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Explanatory Value of Reason in Public Space: Use and Misuse in Political Speech

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Abstract: In this article, the concept of communicative rationality and its practical application in public debates will be explored. Focusing on the importance of the communicative treatment of reason, validity, and its practical implications, the article critically examines Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action and its ethical elements. The potential difficulties of bridging the gap between theory and practice are highlighted by discussing the distinction between theoretical discourse and discursive practice. Through an analysis of Habermas' approach, the paper aims to improve public discourse quality and understand how communicative reason works in practical terms. It considers the pragmatic context of communicative action, the importance of claiming validity, and the process of validating. It discusses the concept of communicative reason in the context of concrete instances of communication, such as public discussion. It emphasizes the importance of communicative reason and the pursuit of the common good in promoting productive discussion and compromise.

Keywords: *Rationality, Reasonableness, Rationalisation, Validity, Parliamentary Debate*

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The communicative treatment and practical use of reason

For methodological reasons, the distinction between the two discursive registers, i.e. theoretical discourse on communicative action and discursive practice, is blurred as much as possible in this article. Treating the two separately creates a distance between theory and practice that will be difficult to recover later. The separation of discursive registers is justified from a didactic point of view. A theory is easier to learn and understand. However, when we move from theory to practice, reductionism often leads to errors. When applied to discursive practice, it leads to misunderstandings, and misunderstandings and confusion are certain to lead to conflict (Wrigley 2019). The pragmatic function of communicative action is the elimination of conflict and the achievement of reasonable consensus. An effective application of a theory in practice, with the most accurate results expected from the theory, is to maintain a minimum difference between what a theory requires, validated within theoretical limits, and what its practice would offer if the context requires and accepts it.

Given the widespread use of Habermas's theories, this article will attempt a critical examination of the concept of communicative rationality in public debates. It considers the theory of communicative action, ethical elements, and discourse morality. The paper will argue that Habermas' theory of action and his project of discursive morality invite us to consider public discourse as a form of rationality. Understanding how Habermas's communicative reason operates could help to improve the quality of public debates.

In the first part, an attempt will be made to explain, according to Habermas's theory, what is meant by the communicative treatment of reason and validity, and how these terms should be understood - or the processes that are practically grounded in them. This is a necessary exercise because there is a difference between the perception of these terms: the logical, the pragmatic and the general socio-linguistic one.

In a pragmatic context, it has been said (Habermas 1983a, p. 260) that communicative action serves to integrate and coordinate people's plans in their social interactions. When using the concepts of reason, rationality and validity as arguments in discourse, there are two adverse consequences for communication. In most cases, pragmatic connectors make weaker connections with the content they connect than logical connectors do, and there is a danger that communicative actions could lose their content. Secondly, the pragmatic perspective would impose and accentuate the

meaning of the term 'reason', for example, not as an impulse to thinking, but as a limitation or stop to the expression of desires and wills. Moderation, limitation and restraint are also common meanings of reason. In philosophy, the role of reason in objective and rational thought processes is often contrasted with emotion or intuition. Language facilitates interactions between individuals and structures the world. Habermas not only endows communicative action with a function of social integration, but also stipulates that any use of language should be oriented towards achieving understanding and, on another level, should be a form of manifestation of reason. For Habermas (1971/1983b, p. 200), communication is the way in which individuals express themselves both through the use of linguistic expressions and through actions or expressions of feelings (extra-verbal expressions or gestures). These elements that describe the process of communication are supported by the general structures of the communication situation: speaker/hearer/potential participants in the act of communication, time, space of perception of the participants in the act of communication, relationships that develop between speaker and hearer and their intentions. Habermas (1983b, p. 201) uses this perspective to distinguish between two forms of communication: communicative action and discourse. Claims of validity determine the distinction between the two forms of communication. Validity claims are truth claims. The validity claims (propositional truth, normative rightness, and subjective truthfulness) characterize different categories of knowledge that are embodied in symbolic expressions (Habermas 1984, p. 75). Validity claims of communicative action are implicit in every utterance, in the simple acceptance, and in the simple statement of something. In the same implicit way, they have universal claims. From a logical point of view, claims of validity can only be confirmed by means of tests with counter-examples from various other contexts. In communicative action, a claim to validity is accepted or rejected through a process of examination of arguments that exclude violence; that invoke special rules; and that require arguments that relate to the issues being addressed. Habermas' theory seems to be concerned with this pragmatic sense.

