

# FAMILIARITY AS A *KITSCH* GENERATING MECHANISM IN PRIVATE AND MEDIA DISCOURSE

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**Abstract:** *The paper investigates the implications of the colloquial language in the production and reception of the kitsch as a language phenomenon, with a special focus on its processability within the language field in which it manifests itself. Two types of communication contexts are subject to our analysis: the telephone/internet communication (where the target is to set a typology of the occasional kitsch as found in students' private messages) and excerpts from journalistic text, namely the entertainment category (where we examine the oratorical kitsch facets present in the article titles of the journalistic text). We have thus highlighted that the re-evaluation of established forms transforms various pre-existing models, through the appeal to familiarity, into brands of mediocrity and vulgarity.*

**Keywords:** *kitsch, colloquial language, repeated discourse, journalistic title, journalistic text.*

## **0. Définition. Critères d'évaluation et attributs du *kitsch***

0.1. The wide spectrum of use and the multiple implications of the term *kitsch* in various fields of knowledge (painting, sculpture, design, music, film, literature, etc.) have highlighted the universal, complex and open character of the term, both from a “perceptual” point of view and “as a spiritual attitude” (Moles, 1980: 211-212), which explains the multiple reconsiderations of its problematic aspects over time.

0.2. The interpretation perspectives of *kitsch* have highlighted the ambiguity of the phenomenon, its dependency on a series of conditions, which broaden or reduce its meanings. Therefore, if for Eminescu, the recognition of value must be generally linked to authenticity and to the effort to produce goods, loans being considered semi-barbarous, for Maté (1985: 40, 54), the criteria for evaluating the phenomenon can be found in the traits of the “kitsch man”: low degree of intellect, poorly defined personality, that acts imitatively. Horia-Roman Patapievi's observations (2001: 16-17) belong to the same sphere of qualifications, as he noted, regarding the fundamental attributes of the “recent man”, that at the basis of his inconsistency lies the inability to live in the present: “no

matter how much time passes over him and no matter how long it polishes him, he still remains rudimentary [...]. The recent man is the man who, wanting to satiate himself of all the phenomena of the world - mastering them, possessing them, changing them at will and permeating himself with all their materiality - found one day that he was nothing more than an epiphenomenon of their flow, spilling and dripping”.

### 1. Le kitsch dans la langue

Regarding the use of the term in the sciences of language, it is especially found in the field of stylistics, usually associated with slang, with the vulgar, familiar language, but also with the attributes of wooden language. As for the semantic potential of the term, it has been described by reference to its lexico-grammatical status and to its combining possibilities and, from this latter point of view, the term can be framed, in Moles' view (1985: 19), according to the contextual meaning, in the lexico-grammatical class of the adjective or of the noun and can be associated with different terms: “the word *kitsch* can function both as a prefix or as a preposition, indicating the modification of a «state»: Greek kitsch, Roman kitsch, Henry II kitsch, Romance kitsch, Gothic kitsch, Rococo kitsch and - why not? – kitsch-kitsch.”

Referring to different types of languages therefore positions us in the field of linguistic stylistics, understood as it had been defined by Iorgu Iordan, as “the study of a linguistic community's means of expressing speech from the point of view of their affective content, namely the expression of facts of sensitivity through language and the effects of language facts on sensitivity” (Iordan, 1975: 23). In the case of the stylistic features that transpire in speech, however, they must be connected primarily with the communicative intention, as pointed out by Eugeniu Coșeriu (1997: 176-177) and by Ion Coteanu (1973: 76), who stated: “no matter the definition of expressiveness we consider, the organization of the message appears as an exclusive activity of its creator, exclusive but not independent, not in itself and for itself, but in itself and for the recipient. Along with the consideration of the recipient, our concern also extends to the effects of the message. The intentions coincide or not, totally or partially, with the effects. The value of expressiveness is given by this fact, which allows us to claim that expressiveness is defined as the difference between emission and reception, between the intentions of the author of messages and their effects on the recipient”.

