s’achève”; “At a time when we turn the page and look to the future”).

Although the speech addresses the entire audience, more often than not presidents choose to particularise certain categories within the large public, whom his greetings are mainly directed to: people suffering from the loss of their dear ones in attacks, natural disasters or accidents, soldiers fighting to defend one country’s values, as well as their families - who have to cope with the separation, people who lost their jobs or were victims of injustice.

- *the overall assessment of the year* that is about to end: it is usually made from a negative perspective (the year has been difficult, rough, witnessed the economic depression) in order to enhance the value of the government’s achievements, which prove to be even more outstanding since they were performed in rough circumstances;
- *the more or less detailed presentation of the government’s achievements*: this part is strategically organised so as to touch the various needs of the different categories of population - from foreign affairs aiming at the general well-being of a country (the closure of nuclear weapon programmes or the increased involvement of France in the EU policies) to social issues (marriage equality or increasing graduation rates) and to the fulfilment of basic needs (creation of jobs, investments in the health

care system). All aspects are thoughtfully approached in the speech, usually under the form of an enumeration dictated by the temporal boundaries of the speech. These accomplishments are depicted as the result of “hard work, tough choices and resilience” (GB); “je me bats pour chaque Français” (JC); “j’ai agi, c’était mon devoir” (NS), “je me suis toujours battu pour la protection de notre industrie” (NS).

- *the announcements of the objectives set for the new year*: at this point, a lot of care is given to the choice of the objectives put forward so as to make sure that the audience is sensitive to those aspects (professional training for people who need requalification, continuing reforms in the medical or the educational systems);
- *the act of thanking the citizens* for their commitment to the country’s ideals and values: “thank you for making America stronger for these past eight years” (BO); “je salue les efforts des Français pour relancer la croissance économique” (NS);
- *the reiteration of the commitment* of the presidential office, of the entire government, as well as of each and every citizen to the values of the nation: equality of chances, seeking peace while protecting human rights, solidarity, secularity, “helping people around the world achieve peace and freedom” (GB);
- *the traditional final wish*: it stems from either the president himself, in the case of the French (“Du fond du cœur, je présente à chacun d’entre vous mes meilleurs vœux pour 2009” (NS); “J’adresse du fond du cœur, à chacune et à chacun d’entre vous mes vœux les plus chaleureux” (JC)), while the Americans tend to formulate the greeting on their behalf, but also on behalf of their families (“From the Obama family to yours, have a happy and blessed 2017”; “Laura joins me in sending our best wishes for a Happy New Year” (GB)).
- the speech could end with *another standardised formula*, the slogan which ensures the specificity of the nation, becoming a mark of its identity: “Vive la République! Vive la France!”; “May God bless you, and may God continue to bless the United States”. (GB)

The model identified is relatively predictable in terms of content. It can vary as far as its organisation is concerned and some parts can be absent (for instance, in one of BO’s speeches, there is no use of the slogan “God bless America”). Before elections, the president could take the opportunity to make a reference to the upcoming process and therefore to the audience’s ability to make pertinent choices and to vote for already acknowledged candidates. For instance, in his greetings for 2011, president

N. Sarkozy drops a hint regarding the future elections of 2012, stating that France cannot afford the luxury of a year of pre-electoral stagnation and immobility. In the second part of the study, I will refer back to this general, yet not so set, model of presidential New Year's Day address in order to approach the Romanian president's speeches.

Through all their speeches and actions, presidents attempt to show themselves in a favourable light as competent leaders and role-models. Although classified as epideictic discourses, the new year's day messages cannot be envisaged apart from their indirectly persuasive effect: leaving aside the traditional greeting (whose role in binding a community together is to be considered), the discourses focus on promoting the image of a skilful leader who:

- in an overall difficult situation, takes action and performs great achievements;
- acknowledges the support of the citizens in achieving his goals;
- sympathises with people in need and strives to find solutions for them;
- in all his actions, is governed by the country's values and principles.

In the following part, I will firstly provide a brief account of Traian Băsescu's evolution on the political scene and secondly I will embark upon analysing his New Year's Day messages [1] in order to highlight the construction of the presidential ethos. We argue that these speeches, through their content and their communication context, are a form of adaptation to the audience, who had gradually lost confidence in his leadership skills.