However, the process of validation follows a different path and implies the process of legitimation, which is not the subject of this paper. Rawls (1995, pp.132-180) uses a competing term that has similar characteristics to the pragmatic sense of claims of validation, namely that of reasonableness. Habermas discusses this term in his famous 'Remarks on John Rawls' (1995, pp. 109-131). Habermas points out that the predicate 'reasonable' is used instead of the predicate 'true'. However, it refers to the public behaviour of individuals rather than to the truth of their statements. It

is in moments of disagreement that this correct behaviour comes into play. Accepting different perspectives, 'reasonable disagreement', putting a difficult issue in brackets and deferring it for further discussion, is a common fact of life on this behavioural basis. James Gordon Finlayson (2005, p. 48), on the other hand, sees validation claims as a means for the speaker to justify what he or she says and does to other people. For Finlayson, since any agent in any situation can be asked to justify his or her actions, validation claims have a practical function as a guide to social action.

The distinction between the two forms of communication is imposed by validity claims. In the case of communicative action, validation is anticipated and, according to Habermas, the exchange of information in a communicative action takes place on the basis of validation presuppositions; in the case of discourse, the problematised validity claims are thematised, because the role of discourse could be to create a problematised agreement that can be found in communicative action. The claim to validity of any communicative action is tested through the process of problematisation. This pure and simple process transforms the wishes of the originator into problems at the level of speech. They are treated in this way by the participants until an agreement can be reached. Discourses follow a similar process, but at a higher level. In this case, the process of verification takes the form of thematisation, because it involves ab-initio, justifications, explanations and descriptions with truth claims. The process of thematising requires a thematic and systematic development of all the elements which have been perceived or indicated as problematic within the framework of the said speech. From this point of view, under these conditions, thematising is a way of reconstructing the speech on behalf of the receptor when it comes to problematic aspects, asking for other justifications than those given by the author/originator. This process ends when an agreement can be reached, from a theoretical point of view.

In Habermas's terminology, the creation of agreement and discursive understanding aims to "overcome a situation that arises by problematising claims to validity naively assumed in communicative action, and at the same time it can be seen as an element which makes the transition from communicative action to discourse, or which makes discourse a means of manifesting a communicative action" (Habermas 1983b, p. 201). The distinction between communicative action and discourse remains fragile and may lead to some confusion, especially given that Habermas sees the same characteristics and structural elements underlying both types of manifestation (Pricop 2013, pp. 487-491). Habermas will speak of only two elements that would separate speaking as communicative action from speaking understood as discourse: at the practical level of communicative action, interaction

unfolds as a homogeneous process, following an interrogative structure initiated by a question and followed by an answer; in communicative action, answers take the form of presentations, clarifications, explanations. In Habermas' construction, discourse has the role of creating problematised claims to the validity of opinions and norms. Explanations resulting from communicative actions become interpretations, representations become judgments, and explanations are given a theoretical aspect. The double pretence of discourses, on the one hand the virtualisation of constraints on action and, on the other hand, the virtualisation of validity claims, is another characteristic of speech as discourse. A process of instrumentalisation is imposed on discourse by these claims. Habermas sees the process of instrumentalising reason as the "precise calculation of adequate means" (1984, p. 168). This process requires a clear separation of the objects of communicative action, i.e. of things from events, of individuals from statements. If this is achieved, the discourse could have valid claims and would realise understanding. On a practical level, it would provide several recommendations or warnings. Recommendations refer directly to the ethical dimension of discourse. They question the accuracy or inaccuracy of discourses. The ethical nature of all communicative actions is to be found rather in what Habermas (1983b, p. 214) describes as the process of idealisation, that is to say, in anticipating the responsibility of the one who interacts with the other and, at the same time, in recognizing/assigning the competences of a partner in the communicative interaction. Due to its anticipatory/projective dimension, Habermas sees the process of idealization as more of an intuitive process, unfolding in two steps: conscious waiting - in this stage it is envisaged that the participants in a communicative action should consciously observe all norms, and non-verbal expressions, if required by the other participants, should be replaced by verbal expressions. This requirement may seem a little exaggerated, but if we take into account the effects of the gestures of a person during the discourse of another person, that is, of the opponent: the outline of a smile of mistrust, a gesture of the hand as an expression of inability to change anything; the expression of disagreement by shaking the head, and so on. All these gestures enter into direct completion with the spoken discourse, performed simultaneously with the oral intervention of the opponent. Between the two forms of expression, gestures have an advantage: they are easier to understand and they do not need words to be understood, whereas words to be understood require effort and confirmation between the meanings of the words. Therefore, in debate, non-verbal expressions must be replaced by verbal ones.