1.1. As far as the implications of the *familiar* in the production and evaluation of kitsch are concerned, these first require relating to the origin of the term *kitsch*. Specialists who have dealt with the issue of kitsch draw attention to the controversial etymology, with its root in the German word “kitschen”, which referred to a naive style of making some embroideries that used to be found long ago in kitchens, or to the verb *verkitschen*, translated as “altering, selling a degraded product, without noting its defects”. According to Moles (1980: 5-6), *kitschen* is a verb belonging to the familiar register, meaning “to do something superficially”, by extension “to tinker, alter, falsify”, “a surrogate art, surrogate universe, surrogate reality; the essence of kitsch consists in stupefaction”, “doing something superficially”... is a verb from the familiar language, *verkitschen* means “to degrade, to disfigure, to spoil, therefore to sell to someone something else than the thing they asked for: it is about an underlying ethical thinking, a denial of the authentic”.

As it appears from the description of the meanings of the term proposed by the cited authors, most of the enunciated features of the phenomenon are found in the

description of the specific peculiarities of familiar language, as it was described by Charles Bally (1909: 108): banality, low degree of expressiveness, lack of self-censorship, etc. Regarding the parameters of the reception of kitsch in different types of languages, our attention lingers on two types of languages, in which the insertion of the familiar is important, which were framed by Stelian Dumistrăcel (2007: 125), within the “style of public and private communication: that of everyday conversation, with special attention paid to communication via telephone messages, and journalistic language”.

1.1.1. In the case of situational determination of communication by phone or by the internet, we are witnessing a transition from initially affectively unmarked communication, to the presence of a series of verbal elements meant to compensate for the lack of spatial connectivity, which employ components that are specific to non-verbal communication.

After analyzing the examples provided by the students of the Faculty of Letters in Suceava (1st year), we concluded that most of the changes specific to familiar language have as a common principle of action the sacrifice of a pre-existing model in favour of ephemeral, occasional, transitory forms, generally specific of a certain age. They are obtained through lexico-semantic condensation (Suciu, 2009) or lexical truncation (Zafiu, 2001: 246), understood as the reduction of letters, from different positions, according to the model of abbreviations. They result in “the appearance of variants of the original full forms [...] a process that does not occur randomly, but stops at the border between the lexical constituents of the complex term. This means that either the omitted sequence, or the retained one, or both had been recognized, identified in one way or another” (Suciu, p. 45, p. 212): *msj* (<mesaj, our translation, henceforth o.t.: “message”), *cnw* (< cineva, o.t.: “somebody”), *smr* (<Să mor eu!, o.t.: “Take my word for it!”), *tlf* (<telefon, o.t.: “phone”), *at* (<atunci, o.t.: “then”), *cv* (<ceva, o.t.: “something”), *npc* (<Nu ai pentru ce, o.t.: “You are welcome”), *imd* (<imediat, o.t.: “immediately”), *int* (<intenționez, o.t.: “I intend to”), *csf* (<Ce să fac?, o.t.: “What can I do?”), *st* (<stai, o.t.: “wait!”), *nmc* (<nimic, o.t.: “nothing”), *dvr* (<devreme, o.t.: “early”), *lma* (<La mulți ani!, o.t.: “Happy birthday!”), *afr* (<afară, o.t.: “out”), *mgz* (<magazin, o.t.: “shop”), *att* (<atât, o.t.: “this much / enough”), *stp* (<Stai puțin, o.t.: “Wait a minute”), *plc* (<plec, o.t.: “I am leaving”), *bnî* (<bineînțeles, o.t.: “of course”), *sgr* (<sigur, o.t.: “sure”), *aj* (<ajutor, o.t.: “help”), *km* (<cam, o.t.: “about / approximately”), *knd* (<când, o.t.: “when”), *dn* (<din, o.t.: “from”), *crz* (<crezi, o.t.: “you think”), *Que* (<Ce?, o.t.: “What?”), *Yas* (<Da, o.t.: “Yes”), *nush* (<Nu știu, o.t.: “Don’t know”), *nmc* (<nimic, o.t.: “nothing”), *cpl* (<Cu plăcere, o.t.: “My pleasure”), *pwp* (<pup, o.t.: “kiss”), *CF?* (<Ce faci?, o.t.: “How are you?”), *BN* (<Bine, o.t.: “Good”), *CP* (<Cu plăcere, o.t.: “You are welcome”), *VB* (<Vorbesc, o.t.: “I am talking”), *K* (<Bine, o.t.: “OK”), *F* (<Foarte, o.t.: “Very”), *FC* (<Făcut, o.t.: “Done”), *Tz* (<Târziu, o.t.: “Late”), *Tn* (<Tine, o.t.: “You”), *VR* (<Vreau, o.t.: “I want”), *BRB* (<Revin imediat, o.t.: “Be right back”), *Bv* (<Bravo, o.t.: “Bravo”), *DC* (<De ce?, o.t.: “Why?”), *CMZ* (<Ce mai zici?, o.t.: “What else is new?”), *Altcv* (<Altceva, o.t.: “Something else”), *AMR* (<a mai rămas, o.t.: “there is [...] left”), *Nb* (<Noapte bună!, o.t.: “Good night!”), *csf* (<Ce să-i faci?, o.t.: “What can I do?”), *ncsf* (<N-ai ce să-i faci, o.t.: “There’s nothing you can do”), *npc* (<n-ai pentru ce, o.t.: “you are welcome”), *sm* (<Să crești mare!, o.t.: “you are welcome”). Syllable reductions can affect especially the last syllable: *Tre* (<Trebuie, o.t.: “I must”), *Nev* (<Nevoie, o.t.: “Need”), *gogo* (<gogoasă, o.t.: “doughnut”), *miti* (<mititel, o.t.: “very little”), *scumpi* (<scumpică, o.t.: “sweet, nice”), *drăgu* (<Drăguță, o.t.: “Nice”), *sus* (<Suspicios, o.t.:

