

A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROMANIAN CONSTITUTION AS ACT OF COMMUNICATION: WOODEN LANGUAGE AND IDEOLOGY

Daniela CĂTĂU-VEREȘ

danielaveres@yahoo.fr

Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava, Romania

Abstract: *This paper explores the evolution of Romanian constitutional texts from a discourse and communication analysis perspective, focusing on all successive constitutions as reflections of changing political regimes and constructions of national identity. The study conceptualizes the constitution not only as a legal document, but also as a communicative act that mirrors the values, ideologies and power structures of a given historical context. Particular attention is paid to the communist period, in which constitutional language became a vehicle for ideological dissemination. The analysis highlights the prevalence of “wooden language”, characterized by linguistic formulas, ideological clichés and the cultivation of linguistic ambiguity, serving to legitimize the authority of the political regime and to construct a controlled representation of social reality. By contrast, the post-1989 constitutional discourse reflects a shift towards democratic communication, marked by increased transparency, pluralism and alignment with European legal and political standards. Through a comparative approach, the paper demonstrates how constitutional language evolves from an instrument of ideological control to a framework of democratic expression, while continuously contributing to the symbolic construction of Romanian national identity. Human action itself, as evoked in the Constitution, possesses a strong symbolic dimension, with reference to loyalty to the Constitution and the State (oaths of allegiance), the sacralization of the political sphere through symbols (flag, anthem, historical battles), as well as the mythical construction of the political community (nation, working people, Romanian people). The Constitution is thus not only a legal norm, but also a text loaded with symbols and values that shape the collective imaginary of the Romanian people.*

Keywords: *constitutional discourse, national identity, wooden language, communist ideology, political communication.*

Constitutional discourse and national identity in Romania: from ideological language to democratic communication

From a linguistic perspective, the Constitution can be analyzed as a discourse that highlights the functions of the language (Roman Jakobson, Ferdinand de Saussure) it employs. Firstly, the constitutional text has a referential function, describing reality and clearly designating the elements that define it. The Constitution describes and names the legal and political reality: what Romania is, what its fundamental institutions are, what rights citizens have, and what values are protected, as we see, for example, in Article 1 of the 2003 text: “Romania is a national, sovereign and independent, unitary and indivisible state” (<https://www.constitutia.ro/>), where political and state reality is defined.

Furthermore, constitutional discourse, as an act of communication, is performative, in the sense that it creates legal reality. The creative power of the word, of language, is evident in the Constitution, which does not merely “describe” but actually creates legal reality. It is a performative text (in the sense of J. L. Austin): by virtue of its adoption, it brings into existence institutions, rights and obligations. For example, when the Constitution states that “Parliament is the supreme representative body of the Romanian people”, this sentence does not merely describe, but establishes the institution of Parliament as the supreme authority.

The third function of constitutional discourse, from a linguistic perspective, is the conative function, as it calls upon citizens to comply with the rules. In this sense, the Constitution also has an imperative/normative character, as it addresses citizens and authorities directly, requiring them to observe the established rules. Its conative dimension thus stems from the call for compliance and civic responsibility, as in the example: “Respect for the Constitution, its supremacy and the laws is mandatory” (2003, Art. 1, par. 5).

1. Constitutional language and rhetoric during the communist era in Romania

An analysis of the Romanian Constitutions, in their successive versions of 1866, 1923, 1938, 1948, 1952, 1965, 1991, revised in 2003, from the perspective of constitutional language and rhetoric, reveals differences, particularly of an ideological and conceptual nature, between the democratic and authoritarian eras. As I have already stated, the Constitution is a mirror of national identity, but also of the ideology of the regime under which it came into being, thus placing the constitutional text within the sphere of influence of political and legal discourse. The influence of politics on the constitutional text, particularly during the communist era, is confirmed first and foremost by the formal and abstract lexicon, specific to ideology, which echoes the “wooden language” of the Soviet political sphere, particularly in the constitutions of the communist era. Without analyzing in detail here the manifestations of political jargon in Romanian constitutional discourse, a topic that could be explored in a future extension of this research, we shall merely note that this concept of “wooden language” was first extensively developed in relation to political communication by Françoise Thom in her book *La langue de bois* (1987), then by Christian Delporte in his work *Une histoire de la langue de bois* (2011), as well as in academic articles (Fiala, Pinéira, Sériot and Krieg-Planque, Claire Oger, Ruth Amossy, François-Bernard Huyghe), including two issues of the French academic journal *Mots. Les langages du politique* (no. 21, December 1989) and issue no. 58 of the journal *Hermès* from 2010. Also appearing in the constitutional text as elements of political discourse are

generalizing terms, an avalanche of abstract nouns (as long infinitive forms, replacing verbs expressing actions: development, progress, liberation, overthrow, leadership, exploitation, constitution, creation, flourishing, etc.), impersonal reflexives, strategic redundancy, controlled ambiguities or semantic opacity—particularly in ideological phrasing—“frozen” formulas, linguistic stereotypes or euphemistic statements. We shall provide a few examples of such linguistic manifestations in Romanian constitutional texts.