The second stage, that of expectations of legitimacy, is the assumption that the participants in the action will only comply with the norms that they consider to be legitimate. In fact, this presupposition points to a set of requirements interdependent with freedom of expression in the context of communicative actions.

Communicative Reason and Discursive Understanding

The purpose of this section is to show how communicative reason is at work in concrete communicative situations. Public debate can be seen as a particular type of discourse that takes place in a democratic public space and involves the participation of a number of individuals in communicative actions on an issue that generates polarities, diverging interests, dilemmas and conflicts. In the process of deciding on an action, the aim of communication is for the participants to reach a consensus/compromise. The macro context of communication is provided by freedoms and constraints of deliberative/discursive democracies (Pricop, 2017, pp. 1-5). According to Joshua Cohen (1989, p. 24f), deliberative democracy limits the grounds on which people are able to support political views to those which are consistent with the recognition of the equality of other people. The acceptance of universal ethical values; equality of rights of all participants in discussions, freedom of expression, respect for all human rights, is a direct consequence of these practices. It is necessary to respect all the norms of communication, avoiding manipulative and deceptive arguments, at the strict level of communication. The elements that characterise communication in this context can be divided into two categories: communicative reasoning and conceiving the common good. Communicative reasoning is considered to be a necessary condition because the participants in the debates/consultations have to "speak the language of public reason", according to Kahne, Weinstock, Leydet and Williams (2010, p. 13). The idea of the common good appeals to the ethical dimension according to Beerbohm & Davis (2017). It takes into account the natural inclinations or virtues of the participants in the communicative action, because when a controversial issue is under discussion (e.g. legalisation of prostitution, drugs, etc.), virtually capable of having more options for resolution, "citizens need the disposition to identify possible compromises rather than looking for arguments to prolong the conflict" Kahne et al. (2010). Communicative rationality is the process by which different claims to validity are brought to a satisfactory resolution, according to Habermas (1984, p. 75). Therefore, Habermas will construct it on levels or modes of expression (1984, p. 6): the metatheoretical level, which is structured according to theories of action and focuses on rationalizable aspects of action;

the methodological level, which focuses on the theory of interpretive understanding; and the empirical level, which focuses on forms of reasoning at the cultural and social level.

Under these conditions, Habermas' communicative reason includes in its sphere a wide range of "forms of argumentation capable of continuing communicative action in a reflexive way" (1984, p. 9). This view of communicative reason ensures, through its argumentative techniques, the possibility of overcoming the tensions and disagreements inherent in communication in public debates and thus achieving consensus.

Communicative Reason and the Practicality of Reason

In discourse practice, if we take as an example political statements and politicians' interventions in the framework of parliamentary debates in the Romanian Parliament (Table 1), we can notice not only the frequency but also the meaning with which terms like reason, reasonableness or rationality are used as warning signs. Due to its partial similarity with the appeal to reason, the latter term was added to the above-mentioned expressions. The syntagma reason as a warning sign is used in this article because the collocation appeal to reason is often included in the titles of politicians' interventions in parliamentary debates. In this narrative analysis, only the titles of political statements were taken into account, on the premise that the title of a statement is an accurate description of its content. The model outlined by Gennaro and Ash (2022) is followed in the semantic analysis of cognitive language proposed in this article. A simple qualitative test of semantic validity, which consists in the analysis of the language associated with the geometric poles for the cognitive language and the emotional language.