“Suspicious”), *Mulțu* (<Mulțumesc, o.t.: “Thank you”), and sometimes syllabic reductions are accompanied by the addition of letters: *sall* (<Salut, o.t.: “Hello”).

The meanings contained in the initial form can also be traced in the case of words borrowed from English: *Hlp* (Help), *Bday* (birthday), *F2F* (face to face), *bb* (baby), *WTF* (What the hell?), *pls* (Please), *Thks* (Thanks), *ORLY* (Oh, really?), *BTW* (by the way), *Tyl* (Talk to you later), *gg* (good game), *Idc* (I don’t care), *Hru* (How are you?), *Wbu* (What about you?), *Hi 5* (High five), *Rn* (Right now), *Well* (Well), *NVM* (Nevermind), *NSFW* (Not safe for work), *Bf* (Boyfriend), *thx* (Thanks), *ofc* (Of course), *ILY* (I love you), *LMAO* (laughing my ass off), *LYSM* (Love you so much), *Like U* (Like you), *bcs* (because), *LOL* (Laughing out loud), *OMG* (Oh, my God!), *LMK* (Let me know), *GF* (girlfriend), *Pov* (point of view), *IDK* (I don’t know), *IDC* (I don’t care), *RL* (Real life), *WB* (Welcome back), *Np* (No problem), *BF* (Best Friend), *Atm* (At the moment), *Ngl* (Not gonna lie), *gj* (good job), *Fyi* (For your information), *ss* (screenshot). Very few from French: *MS* (<Merçi, o.t.: “thank you”).

Finally, we also identified a series of reformulations and resemantizations of some terms, which are based on keeping the first part of the word, and which highlight the tendency noted by Sextil Pușcariu, of “amassing the energy of pronunciation at the beginning of the word” (1940: 169): *LUV* (Love), *frumix* (<frumoasă, o.t.: “beautiful”), *prinți* (<prințesa, o.t.: “princess”), *supi* (<supărat, o.t.: “angry”), *Nuji* (<Nu știu, o.t.: “I don’t know”), *dulke* (<dulce, o.t.: “sweet”), but also *xoxo* (kiss), *momos* (<frumos, o.t.: “beautiful”).

