Aleksandar Ostojić and Aleksandar Čučković

PHRASEOLOGY "WITHOUT MEANING": POLITICS OF EMPTINESS[1]

ABSTRACT
We have heard many times expressions such as: "empty words", "empty talk", "hot air", but is there really an empty "phraseology", one that does not mean anything, i.e., that does not have a clear referent (the idea it refers to)? Showing the possibilities of such phraseology without meaning, the paper examines its use in politics, focusing on bureaucratic language that shapes our political reality, and can be found in many constitutional documents of the EU, US, or even UN. Namely, we will try to show that between general and particular meaning, there is a huge gap, an *emptiness*, which is used by a certain type of speech, in order to absorb every other language and its performative powers. Our criticism will move in two directions: the first has the task of showing the meaning(less) character of political bureaucratic phraseology as such, and its passivizing or non-affirmative effects. The other one comes down to examining the ideological background of Eurocentrism, detecting the hegemonic character of the idea of Europe (and Western civilizations) embedded in its political language. Starting from Ernesto Laclau's understanding of the "empty signifier" and the necessary function it has in the foundation of the system (especially a hegemonic one), through the history of the discourse of the idea of Europe, we will show the possibility and use of "emptiness" in meaning, especially when it comes to core values that are set for the foundation of one's politics.

Aleksandar Ostojić: Assistant, University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Economics; aleksandar.ostojic@ef.uns.ac.rs.
Aleksandar Čučković: Full Professor, University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Economics; aleksandar.cuckovic@ef.uns.ac.rs.

Introduction

Some of the many definitions of phraseology tell us that it is a branch of linguistics that observes the tendency of frequent repetition of words and their combinations in different contexts or ways of speaking and examines the meanings of these repetitions. Phraseology can also be defined as the study of "the structure, meaning and use of combinations of words (that form *phrases*)" (Cowie 1994). But, beyond the neutral linguistic determinant as the science of phrases, there is also a value-laden meaning of "phraseology" that testifies to the *absence* of meaning. The synonyms given for the use of the verb "phrase" in the Serbian language are, in addition to "verbalize", also "talk in vain (isprazno govoriti), empty talk (praznosloviti)", Talking bullshit (proseravati se)" (Ćosić 2008: 652). Such speaking is possible (and present) in all fields, whatever is the subject of speech, but the language of politics seems to be its trademark.

In his works *Emancipation(s)* and *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau introduced and elaborated the concept of the "empty signifier" in order to analyze its use in politics, that is, in political discourse. In question is no longer the possibility of a signifier missing the signified, or the impossibility of the term to fully express the object it refers to, nor of the subordination of the meaning to the structure rather than to the individual word, which the pioneers of structuralism, Lévi-Strauss or Saussure talked about. This is about a specific gesture of speech, a discourse within which the meaning is blurred, in which the phrases used do not refer to anything concrete, but at the same time, due to their "flexibility", they can include a large number of differences, which are thus totalized within the existing system (Laclau 1996: 69).

There are, therefore, those who use empty words because they cannot do better, but also those who use it willfully, to achieve their goal through the effect the words have on those they address. The second type of "phraseology" is the subject of this paper. In order to show this specific type of political phraseology we will refer to many diverse, and different political projects, text, and ideas, showing that, is spite of undeniable differences between them, they share same common characteristic of empty political phraseology.

1. From Lingual to Political

The rise of structuralism, which significantly changed the approach to social sciences by posing the question of language as the most important one, not only subordinated the meanings of individual expressions to the system as a whole, i.e., the structure. Thanks to Saussure's distinction between the signifier and the signified (Saussure 2011), structuralism abstracted language from the content that was provided by empiricism or, to put it more simply, from reality. Understood in this way, language becomes *a system* in itself, and at the same time the exclusive way of *representing* reality. The structuralist linguistic paradigm highlighted the already observed problem, that words always miss something about the things they refer to, leaving a certain amount of "conceptual

surplus" unexpressed (Adorno 1979: 26). On the other hand, since language is now understood to function as a system for itself, it is seen as capable not only of expressing but also of "producing" external circumstances.

Bakhtin and Voloshinov[2] were among the first to connect contemporary considerations of language with social and political circumstances, emphasizing the social role of language expressions. The usual relationship between language and social reality becomes reversed: all the effects that the sign causes (reactions, actions, new signs...) take place within the external experience. This means that the sign is no longer just a reflection, but also a part of material reality (Volosinov 1996: 11), as a result of which, the study of ideology becomes primarily a consideration of language: "the field of ideology coincides with the field of signs", and the word becomes "an ideological phenomenon par *excellence*" (ibid. 12). Here, however, we are only interested in a small part of the relationship between language and ideology, the one that brings us back to the central question of this paper: how is language that uses empty signifiers possible, and how it is used, or how could it be used for the purpose of promoting political ideology?