Table 1. *Number of occurrences of the word "reason" in the framework of the speech within the interventions and political declarations of the Romanian Parliament*

Legislation	Number of interventions/ political declarations	Reason in language	Semantic relations	Observations
5th of February.1996- 15th of October. 1996	8	Reason = Argument/ arguments in developing strategies for hydroelectric resource use (practical reason)	Hyperonym (rational speech)	All papers were written by a single author.
1996-2000	2	Reason as a virtue vs force vs passion	Antinomy (emotional orientation of speech)	An Appeal to Reason and the Criminalisation of NATO Aggression in Yugoslavia Intervention of 20 April 1999
		Reason as a warning signal	Causality	An appeal to reason in the search for a solution for the rescue of the Romanian economy. In the intervention of 2 March 1999, the syntagma 'appeal to reason' appears for the first time in a transcript
2000-2004	2	Reason as a warning signal	Causality	Appeal to Reason and Understanding in Dealing with the Hungarian Minorities in Romania, political declaration dated 27 November 2001
		Reason as a warning signal	Causality	Appeal to Reason, Political Declaration, 10 June 2003
2004-2008	6	Reason as a warning signal	Antinomy (emotional orientation of speech)	Political Declaration, 26 April 2005, 'Some words on cynical reason'
		Reason and morality as the basic basis of political thinking and practical action	Causality	Political declaration with the title 'Appeal to reason and morality in the service of public welfare and national interests', 14th March 2006
		Reason = calculation (economic reason) vs. the promises of populism	Causality	4 April 2006, Political declaration entitled 'Between Ego and Reason!'
		Reason as a warning signal	Causality	27 February 2007, Political declaration entitled 'Appeal to reason'
		Reason as a warning signal	Antinomy (emotional orientation of speech)	27 March 2007, Political declaration: 'In defiance of reason'
		Reason as a warning signal	Antinomy (emotional orientation of speech)	7 October 2008, Political declaration entitled 'The reason to be the Razgandeanu government'.

Legislation	Number of interventions/ political declarations	Reason in language	Semantic relations	Observations
2008-2012	4	Reason as a warning signal	Causality	9 February 2010, Political declaration entitled 'Reason has won'
		Reason as a warning signal	Causality	15 June 2010 - Appeal to reason and social solidarity in the new conditions of austerity imposed by the government
		Reason as a warning signal	Causality	26 June 2012 - Political declaration with the title 'Appeal to reason for the education in Romania'
		Reason as a warning signal	Causality	22 March 2011, 'Appeal to reason' - political declaration
2012-2016	0			
2016- 2020	0			
2021- present	2	Reason as appeal to moderation	Causality	9 February 2022-- political declaration 25 May 2022 – political declaration

Source: Author's own conception

Since the content of the intervention related to attitudes that the speakers considered lacking and could theoretically justify appeals to reason, it was privileged. Another element leading to the use of this array was the fact that the politicians used certain expressions with which they wanted to be equated: an appeal to calm, serenity, tolerance, and wisdom. There is a difference to be found between the syntagma of reason as a warning sign and as an 'alarm signal' within the debates and interventions that took place in the Romanian Parliament. If the former, at least theoretically, implies the need to think ahead before presenting it to others and exposing it to the public, the alarm signal or wake-up call is rather within the sphere of urgency, of the immediate attention of the public to issues that are currently taking place, which have a progressive potential towards negative areas, with more or less catastrophic consequences. A medium term between these two expressions could theoretically be represented by that of reasonableness. Its use is extremely rare in the interventions of the Romanian Parliament. It appears only in two political declarations, both issued by the Chamber of Deputies, one dated 1999, entitled "Defining dialogue as a unique instrument to produce reasonable political solutions", and the other dated 2018, entitled "The Metropolitan of Bessarabia's property restitution – Prioritising reasonable

conditions to grant non-repayable aid to the Republic of Moldova". Both political declarations use the term without allowing the audience to identify the content and contribution of the term to the understanding or resolution of the situation presented.

In the Chamber of Deputies, throughout all legislation, but starting from 1996, the year when stenographic records of parliamentary debates in Romania are stored online, the word count for alarm signals/alert calls was no less than 136. If in 1992-1996 no alarms/alert calls were used, in the following legislation in 19 sessions 20 alarms/alert calls were mentioned. The peak in the use of wake-up calls is represented by the 2004-2008 legislation, where they were used 29 times in 24 sessions, when the situations were considered to be endangering society. The 2000-2004 and 2012-2016 legislation had the same number of uses of wake-up calls with 23. The 2008-2012 legislature recorded 25 such interventions, and the 2016-2020 legislature has used 16 so far.