1.1.2. Regarding the act of resorting to the familiar enunciation in the current journalistic text and the proximity to the area of kitsch, the particularity in question was first pointed out by Dumitru Irimia, who noted that the “broadening of the stylistic register” (2007: 293) in the journalistic text “means openness not only to the popular element, even in the familiar version, but also to the slang element, to vulgar expression, even to the licentious term”, and “freedom of expression has materialized in the suspension of all taboos, the aesthetic dimension of the linguistic act, also characteristic to current communication, being abandoned in the public performance of the act of linguistic communication” (Irimia, 2007: 291). Similar observations were made by Stelian Dumistrăcel, who, referring to the “hybridization» of mass media and the private discourse in the field of attitude and expression”, will select observations related to “the interference of the familiar in the journalistic language and in the public discourse” (Dumistrăcel, 2007: 244-245), having the effect of “attempts of placement in the atmosphere of the same «expressive competence», an effective (and apparently innocent) means of establishing empathy, but also of manipulation through direct incitement” (Dumistrăcel, 2007, 36).

1.1.2.1. From the perspective of the “attitude” it promotes, the journalistic text is defined as a form of communication in which the journalist tries to shape, through representations, the ideas and mentalities of a society, which reflect traditions, values, norms, etc. The rush for the sensational, however, which characterizes the current media, is frequently achieved through unusual content, which employs an oversimplified, ungrammatical language, a colourful language, in which various situations from the public space are recounted shamelessly, where familiarity often merges with verbal violence. In the pages of newspapers, representative figures are cut out (the bimbo, the demagogue, the lower-class suburban punk, the social climber, the expert), mediocre people with the claim

of a special status in everyday life, who compromise positive aesthetic categories, displaying all the signs of kitsch. We reproduce, below, such an example:

Expertul – *Kitschitoare* (17.09.2021)

Acum să vă văd, ghicitoare: e cineva la Ministerul Educației care face de rahat Educația mai mult decât Anisie? Răspuns corect: Luminița Barcari, secretar de stat pentru învățământ preuniversitar. Luminița Barcari este cea care s-a referit la subiectele date la Evaluarea Națională astfel: „Un copil care învață la școală, fără meditații, ar fi putut să ia 5-6.“

Zilele trecute am văzut-o la o emisiune la Realitatea Plus, se stropșea la un primar pesedist de sector, într-un concurs cu sine însăși de-a strecura cât mai multe țâțisme în confruntare. Pe 14 septembrie însă, ziua în care ministerul stătea cu ouăle prinse în menghină, ziua în care președintele îi mobiliza pe elevi comparându-i cu niște supereroi, unde era doamna Barcari cu hainele ei de blană cu tot? În concediu.

Haosul din acel minister e desăvârșit acum. Femeia și-a luat concediu pentru că vrea să prindă ceva mai mult decât un secretar de stat: a devenit om politic, îi suflă-n fund țărănușii de la partid de pe Ialomița, așa că femeia se vede președintele Consiliului Județean Ialomița.

These anti-categories are fascinating to the kitsch man, who admires actions especially from the perspective of the cause-effect relationship, contenting himself with sweet emotions. The language is often precarious, and verve (sometimes acid) becomes the main means of (self)characterizing certain physiognomies known in the public space or certain characters lacking substance. Without intending to make a balance sheet, we present below some illustrative speech samples, in which the profile of the invoked characters is outlined by their own enunciation and where the option in terms of *kitsch* is justified by the need to belong to a group:

Adrian Minune (C, May 23, 2014): “Had she listened to me, she would have reached far from the point of view of *the silk road of diamonds*.” (*Libertatea*, May 19)

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<sup>1</sup> There is a close phonetic similarity between the word *kitsch* and the first two syllables of the Romanian word for *riddle*: “ghicitoare”. Therefore, the wonderful construction *Kitschitoare* was possible, hinting at a *kitsch* riddle.