## **2. Romanian President's New Year's Day speech: a rhetorical approach**

Traian Băsescu was the president of Romania between 2004-2009 and 2009-2014. Prior to being elected president, he was the general mayor of the capital city, Bucharest, on behalf of the Democratic Party. Both his presidential terms were rather turbulent as he faced the risk of impeachment and suspension twice:

- the first time, in 2007, the members of the Social-Democratic Party, which was the opposition party, accused Băsescu of unconstitutional conduct and proposed him for impeachment. Although the Constitutional Court of Romania found no breach of the constitution in the president's behaviour, later that year the Parliament voted in favour

of the impeachment, which was enforced in April 2007. His temporary suspension ended in May 2007 through a national Referendum.

- the second time, in 2012, the Parliament voted for the President's suspension based on accusations such as his frequent involvement in the government's decisions or the pressure exerted on magistrates. The new national Referendum was invalidated by the Constitutional Court based on the lack of the necessary quorum (although the majority of the people who voted in the referendum, about 87%, were in favour of the suspension).

Being in turn a ship's captain, minister, party leader, mayor, Traian Băsescu became president breaking with the constitutionally enforced tradition of the president as a political mediator and inaugurating the era of the president as a player – as he proudly called himself in the attempt to forge the ethos of a president who gets involved into and even influences the decisions affecting the nation, the one who openly rejects the role of a spectator. In terms of Maingueneau's terminology (2014), we are dealing here with 'l'ethos dit' (in contrast with 'l'ethos montré'), namely what the speaker states about himself and, subsequently, what he aims at convincing the audience about. The phrase of the president-player has received a large media coverage, to the point that it became a label stuck on the president, used by opponents as a criticism, by the supporters as an essential quality in a president, and it has triggered a series of satires and parodies in Romanian entertainment programmes. The self-designation of 'president-player' also functioned as a counter-attack to his opponents who contemptibly called him 'the sailor' referring to his career before entering the political world.

Băsescu has rarely shied away from controversy during his time in public life. His background in the merchant navy and his grasp of populist rhetoric have helped to set him apart from contemporaries who had pursued more overtly political careers under the former regime, although he has never hidden the fact that he was a Communist Party member. (Referendum Briefing No.15)

The following part will point out how the presidential ethos is built through linguistic and extralinguistic devices, and how the power of rhetoric is used to "bring messages of hope and new beginnings" (Kroes, 2012) according to the general pattern of such ceremonial addresses.

Between 2004 and 2009, Traian Băsescu chose to deliver his New Year's Day Message in front of people celebrating the event in public

squares: he deliberately left the official residence to be among the average people. The end of the speech was usually marked with the symbolic gesture of spraying champagne on the audience. The choice of this location is ethos-oriented:

- *the president = the player* who gets involved in every event that marks the national identity;
- *the president = the tradition breaker* who puts aside the largely enrooted presidential habit of addressing the nation from his official residence;
- *the president = the confident leader* who is aware of his popularity which is meant to be reinforced by the new location.

On the eve of 2005, as a newly elected president, Bănescu's speech had a mainly prospective view, focusing on the commitment to the values of the nation and setting general objectives for the future. The speech had the following overall structure:

- *the salutation*: "Happy New Year, Romania! Happy New Year, Bucharest! Happy New Year, dear folks!" The addressee is highly connected to the speech moment and the referential sphere is gradually restricted from the entire country to the city and, finally, to the people present there;
- *the contextualisation of the speech act*: "Every time, on the magical night of the New Year, a wish occurs in our thoughts";
- *the wish made to the country*:

My wish is that of a successful Romania, a Romania where each and every child, woman and man leads a better life, a Romania where we all should be close together, solidary, strong. On New Year's Eve, I wish you health, strength, confidence in yourselves, I wish you the confidence that at the helm of the country there is a man, a President who loves you because he has the same origin as you. I want you to know that you have a strong President, a president capable of representing you, a President who loves the 22 million Romanians, plus the 6 million who are everywhere abroad. (Bănescu, 2004-2005)

It should be noticed how the discourse evolves from a wish addressed to the Romanian people (it is a rather general wish that can be applied to any nation and be pronounced by any president because of its language based on clichés) to an attempt to impose on the audience his positive individual image. The president takes advantage of this festive moment for his own rhetorical needs as he envisages himself (and we are again dealing with a spoken type of ethos, not just a discursive one) under a very favourable light.



- *the presentation of the objectives:*

We are a strong nation, a proud nation, a nation that needs to be respected. In the years to come, together, we will make history; together, we will take the steps to join the selective club of the countries which are members of the European Union. And I want you to know that they do not do us any favour. It is our right, the right of the Romanian people, to be part of modern Europe, part of civilised Europe. (Băsescu, 2004-2005)

The strategy of putting forward the qualities of the collective identity (strong, proud, worthy of respect) is persuasive in the direction of making the audience adopt the idea that, due to the above-mentioned qualities, Romania has the right to be a member of the EU. This part adds to the prior personal image, that the president has discursively forged for himself, the image of the president as the history maker, through semantically charged words meant to help him “craft his place in the national memory” (Kiewe, 2004).