The language of politics, in order to be of use to any form of political activity, needs to be performative. Admittedly, if we follow the views of Bakhtin or the French structuralists and poststructuralists, language is always active, because even declarative sentences influence the formation of consciousness, or statements about "what I think I am", "how I understand the world" and "how I decide to act based on that". Moreover, the question about the active nature of language can only be the question of the scale or intensity of that action. In analytical philosophy and the philosophy of language, the term "performativity" denotes immediate activity, that is, a speech act (such as, "I promise to... I declare this fair open [...]. I name this square Saint Stephen's Square"). John Austin is credited with the invention of language performativity. For us, the more interesting and certainly the more controversial part of Austin's contribution refers to the division of types of speech acts into locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. Locutionary refers to everything that is said, illocutionary to the intensity of intention contained within the locutionary speech act, and perlocutionary to the resulting effect (Austin 1962: 83–146).

It is plausible to assume that political speech produces illocutionary and perlocutionary acts: it relies on persuasion and aims to persuade. Performative speech acts, since they primarily denote an action, are not subject to the true/false distinction. A promise is an act, and the signifier "promise" certainly wants to convey a common understanding of the promise to those aimed at, regardless of whether or not the speaker planned to fulfill the promise. Even when it comes to constative, or referential sentences that precede persuasion,

---

2   Till today it is unknown who wrote the book *Marxism and The Philosophy of Language*, who was originally ascribed to Voloshinov. (For the whole story, and the reason why some publications name Voloshinov as author, while others sign Bakhtin see "Translator preface" in Voloshinov N. V. (1996), *Marxism and The Philosophy of Language*, Harvard University Press. p. vii)

such as: "we must not vote for person A, because he is a thief!" or "Privatization of state-owned enterprises produces the best economic results in the long run, so I urge that we support it". Even if those sentences are false, the words used in them still represent clear images, ideas, as is the case with the word "thief" or "privatization". This is because even in constative form, words have performative power.

But what if there are no such clear images, even less "excess of meaning" – but the words are there, (because somebody speaks). In other words, what is the structure of a well-known sentence that has itself become a phrase: "talks a lot, but says little"? Let us start with the simplest examples of the use of empty, vain, and depraved language for the purpose of affirming "social cohesion".

Inside his famous *six functions of language* Roman Jakobson includes *phatic* function, which he takes over from Malinowski: phatic function "profuse exchange of ritualized formulas, by entire dialogues with the mere purpose of prolonging communication" (Jakobson 1960: 355). Therefore, it is about communication that does not aim at any information transfer, but exclusively at establishing or maintaining social contact, as is the case with phrases such as: "How are you? Fine, how are you?", "Well, here we are, aren't we?", etc. The meaning of the phrase is to attract the listener's attention, not to communicate specific information. Meeting someone accidentally in the street and asking them how they are, does not imply a genuine interest in someone's well-being. We could even say that if someone starts to reply in full length it would be considered rude.

Of course, *the phatic* function of language can occur even outside of the context specified by Jakobson, it can be meaningfully used with other and different intentions. In his text *Politics and the English language*, George Orwell states the English language is "decadent", bad, as he makes an analysis of this "bad language", highlighting several features through which the "quality" of language can be seen, among which are: "*Dying metaphors, operators or verbal false limbs, pretentious diction, meaningless words*" (Orwell: 1946: 3–6). Let us focus on the last two. While foreign expressions can be used to "dress up" simple statements, or to dignify the sordid process of international politics, glorify war or be used to give an air of certain level of culture and elegance, Orwell's analysis of meaningless words reveal many more problems[3]. Meaningless words are general terms that are used with the intention of not referring to any specific or discoverable object, and readers rarely expect them to do so, or even notice it. Such (mis)use of language, Orwell points out, in addition to literary criticism (and to, we freely add, scientific productions, such as this one), is most common in politics, where words like fascism, democracy, socialism, solidarity, freedom, justice, totalitarianism, equality, progressiveness, progress are used rather to denote something "desirable" or "undesirable" while the concrete meaning of the term remains vague or completely absent. Although it is possible that the speaker, from the belief that the certain values and attitudes

---

3   Even more typical example is a British form "How do you do?".

are affirmative and desirable, and from the desire to present them as such, uses these terms without even being able to explain them, "these words are more often misused, i.e., used in a dishonest way. "The person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different" (Orwell 1946: 6). The fact that the concepts of, say, solidarity or freedom do not refer to any concrete form of their manifestation, enables them to be accepted by the majority who can understand them in different ways, without losing their affirmative character.[4] For such and similar expressions in recent times, the phrase "essentially disputed concepts" has been established (Gallie: 2017). Those terms are signs for something, therefore signifiers, but they are so undetermined – or determinable in countless ways – that they could be called "empty". That "void" or "emptiness", however, can then be taken over and filled, by a certain political lexicon, in order to support, promote and disseminate the beliefs it favors or challenge and denigrate those it does not ("enemies of freedom"). That operation is mediated by the very connection between language and ideology that Volosinov spoke about.