If we consider formal and abstract vocabulary, the constitutions of the socialist and communist era (1948, 1952, 1965) make excessive use of abstract and formalized terms, which comes close to what Françoise Thom calls “wooden language”. For example, in the 1965 Constitution we read: “All power in the Socialist Republic of Romania belongs to the working people of the towns and villages.” We note the generalizing and inclusive phrase “the working people of the towns and villages”, which avoids the concrete naming of specific classes or real individuals. The 1948 Constitution is, in turn, characterized by abstract economic and ideological vocabulary, lacking a concrete subject: “The people’s democracy regime ensures the unrestricted development of the forces of production”, where the phrase “forces of production” euphemistically refers to the people or the workforce. Furthermore, the excessive use of derived nouns and passive constructions renders the constitutional text, particularly from the communist era, rigid and impersonal. The 1952 Constitution stipulates that “the observance of fundamental human rights is ensured”, resorting to an impersonal reflexive verb, followed by the long infinitive with the aspect of an abstract noun “observance” without an agent, which effectively absolves the authorities of responsibility. The same observation applies to the 1965 Constitution: “The harmonious development of socialist society is guaranteed”, where the use of the impersonal reflexive verb lacks accountability.

Furthermore, constitutional texts from the communist era resort to strategic terminological redundancy and ‘frozen’ phrasing through linguistic devices such as the repetition of key concepts (socialism, people, labor, unity) for the purpose of ideological reinforcement. The 1948 Constitution stipulates in Articles 1, 2 and 3 that “The Romanian People’s Republic is a people’s state, unitary, independent and sovereign. The RPR came into being through the struggle waged by the people, led by the working class, against fascism, reaction and imperialism.”, “In the RPR, all state power emanates from the people and belongs to the people.” (<https://www.constitutia.ro/>). The intentional redundancy, nominalization and discursive abstraction for the purposes of ideological promotion also appear in Articles 12 and 15 of the same 1948 version: “The State grants support to all those who work, to protect them against exploitation and to raise their standard of living”, without mentioning any concrete measures, and continuing by asserting, through a series of abstract nouns, that “The State directs and plans the national economy with a view to developing the country’s economic power, ensuring the well-being of the people and guaranteeing national independence”. The nominalization of the State’s actions and the elimination of verbs follow the same logic of eliminating concrete actions, replacing them with abstract nouns, which project the discourse into an idealized world of political promise. In this sense, Eleodor Focseneanu notes that the 1965 constitution showed a tendency towards a more liberal formulation of its provisions, but loaded with pompous, grandiloquent phrases, which are more related to political propaganda than to legislative technique. Through art. 26, a class of privileged citizens is created: members of the Romanian Communist Party were considered “the most advanced and most conscious

citizens of society”, although their selection was not made on the basis of criteria of value, but on the basis of adhesion, “which implies not value, but opportunism” (Focseneanu, 1992: 122-123).

Furthermore, the controlled ambiguities and semantic opacity in communist constitutions are a means of leaving room for flexible interpretations in favor of those in power. Thus, the 1965 Constitution stipulates in Article 3 that “The Romanian Communist Party is the leading political force of the whole of society”, where “leading force” is an opaque metaphor that does not specify concrete mechanisms of control. The 1948 Constitution, in Article 29, states that: “Freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly and of demonstration may not be used for purposes contrary to the socialist order and the interests of the working people,” thus nullifying the guarantee of these freedoms set out in the preceding article, through the ambiguity of the phrase “contrary purposes” and the subsequent reference in the article to “associations of a fascist or anti-democratic nature”.