If, in the case of the wake-up calls, the exception is the session 1992-1996, where no intervention had been entitled, in the case of the intervention that included the concept of the reason, there were registered 8 such interventions, all of them made by the same politician. In the entire history of Romanian parliamentary debate, this is the highest number of interventions containing the concept of reason. Rather practical reason is the sense in which the term was used.

Table 1 shows that the concept of reason was no longer in use in the last two legislative periods. It has not occurred. The same thing happened in all the sessions of the Senate, where the Senators did not have any more interventions, in none of the legislations after 1992 they had inserted the concept of reason in a title of an intervention or in political declarations. However, there were two interventions in the Senate that introduced the concept of reasonableness in the 2004-2008 legislation. With regard to rationality and reasonableness, the dynamic is as follows: the concept of rationalisation has appeared in no less than 54 interventions in the sessions of the Chamber of Deputies, including the Chamber of the Senate. From 1996 to 2000, no title in parliamentary debates included rationalisation. In the 2000-2004 legislation, it was mentioned twice, and in the 2004-2008 legislation, it was mentioned three times, one by the Chamber of Deputies and one by the Senate.

The debate on rationalisation has intensified in the Chamber of Deputies since the 2008-2012 legislation, a period that also coincides with the economic crisis. In 24 sittings, there were 32 political statements and interventions. The rationalisation of public expenditure, the rationalisation of

hospitals and the rational vote were taken into account. In the 2012-2016 legislation, the number of discussions on the rationalisation of expenditure had fallen by more than half. In the 2016-2020 legislation, only 3 such titles were recorded, all of them in 2017. Since then, there have been no more counts on rationalisation, neither in the Senate nor in the Chamber of Deputies.

As a result of this analysis based on the titles of discussions and parliamentary debates, it can be concluded that politicians who were or are members of parliament have used the word reason, rationality, and reasonableness moderately in their parliamentary debates during the last 30 years of democracy. In more than half of the cases, the use of the concept of reason in political discourse in the study is neutral. For most of the interventions, the relationship between the use of reason and the discourse is a causal one. Affective cues were identified in four political speeches, as shown in Table 1. The antinomic relationship was found in these cases. In the last 10 years, these terms have appeared only twice in the titles of parliamentary interventions in Romania.

Conclusion

To sum up, the research has sought to specify the pragmatic meaning and the functions of the word "reason" in communicative action. The overuse and misuse of this term and those related to reason in the political public space and its prolongation have lost their meaning. Or, at best, the lack of meaning forces speakers to give a specific meaning to the domain in which they operate. Public discourses that appeal to these concepts, in turn, become meaningless. Simple communication without content.

The results obtained from the semantic analysis are specific to the political and cultural context of Romania. Only if a strict semantic equivalence is found between the semantic meanings of the terms considered, the validity of the study can be extended. Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to understanding the use of the concepts of reason and reasonableness in political discourse. The semantic analysis highlights how the concept of reason loses its content in this type of discourse, deviating toward the affective zone.

Reason plays a crucial role in facilitating democratic processes and ensuring the legitimacy of political arguments in the realm of political speech (Harel & Shinar 2023). It promotes informed and well-rounded public debate through the presentation and evaluation of evidence, logical reasoning, and critical thinking. Reason improves the quality of political discourse and

decision-making by enabling individuals and groups to support their positions with facts, logical coherence, and sound arguments (Niemeyer et al., 2023).

In political speech, however, reason can also be abused or disregarded. In some cases, political actors manipulate or distort information, use deceptive reasoning, post-truths or appeal to emotions and biases rather than rationality (Pantazi et al., 2021). These abuses of reason may impede genuine dialogue, erode the integrity of public discourse, and result in the spread of misinformation or propaganda.

The potential to promote transparency, accountability, and a well-informed citizenry is the explanatory value of reason in the public sphere. Reason enables individuals to critically assess political claims, challenge false narratives and make informed judgements when it is respected and upheld. It fosters a more inclusive and participatory public sphere and serves as a foundation for democratic deliberation.

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