2. "Empty Signifier" as a Constitutive Element of the System

The above-mentioned characteristics of language and their use for political purposes are easy to connect with populism, and even earlier in history, with rhetoric. Even Plato in *Gorgias* pointed out that rhetoric is a vein art in which everything is subordinated to the way in which something is spoken about, without knowledge of what is being spoken about (Plato 1979).

Ernesto Laclau will show that "empty signifiers" – words whose referent remains undetectable, are far more than tools of manipulation in the hands of a skilled rhetorician. Namely, considering the nature of populism and the phenomenon *of the empty signifier*, Laclau starts from two statements that, according to his belief, represent a pejorative understanding of populism: "1) that populism is vague and indeterminate in the audience to which it addresses itself, in its discourse, and its political postulates; and 2) that populism is mere rhetoric", which would mean that mentioned vagueness is rhetorically used for promotion of political program, values, ideas – that does not necessarily includes ideology (Laclau 2005: 67).

These claims are actually formulated based on Kenneth Minogue's text, *Populism as a Political Movement*. Minogue, in the manner of political elitism, whose paradigmatic example he represents, establishes a normative gradation of ideology and rhetoric, where ideology represents the deeper basis of the (political) movement itself, while rhetoric is only the surface articulation of demands according to current needs of the movement. On the basis of this distinction, Minogue traces the path for accepting the position that, unlike

---

4   In his landmark 1958 essay "Two Concepts of Liberty", Isaiah Berlin notes that "his protean word (has) more than two hundred senses of it recorded by historians of ideas" (Berlin 2002: 168).

established European ideologies, populism as a movement that belongs primarily to those from "the poor periphery of an industrial system" (Minogue 1969: 208) precisely lacks ideology, in order to prevent values to dissolve in vagueness and reduce to mere rhetoric (cf. Laclau 2005: 10–11).

Laclau deconstructs this distinction, as well as the mentioned two assumptions, through their reversal. He contrasts them with fundamentally different ideas that place "vagueness" and "rhetoric" in the very ontological coupling of language and in the act of constructing social reality: "(1) that vagueness and indeterminacy are not shortcomings of a discourse about social reality, but, in some circumstances, inscribed in social reality as such; (2) that rhetoric is not epiphenomenal vis-a-vis a self-contained conceptual structure, for no conceptual structure finds its internal cohesion without appealing to rhetorical devices" (2005: 67).

Laclau relies on the structuralist approach of the Prague and Copenhagen schools, which elaborate Saussure's claim that there are no positive determinations in language, but only *differences*. This is because objects, i.e., meanings, do not exist before *relations*, but are constituted through *relations*, and the constitution of meaning is possible only through *a difference* to something *else*. However, Laclau does not continue through the logic of identity, but resorts to Deleuze's approach, asking about the origin of *difference itself* (Deleuze 1994). Transferred directly into the socio-political space, the problem is the following: each system must include within itself different elements, elements that would not exist without the existence of the difference itself, which precisely make *signification* possible. The system is itself *a signifier*, because it must be able to include different elements, to totalize them within itself, by unifying them, and canceling them at a same time on a universal level, without being reduced to one of them. However, such a gesture is insufficient to determine *a whole* that includes different identities – the conceptual capture of the totality requires the capture of its *borders* – and this means talking about the very limits of signification. (Laclau 1996: 36–37). In order to establish this limit, the totality must determine something that is *outside*, that does not belong, that is *other* in relation to itself. That other is nothing but another difference, but this time *a different* difference, one that cannot be integrated. However, notes Laclau, *a different difference* is not just something that happens to be outside the system that establishes itself by encompassing differences – its impossibility of integration must be produced by the system itself precisely for the sake of its (self)establishment as such.

> the only possibility of having a true outside would be that the outside is not simply one more, neutral element but an excluded one, something that the totality expels from itself in order to constitute itself (to give a political example: it is through the demonization of a section of the population that a society reaches a sense of its own cohesion). (Laclau 2005: 70)

The aversion to the *different* that is banished provides the much-needed equivalence, because now the different elements within the system are unified

by the act of mutual rejection of the given difference. In this way, totality finds within itself the tension between difference and identity, the tension on which it rests. That makes this tension insoluble, and therefore conceptually incomprehensible – and that is why we are dealing with an empty signifier (which, what is particularly interesting, is the condition for the existence of a system, since without it there is no identity).