- *the ending formula:* “Happy New Year, Romania! God bless Romania! May you live well!” The last part is the slogan used during his entire campaign while running for president, a trademark which ensured Băsescu’s further success in the elections.

During his first presidential term, Traian Băsescu used to prefer the context of ‘mingling with the mainstream’ while in office. On a stage, in front of hundreds of people, he aimed at projecting at a larger scale the familiar scenario of drinking champagne, hugging and kissing his family at midnight, constantly reminding thus that he stems from the average people. Even when celebrating, on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2007, Romania’s entering the EU, the president was in University Square to celebrate the event and to make people aware that he had kept his promise. At the end of 2007, the president kept the newly installed tradition of delivering his speech in front of the crowd: he only changed the location in Bucharest, from University Square, he moved to Constitution Square. At the end of 2008, Băsescu left the capital for another famous Romanian city, Braşov, where, again in front of a large audience, he reiterated, through commissive speech acts, his faith in the country’s institutions: “I can assure you that the country’s institutions have the ability to make 2009 a year when we will live better”, an echo of the famous slogan “May you live well!”

On December 6<sup>th</sup> 2009, Traian Băsescu was re-elected president with a percentage of a little over 50%, a first strong sign of the decrease in popularity. Later that year, Băsescu changed the location of his speech

again: his last New Year's Day speech was delivered from a famous Romanian mountain resort, Sinaia. The entire context is therefore totally different: the audience is no longer the enthusiastic crowd for whom Bănescu's presence among them was reassurance that life will definitely get better; this case shows:

- a limited physical audience (the tourists spending the winter holidays in the resort and the locals) who were pushed more by curiosity than by commitment to attend the event;
- a shadowing of the presidential status, which came as a consequence of both the president's attitude (he acted as a director of the event, by placing his wife and other members of his staff to his right on the stage and by giving himself the signal to start) and the audience's behaviour (familiar questions addressed to the president "Are you cold, Mr. President?" or unusual requests "Have a paparazzi photo taken with me!");

All of the above point not only to the violation of the official nature of the event, but also to the quasi annulment of the social function that New Year's Day Message is supposed to have. It should normally be a factor of social cohesion, as it binds people together around fully acknowledged values through people's and government's joint effort to accomplish something and to overcome difficulties.

The little concern for his individual image seems to be transparent in the discourse itself, too: no spoken ethos can be traced and the discourse is rather schematic:

- the Romanians are thanked for their implication in the elections;
- the year is assessed as a difficult one in order to highlight Romania's ability to survive tough times: "2009 has been a difficult year, a year when Romania lived the global crisis, which affected us, but did not bring us to our knees".
- the objective set for the new year, taking into account all the natural prerequisites that Romania is endowed with: "We begin a new year, a year that has to be devoted to reforming the state. We have to take advantage of all the strengths that God gave us. We have the conditions for top-performing agriculture and for successful tourism".
- the traditional greeting: "Happy New Year, dear country!"

The year 2010 marks a transition between two opposite types of approach regarding the act of delivering this ceremonial address: if, during the first term, the speeches were expected and even encouraged by a large physical audience, during the second term, the president addresses only

“target constituencies”, namely those “who see the speech on television and/or the media that reports the speech.” (Windt 1986: 105) The president opts for the site provided by the Presidential Administration to convey the traditional (and this time written) message to the people. When asked by the journalists why he no longer spent the New Year outside, in squares with the people, the president justified his attitude by the fact that he had no longer been invited by a city mayor. Moreover, the president added that he refused to deliver the speech from “between the flags”, discrediting this type of frame as it originates from the communist tradition which was taken over by former Romanian presidents whom he again aims at distancing himself from, not only in terms of policies, but also in as far as behavioural patterns are concerned. In the following part, I dwell upon three speeches posted on the site of the Presidential Administration between 2011 and 2014. A comparative approach of the three discourses discloses the fact that the president starts his speeches with *a contextualisation of the speech act and the expression of the wish itself*.