Stale phrases and linguistic clichés complete the list of features characteristic of the constitutional text from the period of Romania’s authoritarian regimes. We note here the phrase “All power belongs to the people” (recurring in 1948, 1952, 1965), typically ideological and repeated stereotypically, or “At the head of the working people stands the working class” (1952), which is a stereotypical Marxist-style phrase. These are accompanied by euphemistic statements that mask the authoritarian political reality. Thus, in the 1948 Constitution, the phrase “People’s Democracy” appears to describe the dictatorial regime, and in the 1965 Constitution we read that “the right of association is guaranteed”, because through “mass and public organizations, the Romanian Communist Party establishes an organized link with the working class, the peasantry, the intelligentsia and other categories of working people, and mobilizes them in the struggle to complete the construction of socialism’ (Art. 30), thereby indirectly implying a ban on any party other than the RCP and on any initiative that might hinder the actions of the ruling power. Euphemisms also appear in the 1938 Constitution, although the language is more restrained: “The King exercises executive power in the interests of the nation”, which in reality indicates the concentration of absolute authority in the hands of Carol II. Another observation regarding the 1952 Constitution concerns the abundance of stylistic devices, typical of officialese, which transform the text into an ideological discourse with a mythopoetic function. Through collective metaphors, evaluative epithets, hyperbole and antitheses, it sanctifies labor and the working class, glorifies the revolutionary past and creates a founding myth for the new regime, legitimizes totalitarian authority under the guise of the will of the people, transforms the people into a mythical subject of history, nullifies individuality in favor of collectivity and mobilizes emotion through the use of idealizing formulas (<https://www.constitutia.ro/>) (such as: “The building and strengthening of the people’s democratic state, friendship and alliance with the Soviet Union [...] the development and flourishing of the RPR”). We mention here just a few relevant examples from the Introductory Chapter and Chapter I: metonymy and collective personification (“*The working class*, in alliance with *the peasantry*, leads the people’s struggle to build socialism.”), evaluative epithets, enumeration and heroic metaphor (“The Romanian People’s Republic came into being through *the heroic struggle* of the people, led by the working class...”, “The armed forces of the RPR stand guard over the country’s borders, the sovereignty and independence of the Romanian people, their security and peace.”). Other epithets contrast the communist regime with the imperialist enemy: “fascist dictatorship”,

“working people”, “historic victory”, “glorious Red Army”, “exploiting classes”, “working peasantry”, “brotherly aid” (referring to Soviet support), “imperialist domination”, etc.

Comparing these versions with the democratic Constitutions (1866, 1923, 1991, 2003), we find that the latter employ a more sober, legalistic and less ideological language. In the 1923 Constitution, we read that: ‘National sovereignty belongs to the people, who exercise it through their representative bodies and by referendum.’ We note clear, concrete language, devoid of ideological rhetoric. Similarly, in the 1991 Constitution, Article 1 states: “Romania is a national, sovereign and independent, unitary and indivisible state”, characterized by formal yet neutral language, devoid of slogans. However, even in democratic constitutions, rigid formulations appear: “Compliance with the Constitution and the laws is mandatory” (Article 1(5), 2003 revision), the example given being justified by the conative function of constitutional language, which calls for compliance with the rules.

The euphemisms in post-communist constitutions are more subtle than in the socialist era. In an article on the presence of euphemisms in constitutional discourse, Sylvie Monin-Badey explains its role. Euphemism is defined as a figure that “sweetens an unpleasant idea”, “mitigates an idea that is too brutal”, “is the veil of a reality”. It thus reduces the impact of what a speaker says to someone else according to social norms. It always values the “positive face” of the person referred to (Monin-Badey). They do not use obvious “officialese”, but resort to vague terminology and excessive solemnity, whilst concealing possibilities for the restriction of rights or discrepancies between the text and reality. In Article 1(3) (1991, rev. 2003) it is written that “Romania is a democratic and social state governed by the rule of law, in which human dignity, the rights and freedoms of citizens, the free development of the human personality, justice and political pluralism represent supreme values...” The solemn phrasing “state governed by the rule of law” and “supreme values” is somewhat euphemistic and masks the fact that, in reality, these principles have not always been upheld in the functioning of institutions (e.g. corruption, rights violations). In this sense, we can say that the language raises the standard, but does not acknowledge the concrete problems. Furthermore, Article 30(7) (1991, rev. 2003) stipulates that “Defamation of the country and the nation, incitement to national, racial, class or religious hatred... is prohibited by law.” (Monin-Badey) In fact, the term “defamation of the country” is vague and may conceal restrictions on freedom of expression, as it does not state directly that ‘criticism of the state may be punished’, but the wording leaves room for interpretation. Another example is in Article 37(2) (1991): “Parties or organizations which, through their aims or activities, campaign against political pluralism... are unconstitutional.” The expression “campaign against pluralism” is a euphemism, which may lead to the banning of certain inconvenient parties. And in Article 52(1) (rev. 2003), which states that “A person whose rights have been infringed by a public authority is entitled to recognition thereof...”, the euphemism lies in not speaking directly of “abuse of public authority” or “violation of rights by the State”, but rather in formulating it neutrally and objectively: “the person aggrieved...”, masking the conflict between the individual and the state, and evading recognition of the seriousness of the act by referring to a right granted to the victim. It is a play on the logical subject and the grammatical subject of the sentence, where the victim, from being the object of an act of abuse, becomes the subject entitled to redress for the act, presenting a negative reality in a positive light. Thus, authoritarian and socialist Constitutions (1938, 1948, 1952, 1965) make extensive use of abstract vocabulary, impersonal reflexive verbs, terminological