One should ask, if Laclau is right that the "empty signifier", as a constitutive element of the system, is necessary for its existence, so the indeterminacy it brings with it is an inevitable integral part of social reality, then what about claims of political "wrong" use of language?

We can look for the answer in the act of representation – because the political articulation of an "empty signifier" is nothing else than the act of shaping social reality through representation – through which the indeterminacy contained in the concept is "smuggled". Thus, suddenly, an individual difference begins to represent the whole totality, which politically aspires to be absolute certainty (and thus have an unquestionable self-legitimacy). However, it is precisely the absence of complete determination that makes the legitimation of the political system unfounded. Laclau calls this process *hegemonic*, since such a universal object, which is imposed on everything particular, (both on ontological and linguistic level) is impossible. Instead of leading to legitimization (as it is presented) the use of an empty signifier for that purpose leads to the (illegitimate) establishment of hegemony. Hegemonic identity becomes something of the order of an empty signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness (Laclau 2005: 71). The most far-reaching practical consequence of such behavior is reflected in the character of the alleged self-legitimacy, which establishes a hegemonic position precisely on the deception.

To show how this model works in experience, we will turn to the example of political promotion of the idea of a Europe and acceptance of European values.

3. Political Catachresis: On the Other Side of Europe

The discourse of the universal system, of hegemony, which seeks to totalize, subjugate particularities to itself or banish them as an undesirable otherness against which it will re-form or strengthen its identity, is, as a rule, conquistador and is deeply connected to the origin of the idea of Europe. Although after the Second World War, for many intellectuals, the idea of Europe as "spiritual" or "philosophical Europe" – bearer of the universal of which Husserl already spoke as dead, Europe still aspires to remain the original bearer of the "universal". As noted by Jean-Marc Ferry: "marked by the seal of instrumental reason, disenchantment of the world and possessive individualism [...] from the outset, in a sense, the malaise of modernity is European" (Ferry 2015: 152). For Hannah Arendt, the establishment of a system or a universal idea that is imposed *on another* is nothing more than a manifestation of power, and the 'dematerialized mechanism' of reflexive power accumulation is a *structural* or *systemic* mechanism (Arendt 1991: 646). It is one of the sources of totalitarianism, which

was invented for the first time in history within the imperial rule of Europe over the rest of the world.

The beginnings of the structural power of Europe, which, pretending to be universal, simultaneously included and excluded others from that "universality", can justifiably be placed, at least when it comes to the legal history of Europe, in June 7, 1494, when the *Treaty of Tordesillas*, between Sapin and Portugal was signed. Armistices will very soon divide world into one that enjoys the general values and rights of the *Ius Publicum Europaeum*, and the other, which is excluded from that system of values, and which will become not only the potential private property of European Princes, but also of European, and later of the American *constitutional and democratic* regime (Burkhorst 2012: 218). From 1494 until 1945, this division had been grounded in international law. "General" and "inalienable" values were established during that time, precisely on the basis of otherness that the hegemony of global imperialism produced. This produced otherness was then expelled so that hegemony could, through binary opposition, constitute itself. In the center of this hegemony was the idea of Eurocentrism, in which concepts of culture, art and reason were form, that is, they derived their meaning exclusively from the idea of Eurocentrism. During that time, Europe produced significantly more advocates ("sorry comforters") than the critics of this, without doubt, ideology. Thus, Derrida, starting from Kant's understanding of European Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, rightly points to the specificity of its universality (Derrida 1994). At the same time, there is no doubt that Kant's idea of an international organization which, mediated by culture, art and reason should ensure peace and sociability between states (Kant 1784), represented an early preamble for the existence of a world organization such as the UN.

If we return to Orwell and Laclau, we will notice that the pretension to meaning within these terms is the fruit of rhetorical displacement. In classical rhetoric, when we have a figural term which cannot be substituted by a literal one, we call this figure *catachresis*. How does the official preamble of the UN Charter begin? "We, the people of the United Nations [...]" Such a beginning is in a complete consistency with the US Constitution, which begins: "We, the people of the United States [...]" In both cases, the paper speaks – the values establish themselves through the text. What we have is prosopopoeia, but in this case, prosopopoeia is simultaneously catachresis and synecdoche: the inanimate receives the voice of the living, and the particular, a part, emerges and presents itself as a whole (Milić 2020: 244). This is not a coincidence, because the structure of representation is identical to the one on which the idea of Europe rests, as well as every hegemonic system. How come that one (other) place is constitutive (or at least presents itself as such) for our identity (and who are we?) A difference presents itself as something else, as a whole, in order to establish itself as a foundation – this is the initial act of signification which in all the above cases implies the use of "empty signifiers". "If the empty signifier arises from the need to name an object which is both impossible and necessary, from that zero point of signification which is nevertheless