Mihai Tristaru (C, April 13, 2018): “At this time I always carry a container with me, which holds *a powder made of hair crumbs*. It’s quite inconvenient and boring to apply that powder every day. So I decided to get a new hair implant so to never have this problem again.” (*Libertatea*, April 7)

Oana Lis (Cațavencii, June 11, 2015): “Last night I went out for a friend’s birthday. Me, who have been around since the days of the discos! But, looking around me, I was amazed!... Had I wanted to choose something, I wouldn’t have been able to! Everyone looked the same! The men, all with beards, as if Ion Creangă had resurrected and decided to hit the clubs.” (*Libertatea*, May 30)

As for the senders of the message, they belong to one of the three categories mentioned by Stelian Dumistrăcel (2007: 251), that of mass media professionals, representing a specific type of press, belonging to the entertainment category, who propose a special way of constructing the communication contract, which relies on exploiting the idiomatic competence. It is analytical skills, communication skills, knowledge of the linguistic norm and talent that determined the professional message sender to propose scenarios in which people and facts are ridiculed, expressively, by means of irony. Among them, we find representatives of kitsch and the list remains open to new... members. The concentration of terms specific to oral language, which provides the message with an intentional familiar and subjective character, granting it an affective dimension as well, is often combined with the expression of an opinion by selecting a lexicon in accordance with the mediocrity of the situation invoked or described.

The tendency to highlight the features of a situation through amplification is, however, frequently anticipated in the journalistic text, be it informative or in which an opinion is expressed, through *headlines*. A preliminary look at these structures highlights the fact that the familiar enunciation in most titles follows the rule of brevity and falls into the “pattern of the narrative title” (Zafiu, 2001: 10), but “the vivid phrase, the complete statement, with a verb that fixes the action in time and space and evokes its individualized agents”, in which the content of the message is synthesized in a statement, no longer agrees with the “predominantly deliberative, argumentative or informative tone of an article” (Zafiu, 2001: 15).

Facets of oratorical kitsch often take the form of repeated speech and reference the gnomic genre, and facile puns, some of them gratuitous, present “double or even multiple meanings [of the message], which stand in a relationship of coexistence, mutual support and not exclusion” (Cătănescu 2006: 212). Resorting to clichéd expressions, having as “a (obstinate) purpose sociability, the connection between sender and receiver, based on a social or other type of feeling, takes on the aspect of «convivial gregariousness», aims at «mutuality»” (Dumistrăcel, 2007: 27) and materializes in innovative forms, word plays, with the role of activating the cultural memory and strengthening the relationship between journalist and reader, but also with the role of triggering a feeling of complicity and mediating the success of the act of communication. As pointed out by Stelian Dumistrăcel (Dumistrăcel, 2007: 30), citing Baudrillard and other specialists, these cause a hypertrophy of the phatic function, also called “chatting” (Hans Magnus Enzensberger) or “babble” (Geshwätz), which “recalls the general spirit of rural cultures”.

Other times, through additions, simple or multiple substitutions of terms, differently positioned, which exploit the resources of synonymy, antonymy, homonymy,

polysemy and paronymy, through parody, the affective impact is maximised and cultural models of reference can even be called into question (for example, when the source is religion). Violation of politeness norms, of taboos, aggressiveness, sarcasm, triviality, reflected in such messages belonging to the familiar register of communication (“with nuances ranging from playful to sarcastic”) (Dumistrăcel, 2007: 123), “follow, at the level of attitude, empathy, seduction or incitement [...] and are marked by the intervention on the linguistic code usually through one of the construction figures representing the «quadripartita ratio»”. The linguistic turns thus obtained cause the receiver to be in a good mood. However, through the multiple restructurings they achieve, they often violate Coșeriu’s principle of the public good.

## 2. Conclusions

The proliferation of *kitsch* products is, as the specialists noted, the result of the alteration of the perception of authentic values, directly related to the level of education of the public and to the social and cultural state, which determined man to orient himself, as observed by Rosenkrantz (1984: 71), “toward everything that is most sensational, most special and most disgusting. Restlessness, imbalance make the spirits turn towards the ugly because it also becomes for them the ideal of their negative stage.”

As for the linguistic universe in which the manifestations of kitsch occur, it marks the re-evaluation of some established forms, which, through the appeal to familiarity, as a strategy for joining the “phatic communion” (Dumistrăcel, 2007: 29), become signs of mediocrity, snobbery and vulgarity, the only condition for the actualization of a significant value is the similar perception of reality, the unanimous recognition of the same (symbolic) code. In the case of the journalistic text, concern for “negotiation” is realized especially in the case of headlines, in the exploitation of the “familiar” register, through clichés, automatism, both in canonical and modified form.

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