redundancy, stylistic devices and semantic opacity, as features of “wooden language” (Françoise Thom, 1987), whilst democratic Constitutions (1866, 1923, 1991, 2003) employ technical-legal language, using in turn euphemistic and stereotypical phrases and ‘frozen’ expressions intended to ensure the text’s solemnity.

2. The semiotics of the Romanian constitutional text and the symbolic dimensions of human action

A semiotic reading of the Constitution highlights the fact that it is not merely a legal document, but a text saturated with symbols and collective meanings. As Pierre Bouvier emphasizes, among the multitude of signs observed by interpretative anthropology, the ‘symbolic dimension of human actions’ stands out. (Bouvier, 1999: 569-577) This suggests that any fundamental text of a political community, such as a constitutional text, must be understood as a system of signs that shapes human action, giving it meaning and direction. The Romanian Constitution, across its successive historical versions, has consistently functioned as a founding and symbolic text, setting in motion not only norms but also an imaginary of the nation, of traditions and of the collective ethos.

If we refer to constitutional symbols, we can identify in the Romanian Constitutions a recurring evocation of fundamental political values and symbols: the nation and unity (1866, 1923, 1991, 2003: “Romania is a national, sovereign and independent, unitary and indivisible state.” (<https://www.constitutia.ro/>)), as symbols of continuity and national identity; “the working people” (1948, 1952, 1965: “a state of the working people of towns and villages”), as a symbol of socialist legitimacy, a political myth that substitutes “the people” with “the working class”. These formulations function semiotically as ideological condensations that transform a social reality into a collectively accepted “nature”.

In turn, the traditions and history evoked in constitutional discourse function as a strategy for legitimizing the regime. The monarchy (1866, 1923, 1938) was founded on dynastic tradition and the continuity of the “Kingdom of Romania”; socialism (1948–1965) legitimized itself through a *narrative* of the struggle against ideological enemies, fascism and imperialism, constantly evoked in discourse (Art. 2, 1948: “The Romanian People’s Republic came into being through the struggle waged by the people, led by the working class, against fascism, reaction and imperialism”). As for constitutional democracy (1991, 2003), this is rooted in the tradition of fundamental freedoms, the glorious past and the historical aspirations of the Romanian people, as can be seen in the very preamble to the 2003 Constitution (<https://www.constitutia.ro/>): “Art. 1. (3) Romania is a democratic and social state governed by the rule of law, in which human dignity, the rights and freedoms of citizens, the free development of the human personality, justice and political pluralism represent supreme values, in the spirit of the democratic traditions of the Romanian people and the ideals of the Revolution of December 1989, and are guaranteed”. In the same vein, the 1952 Constitution evoked the USSR’s struggle against fascism, a historic enemy that had been defeated. We see how history is transformed into a legitimizing symbol that ensures the identity coherence of the human community.

The same applies to state symbols, such as the flag and the anthem, to which post-communist Constitutions accord a special place as national symbols and signs of identity, enshrining them in a separate chapter. (Stanescu, 2025: 51-60) The flag of Romania is mentioned in Article 12 of the 1991 and 2003 Constitutions: “The flag of Romania is

tricolored; the colors are arranged vertically: blue at the hoist, yellow in the center, red at the fly”. Article 12 of the 2003 Constitution refers to the national anthem: “The national anthem of Romania is ‘Awaken, Romanian!’”. These symbols function as visual and auditory markers of the community, ritualized through public ceremonies (National Day, inaugurations, official oaths).