the precondition for any signifying process, the hegemonic operation will be catachrestical through and through" (Laclau 2005: 72). The political construction of the "people" is always essentially synecdochic and catachrestical. This is also the case with the notions of reason, culture and art. However, this does not necessarily imply that construction process is hegemonic, because the hegemonic system must include synecdoche and catachresis, but the use of these figures does not need to imply a hegemonic signifying process. But in the given case discourse is hegemonic for at least two reasons. First, because outside of these rights and values, even outside of the notorious "people" or "peoples", there are Indians, Native Indians, slaves, Africans, but also Americans and Europeans, who continue to be absent, even today, along with all of those who go "the other heading" (Derrida 1992). Second, the main problem of phraseology in the service of a hegemonic signifier chain is the iterability that such a chain requires. Referring to Benjamin, Derrida draws that this founding violence "is constantly represented in a conservative violence that always repeats the tradition of its origin and that ultimately keeps nothing, but a foundation destined from the start to be repeated, conserved, reinstituted" (Derrida 1992b: 55)

The question is to what extent western culture including the idea of Europe, managed to escape from the identity on which they ware founded and from the system of language and politics through which they ware founded. Phraseology that aspires to universality must contain a great *emptiness* within itself, a void that we can understand as a split between the individual and the whole, which that individuality tries to cover up. That emptiness absorbs both the meanings and the potential performativity that language carries with it, but it also represents a useful tool for assimilating the Other. When Orwell says that words like democracy, solidarity, equality, totalitarianism, etc. are meaningless, because the speaker has private definition, which is not expressed by the concept, and the concept itself, again, does not refer to anything concrete, but carries all the meanings that the listeners believe belong to it – Orwell is referring to the *emptiness* we are talking about, the void between particular and general, in which, as if in an abyss, all those active powers of language that are not in accordance with the dominant system, are lost. We might object Orwell, that this is also case with every abstraction we can think of – love, happiness, even abyss. But the problem appears when this emptiness is used in manipulative way, for political purposes.

The most important document of the French Revolution, the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen", adopted by the Constituent (France's National) Assembly on August 26, 1789, proved to be a true reservoir of contradictions of the universally human and the specifically-national. "As the supreme authority, addressor (and the meta-normative), man should have signed the Preamble of the Declaration. Such is not the case: "The representatives of the French people, organized in the National Assembly, [...] have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable and sacred rights of man [...]". The signatory, the *z* who declares the norm that is to be imposed on the norms, is a community representative of a community, an assembly

representing a people, who is named by a proper name: the French" (Lyotard 1988: 145). The sender of the Declaration is divided into French and a human being, and in the absence of a "man" as a signatory, guarantor is invoked in the form of the Supreme Being, who rivals the national authority: "The National Assembly recognizes and declares in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being [...]". This Being of reason has no reason to authorize a particular nation. By soliciting its presence and by imploring its recommendation, the Assembly authorizes itself not only as French, but also as human" (Lyotard 1988: 146).

> The members of the Constituent Assembly would have been prey to a "transcendental appearance and even perhaps to *dementia.*" concludes Lyotard mercilessly. "They hallucinated humanity within the nation [...]. The nation, as much as it is a community, owes the essence of its consistency and authority to the traditions of names and narratives. These traditions are exclusivist. They imply borders and border conflicts. The legitimacy of a nation owes nothing to the idea of humanity and everything to the perpetuation of narratives of origin by means of repeated narrations. Rightists never cease to make the most of this. Leftists give credence to a counter-narrative, a history of the whole of humanity. the narrative of its emancipation, cosmopolitan, of international import... There is no Supreme Being to reconcile these two authorizations. (Lyotard 1988: 147).

Because even the introduction of a Supreme Being in the Declaration did not settle the insurmountable dispute about sovereignty and authority, but only camouflaged it. Due to the impossible transition from the philosophical to the historical-political universe inside the law of one political revolution which contains both, in the end it remains unknown "whether the law thereby declared is French or human, whether the war conducted in the name of rights is one of conquest or one of liberation, whether the violence exerted under the title of freedom is repressive or pedagogical (progressive), whether those nations which are not French ought to become French or become human [...]" (Lyotard 1988: 147).

What is the language of the new Europe, guided by the slogan "united in diversity" and can the slogan offer something different, that is, can the slogan be more than a phrase?

4. Use with(out) Meaning

Already in the second paragraph of "Consolidated version of the treaty on European Union" we found that the drawing inspiration of EU contract is "cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the *universal values* of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law"[5] (italics added). Just one

---

5   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2-f140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF Accessed on 04. 05. 2023.

page lower, in the *Article 2* of *Common provisions*, these "founding" universal values named above, (which also include human dignity) are complemented with values "common to the Member States societies": solidarity, pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice.