Dear Romanians, we celebrate the New Year together, and on this occasion of joy and hope I wish you health and confidence in the future. (Băsescu, 2011-2012)

Dear Romanians, on the occasion of the New Year, I wish you health, prosperity and joy for you and your loved ones. (Băsescu, 2012-2013)

Dear Romanians, we are welcoming a New Year, an occasion for joy and, at the same time, reflection on the time that went by. (Băsescu, 2013-2014)

- *the assessment of the year that has passed and the appreciation of the collective effort*; this appreciation becomes manifest at the lexical level (by the use of phrases such as ‘national effort’, ‘overcome difficulties’), in terms of deixis (the use of the inclusive pronoun ‘we’), in terms of speech acts (‘I would like to thank you for’):

Now, at the turn of the year, we can be proud that through a vast national effort we have overcome together the difficulties of 2011. (Băsescu, 2011-2012)

It has been a year marked by political challenges, social tensions, economic difficulties. I want to thank you, first of all, for the way you knew how to remain, even during hard times, a community. This proves that our identity rises above the momentary disputes. (Băsescu, 2013-2014)

- *the particularisation of specific categories of population among the whole nation*: Romanians living abroad are mentioned in the context of the

elections won due to their votes, soldiers on duty to defend peace are brought to the fore in the frame of the consolidation of NATO alliances:

May the New Year renew in the hearts of all the Romanians living in the country or in the communities of the diaspora, the joy, the hope and the courage to assume and fulfil the destiny of a nation meant to prosper and succeed through work in everything they have in mind. (Bănescu, 2011-2012)

At the turn of the year, my thoughts, my gratitude go to the Romanians who live and work outside the borders, but also to the soldiers on duty in the theatres of operations. (Bănescu, 2013-2014)

- *the objectives for the new year* are presented as realistic because they stem from people's strengths and positive features:

Romania's most important value is its people, and Romanians need, now more than ever, to know and believe that by their own strength they can create a modern and performing Romania... (Bănescu, 2011-2012)

I have the confidence that, on this strong identity of the Romanians, we will keep on building a national project in which modernization and economic development are priorities that underpin our political actions. [...] I hope that we will welcome the New Year motivated by the goals we are setting and by the strengthening of our country's status within the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance. (Bănescu, 2013-2014)

The main impression is that the discourses are so general and ritualised that, if we take out the nouns Romania and Romanians, they can apply to any other Eastern-European country. There are only two situations which overtly disclose Bănescu's policies and politics:

- his position regarding the neighbouring country, the Republic of Moldova, as he was a fervent supporter for the latter's joining the EU:

I also wish to congratulate the citizens of the Republic of Moldova on the important step they have taken on the path to European integration. Both Romania and Moldova belong to the European space through the language, culture and history that unite us, but also through the values and aspirations we share. (Bănescu, 2013-2014)

- his position regarding NATO (he is famous for creating, in 2005, the Bucharest-London-Washington axis aiming at strengthening the partnership with the aforementioned countries, thus stating his pro-

American stance (<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/ro-foreign-relations-us.htm>):

I hope that we will welcome the New Year motivated by the goals we are setting and by the strengthening of our country's status within the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance. (Băsescu, 2013-2014)

## Conclusions

This paper has taken into account the presidential message as a particular type of ceremonial address and, therefore, inscribed within the framework of the epideictic rhetorical genre. I have firstly identified a general pattern of this message based on several discourses delivered by French and American presidents.

As far as the Romanian president's speeches are concerned, I could notice a big gap between the discourses delivered during the first term and the ones from the second term. In the first term, Traian Băsescu uses the power of rhetoric to provide an individual image of a president stemming from the people and caring for his people; the discursive ethos is enhanced by the extra discursive ethos as the president used to break with what he labelled 'communist heritage' (delivering the speech from an office having flags in the background) and celebrated New Year's Eve with the masses. The speeches of the second term no longer put emphasis on the spoken ethos, being closer to the epideictic discourses which reinforce values and the speaker's, as well as the audience's, commitment to these values. The discourses became more official (posted on the Presidential Administration) and displayed a more general scope.

The change of the communication channel triggered the change of the type of audience, from the physical audience present in the square to the audience informed via the media. The first-hand message turned into second-hand information. The change in location and content occurred mainly when a descending trend was pointed as far as the confidence of the Romanians in the president and presidential office is concerned. Facing a decrease in popularity, Băsescu preferred not to get exposed to uncomfortable moments and fall into a quasi-conventionalism that usually characterises epideictic discourses. From the rhetorical point of view, the discourses in the second term were an adaptation, in both content and situation of communication, to the audience who was gradually losing faith in the president and, at the same time, an act of self-protection: he kept on doing his duty while avoiding any contact (including the televised one) with the audience.

## Note

[1] All the speeches are translated from Romanian into English by the author of this study.

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