Human action itself, as evoked in the Constitution, possesses a powerful symbolic dimension. In this sense, the Constitution shapes both modes of collective action and traditional values, such as loyalty to the Constitution and the State (oaths of allegiance), the sanctification of the political sphere through symbols (flag, anthem, historical struggles), as well as the mythical construction of the political community (the nation, the working people, the Romanian people). Thus, the Constitution becomes not merely a legal norm, but also a fully-fledged semiotic text, which establishes values, evokes symbols and shapes the collective imagination.

Conclusion

The constitutional text thus also serves as the founding text of a symbolic order and a discursive product of a social system in transformation. From an anthropological perspective, each Romanian constitution reflects the balance between stable elements, such as unity, sovereignty, the law and the nation-state, and variable elements, such as the monarchy, the working class, democracy and fundamental rights, charting a chronology of the political and axiological transformations of Romanian society. Authority, a central concept, oscillates between the semantic conservatism of the unitary state and the terminological innovations imposed by the context: from the authority of the king to the sovereignty of the people and, temporarily, to the leadership of the working class. Proclaimed values, such as freedom, work, rights, faith and democracy, function as mirrors of national identity and as markers of the collective ethos. The Constitution is also an act of institutional communication: through ritualized and performative formulas (“Romania is a state...”, “I swear to...”), it produces the political reality it defines. (Oger, 2005: 113-128) This research highlights the fact that the constitutional language of the communist period, dominated by collective metaphors (“the working people”), axiological epithets (“the heroic struggle”), and hyperbole (“all power belongs to the people”), transforms the legal text into an ideological, mythical and moralizing discourse, intended to legitimize the new socio-political order. Moreover, on a semiotic level, the Constitution functions as a system of signs that organizes and symbolizes human action, in the sense given by Bouvier (1999: 569-577): the flag, the anthem, the coat of arms and the oath become signs of national identity and cohesion. Thus, the Constitution is not merely a fundamental law, but a founding narrative, a linguistic, political and symbolic construct that expresses, preserves and reconfigures over time the image of the national identity and the values of Romanian society.

Bibliography

- *** (2017), *Lexique des termes juridiques*, Paris, Dalloz.
- BOUVIER, Pierre, (1999), « La définition des disciplines et leurs enjeux », dans *Ethnologie française*, XXIX, nr. 4, pp. 569-577.

- DELPORTE, Christian, (2009), *Une histoire de la Langue de bois*, Paris, Flammarion, coll. « Champs histoire ».
- FOCSENEANU, Eleodor, (1992), *Istoria constituțională a României. 1859-1991*, Bucharest, Humanitas.
- KRIEG-PLANQUE, Alice, « Langue de bois », dans *Publicationnaire. Dictionnaire encyclopédique et critique des publics*, mis en ligne le 12 septembre 2017, disponible en ligne : <http://publicationnaire.huma-num.fr/notice/langue-de-bois/>.
- MONIN-BADEY, Sylvie, « Observations sur la manière de traduire les euphémismes français et anglais de l'expression constitutionnelle 'président de la République française' dans la presse « écrite », disponible en ligne : https://www.ininterm.net/public/langues%20de%20sp%C3%A9cialit%C3%A9/langue%20juridique/Monin_Badey-euph%C3%A9mismes.pdf, accessed on March 27, 2026.
- MURARU, Ioan, & IANCU, Gheorghe, (1995), *Constituțiile României. Texte. Note. Prezentare comparativă*, ediția a III-a, București, Regia Autonomă „Monitorul Oficial”.
- OGER, Claire, (2005), « L'analyse du discours institutionnel entre formations discursives et problématiques socio-anthropologiques », dans *Langage et société*, 2005/4 (nr. 114), pp. 113-128.
- ROVENȚA-FRUMUȘANI, Daniela, (2005), *Analiza discursului. Ipoteze și ipostaze*, Tritonic, București.
- STĂNESCU, Lucian-Sorin, (2025), “National symbols in the constitutions of Romania and the Republic of Moldova. outline for an integrated study of the common constitutional traditions of the two countries”, dans *Survivața tradiției constituționale în țările constituționalismului european*, Ed. Ediția 2, Chișinău, CEP USM, Ediția 2, pp. 51-60, disponible en ligne : https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag_file/51-60_24.pdf, accessed online on April 20, 2026.
- THOM, Françoise, (1987), *La langue de bois*, Paris, Julliard, coll. « Commentaire Julliard », versiunea în limba română, *Limba de lemn*, Humanitas, colecția „Societatea civilă”.

Online sources:

<https://dexonline.ro/definitie/constituție>
<https://www.constitutia.ro/>