On the next 33 pages of treaty of EU, and the following 344 pages of "Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union",[6] the word tolerance is to be found exactly zero times, pluralism is mentioned once, while democracy and equality are a bit more present as they can be found 9 times each, mainly when the provisions of the Union's external actions are defined. In most of these appearances, those notions are only mentioned, and it is impossible to relate them to some "clear image" or "discoverable object" that they pretend to promote. Among the listed values, the concept that can most obviously refer to the problem we are presenting is the concept of solidarity. Namely, solidarity can be found as many as twenty-four times in these two texts, however, the only time when a clear idea of what solidarity should be, is in chapter 222, on the "solidarity clause". The very use of the term "clause" leaves enough space for interpretational ambiguity, but to leave that aside, it is said that "The Union and its Member States shall act jointly in a spirit of solidarity if a Member State is the object of a (a) terrorist attack or the victim of a (b) natural or man-made disaster", and in both (a) and (b), it is more or less exactly defined what the act of solidarity should be compound of. Contrary to that, in the other twenty-three places, there is no indication of what exactly solidarity means, nor what kind of act it refers to in practice. This sounds even more problematic when we know that solidarity is given a main place in the canon of values of the European Union and it goes back to the early days of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC, 1951), accompanying the integration process ever since. As Sangiovanni reminds us, the preamble of the Treaty establishing the ECSC has already affirmed that "Europe can be built only through real practical achievements which will first of all create real solidarity" (Sangiovanni 2013: 1–2).

The concept of solidarity, taken here as an example, shows the general functioning of global political practice. Andreas Grimmel excellently pointed out the weakness and vagueness of the EU's value concepts (primarily the concept of solidarity), and the absence of any *common sense* when it comes to "what it actually means to act in a way that reflects solidarity in practice of the EU", which is especially manifested during the migrant and economic crisis of the Eurozone (Grimmel 2017: 162). Although Grimmel also claims that it is about the use of "empty signifiers", he distances himself from Laclau's interpretation of the *cancellation of differences*, and focuses on Wittgenstein's idea, that the meaning does not exist on its own (there is no natural relation of words and objects), but only within practice that would define applying of certain concept – that is only through mutual consent for the term use. (Wittgenstein

---

6   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:12012E/TXT:en:PDF Accessed on 04.05.2023.

1953: 34, 233–234.) The less defined the joint action that would be implied by the use of the term, the smaller the space for numerous embeddings of meaning, which brings us back to the possibility of a discourse that absorbs meanings into itself, without bearing any responsibility to them.

The problem we see here is that such language is active in a way that passivizes the active power of concepts and the interpretation of those concepts. We said, referring to Volosinov, that it is an ideological phenomenon because meanings are manifested – have visible consequences in outside world, so ideology is not so much in our heads, as it is around us and between us. As Pêcheux notes, "ideological power" is not derived exclusively from the meaning, but from the subjects' "adhesion" to it. In this sense, the incorporation of different "accents" of meanings into the "ideological content" is not bad in itself, the problem is that they are abolished in a bureaucratically based *emptiness* – "the spirit of the law evaporates before the logorrhea of its letter" (Pêcheux 1975: 111). We must acknowledge that this is not same as populistic emptiness that Laclau spoke of. But this manipulative character of bureaucratic emptiness can be related to a certain type of ideology. Still, If term ideology most often means a set of beliefs oriented towards action, then this type of "Euro-phraseology" could not be called by that name. However, did not Marx in *German Ideology* precisely criticize its impracticality and distance from the real world and its social problems (Marx, Engels 1975: 37–55)? Doesn't a "passive ideology", or better: an ideology of inactivity, contribute to the preservation of the existing state? If, however, we insist that conservation should not be equated with activism, let us wonder for example, what environmentalists would say. For Eagleton, the main task of studying ideological discourse means "the study of the way in which meaning is put to the service of maintaining relations of dominance" (Eagleton 1991: 5). Truth be told, Marx's concept of ideology concerns above all the "false consciousness" of idealism, so Marx also attacks philosophy because it does not ask enough about her own conditions.

On the one hand, there is the ingenuity of the idea, and on the other, the ingenuity of the language. Therefore, to suspect phraseology as a mere hidden ideology would be an unjustified simplification of the problem, since it is a huge domain of discourse that is scattered in time and space.[7] The ideological

---

7   So much more, because the problem of phraseology is not only the ideological assimilation of the Other, but the absurdity and futility of it even when it comes to the manifestation of so-called effects: on the website of the Ministry of European Integration of the Republic of Serbia section: "Guide through negotiations of Serbia and EU", "Introduction", "What have we learned?" we can read the following: "In negotiations, it is recommended to respect the dress code, pay attention to body language and diction, use formal language and established forms of communication with the EU, pay special attention to the opening address". Not only that these are only a mere rhetoric advice without any real content, but there are followed with a sub-section "useful phrases" where we find: "accordingly, as a result, consequently, alternatively, in view of, hence, however , due to, on account of, for this reason, balanced against, for the same reason, as I have noted, on the other hand [...]" https://www.mei.gov.rs/srl/obuka/e-obuke /

character of phraseology should not come down to be just a "phrase", as if there was no certain common denominator of numerous manifestations. To the extent, the sin of the European political-bureaucratic discourse is not that it is ideological or that it is widely accepted in such way, but that it is *empty*, which means: default, arbitrary, unthought-out and therefore – violent. These seemingly difficult words require additional caution, which is maintained if we focus on the adjective "bureaucratic". Truly, there are few projects that are theorized as much as the EU, which was so critically thought through, and in which careful and cautious investments were made. However, the political-bureaucratic phrasing of the language managed to keep little from the critical edge of "Europe to come" or the Other Europe, which has always been there, as an exterior to itself.

Conclusion

Our critique of the political phraseology and its empty bureaucratic language was focused on two aspects. First came down to examining the ideological background of Europe and detecting the hegemonic character of the idea of Eurocentrism embedded in its political language. The second task was aimed at unveiling meaning(less) character of political phraseology as such, and its passivizing or non-affirmative effects. Starting from Laclau and his understanding of the "empty signifier" and the necessary function it has in the foundation of the system, especially the hegemonic one, visible in the history of the discourse of the idea of Europe, all the way to the "emptiness" in the meaning of the values that are set for foundation, and which can be seen not only in the official documents of the EU, but also in those that have fundamentally contributed to the formation of European politics.

Regardless of Grimmel's position, that it is about two different ideas of the "empty signifier", the one of Laclau's and the other that he relates to Wittgentsain, their combination allows one to see the way of changing the political phraseology of Europe. We have said that every hegemonic system requires the use of catachresis and synecdoche that follow the establishment of the individual for the general through the "empty signifier". But not every use of these figures is hegemonic: it can appear as an articulation of the "demands" of the people, those who are oppressed and who neglect their differences by uniting around a value they recognize as lacking in the existing social system. Such articulation of requirements in relation to those of the system, certainly has its advantages, because regardless of different interpretations and "accentuations" of meaning, it opens up instrumental use of notions that enables action, and do

---

guide-through-negotiations-of-serbia-and-evropske-unije/introduction/ More then a half of these expressions can also be found in Orwell text *Politics and English language*, as a form of bad language, named "operators or verbal false limbs". Their use is to "save the trouble of picking out appropriate verbs and nouns, and at the same time pad each sentence with extra syllables which give it an appearance of symmetry" (Orwell 1946: 4).

not neglect necessary answers (Grimmel 2017). It is true that such a conclusion would follow one of the intentions of this paper, that by criticizing the operational policy of the European Union with regard to its goal of integration, it would open a "new space" for thinking about language and its effectiveness. But such a conclusion seems insufficient and even wrong. There is no doubt that philosophical criticism must apply to every policy[8], especially one that ascribes to itself the right of universal prescription and therefore chronically suffers from an autoimmune tendency to turn into enlightened violence, legitimized by its own philosophical inconsistency (Derrida 1994)[9]. But the answer is not only in the upheaval, i.e., in the saving potential of the active power of the oppressed – the answer that would be on the same line with promotion of Arendt's notion of *communicative power* of the people, as developed in *Human Condition* (Arendt 1958). This is because such "active" language is also subject to the creation of phraseological gaps, the moment it is put to unambiguous political use with the intention of gathering "like-minded people". To such an extent, that even the phrase "truly critical thinking" or "critical philosophy" becomes a phrase, especially at that moment when it unquestionably sets itself that way, that is, when it becomes unthought, or uncritical to itself.

Perhaps we can say that all political speech is doomed to phraseology, and therefore must be accompanied by constant philosophical criticism – a task that would set stage to potential future lists, inventions, or studies of all the ways of "empty speech" and its goals.

As for the idea of Europe and the language this idea uses, the conclusion is somewhat easier (because it is repeated by many). The Europe to come, the one that is "wanted" must realize that it is the same Europe that has always been there, as its own constitutive exterior, constitutive other, but also, it must make the language of its politics stop assimilating this produced "exterior" – sucking it into a void where all differences disappear.

References

"Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union", https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

"Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union", https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:12012E/TXT:en:PDF

Arendt, Hannah (1958), *The Human Condition* (ed. 1998), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

---

8   It sounds easier than it really is: it is not uncommon for philosophers themselves, in the name of techno-economic-military positivism, to try to reduce the area of philosophical research using different methods (isn't that exactly the framework of this scientific-research project?).

9   https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/surfaces/1994-v4-surfaces04902/1064973ar.pdf, accessed 07.05. in 2023

—. (1991), *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft*, München: Beck.

Austin, John Langshaw (1962), *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Berlin, Isaiah (2002), in Henry Hardy (ed.), *Liberty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burkhorst Hauke (2012), "Power and the Rule of Law in Arendt's Thought", in Marco Goldoni, Christopher McCorkindale (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and the Law*, Oxford, Portland: Hart publishing, pp. 261–265.

Ćosić, Pavle et al. (2018), *Rečnik sinonima*, Belgrade: Kornet.

Cowie, Anthony Paul (ed.) (1998), *Phraseology: Theory, Analysis, and Applications*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

De Saussure, Ferdinand (2011), *Course in General Linguistics*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles (1994), *Difference and Repetition*, New York: Colombia University Press

Derrida, Jacques (1992), "Force of Law", in Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld, David Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, New York: Routledge, pp. 3–67.

—. (1992b), *The Other Heading*, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

—. (1994), "Of the Humanities and the Philosophical Discipline: The Right to Philosophy from the Cosmopolitical Point of View (the Example of an International Institution)", *Surfaces 4*. pp: XX-XX https://doi.org/10.7202/1064974ar

Eagleton, Terry (1991), *Ideology: An Introduction*, London/New York: Verso.

Gallie, Walter Bryce (2017), "Essentially Contested Concepts", in Mihal Sladaček, Bojan Vranić (eds.), *Essentially Contested Concepts*, Novi Sad: Akademska knjiga; Belgrade: Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, pp. 21–68.

Grimmel, Andreas (2017), "Solidarity in the European Union: Fundamental Value or 'Empty Signifier'", in Andreas Grimmel, Susanne My Giang (eds.), *Solidarity in the European Union*, Springer, Cham, pp. 161–175.

Jakobson, Roman (1960), "Linguistics and Poetics", in Thomas Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 350–377.

Kant, Immanuel (1784), *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kant/absicht/absicht.html

Laclau, Ernesto (1996), *Emancipation(s)*, New York: Verso

—. (2005), *On Populist Reason*, New York: Verso

Lyotard, Jean-François (1988), *The Differend*, *Phrases in Dispute*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Marx, Karl; Engels, Frederick (1975), *Collected Works, Vol. 4,* Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Minogue, Kenneth (1969), "Populism as a Political Movement", in Ghita Ionescu, Ernest Gellner (eds.), *Populism. Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, pp. 197–211.

Orwell, George (1946), *Politics and the English Language*, London: Horizon.

Pêcheux, Michel (1975), *Language, Semantics and Ideology*, London: The MacMillan Press.

Plato (1979), *Gorgias*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Volosinov, Valentin (1996), *Marxism and The Philosophy of Language*, Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1953), *Philosophical Investigations*, New York: Macmillan Press.

Aleksandar Ostojić i Aleksandar Čučković

Frazeologija "bez značenja": politke praznine

Sažetak

Više puta smo čuli za izraze poput „prazne reči", „prazna priča", „mlati praznu slamu", ali da li zaista postoji prazna frazeologija, koja ništa ne znači, koja nema jasnog referenta (ideju na koju upućuje)? Prikazujući mogućnost takve frazeologije bez značenja, rad ispituje njenu upotrebu u politici, fokusirajući se na birokratski jezik koji utiče na oblikovanje političke stvarnosti, a nalazi se u mnogim ustavnim ili vrednosno utemeljujućim dokumentima, EU, Amerike, pa čak i UN-a. Pokušaćemo da pokažemo da između opšteg i pojedinačnog značenja postoji ogromna *praznina*, praznina koju određena vrsta govora koristi kako bi apsorbovala svaki drugi jezik sa svim njegovim performativnim moćima. Kritika takve frazeologije kretaće se u dva pravca: prvi ima zadatak da pokaže (bez)značenjski karakter političke birokratske frazeologije, te njene pasivizirajuće ili neafirmativne efekte. Drugi se svodi na ispitivanje ideološke pozadine evro-centrizma, otkrivanje hegemonističkog karaktera ideje Evrope (ali i Zapadne civilizacije) ugrađene u njen politički jezik. Polazeći od Ernesta Lakloa, njegovog shvatanja „praznog označitelja" te neophodne funkcije koju taj pojam ima u temeljima svakog sistema (pogotovo hegemonskog), kroz istoriju diskursa ideje Evrope, pokazaćemo mogućnosti i upotrebu „praznine" u značenju, naročito kada je reč o osnovnim vrednostima koje su ugrađene u temelje jedne politike.

Ključne reči: frazeologija, politika, prazan označitelj, Laklo, Evropa, birokratija