

THE SPEECH OF THE SPOKESPERSON FROM IMPROVISATION TO PROFESSIONALISM

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Abstract

The article presents a brief history of the profession of the governmental spokesman in Romania, highlighting the steps taken from improvisation to specialization in the new field in the past 20 years. Particular principles and professional qualities, professional achievements and personalities that have marked the field are presented.

Keywords: *spokesperson, spokesperson's skills, spokesperson's improvisation, spokesperson's personality*

Officially and as a rule, the specialized literature accepts that the spokesman has the mission *to represent* the institution, *to make known* to the public the *strategies and tactics* of the institution apart from the different problems of the process of governance, so *his message is extremely important*. He is thus *the first known link* in the chain, that information you launched into the movement and which cannot be quantified and the end of which always remains unappreciated, triggered. Therefore, not only the attitude, but also its *message* breathes beyond its actual *structure* of which is the target time, hospitality, openness and willingness, cooperation, promptness and impartiality, rigor and responsibility, honesty and integrity, understanding and empathy, and then charisma and patience.

When the speaker's message will *constantly*, take into consideration the *institutional context* (Romanian Institution-European institution with numerous other variants) and his relationship, the chances of success of the communication approach will be visible on the increase.

The first formally appointed spokespersons recognized that only the experience in the media has kicked off the assumed mission, that there were no specialized training for that in the immediate post-communist period, that they had no specialized training as in Romania at that

time; a form of training in the new field was not nor ever had been.

However, once established the position at the governmental level, the learning of new professional requirements was made on the fly, intuitively, and depending on the requirements of the official meetings and of the press which was neither very respectful to the public institutions and officials, nor very elegant in expression, but rather aggressive, wanting to get not only information, but even exclusiveness (an inadvisable practice in the field!).

DEX (*Explanatory Dictionary of Romanian Language*) defines the spokesman, making the dichotomy between the *person* "who speak on behalf of others in a group or a meeting, etc." and the *specialist*: "the natural or legal person empowered to disseminate the news and the texts of the official documents or of several organizations, institutions, etc. in the country and abroad"¹ so, the representative of an institution, entitled to present to the public through the *accredited* media representatives in the country and abroad, the official press.

If, at the beginning, the original holder was preparing for the dignitary the press review and the analysis of the articles which formed the object of interest, drawing his attention to certain signals², over the years, the tasks became more complex, reaching even the *counseling*, not only being reflected in his speech, but in the dignitary's speech.

After nearly 10 years of the spokespersons' activity in Romania when their work was formalized, enacted, recognized and a quite vast Romanian experience has been accumulated in a very pragmatic way, Cristina Coman said in 2001 that the spokesman "has the mission to handle the consistency and accuracy of the

messages that the organization send to its publics.”³ According to Virginia Gheorghiu, communication is a simple *process*, which is based on seriousness and responsibility, compliance, and the *accurate information in real time* and, especially, after a *communication behavior* has been drafted (“to know how to behave with journalists”⁴).

Gradually, the operating mechanisms of the organization crystallizes and get into action; even now, after more than 20 years of experience, a *job description* is difficult to achieve⁵, for elements of the three fundamental areas are interfering: organizational *culture*, organizational *communication* and *communicative behavior* with the communicative *act* itself.

It was already emphasized that the position of the *government spokesman* and of the *president* one appeared in the chart *after* the installation of Petre Roman’s government and during the first presidential term of Ion Iliescu. Later, as the influence of the press was understood as the fourth power in the state – in the world of media, a slogan was held that *the morning belongs to newspapers, the day to the radio and the evening to TV!*, – because it *takes* the information to the speaker and *amplifies* it towards the public, that has, as we have seen, a heterogeneous characteristic (internal and external institutions, media, etc.).

Iolanda Stăniloiu, the spokesman of Theodor Stolojan’s government (1991-1992), speaks of a *childhood period* of the institution in post-December Romania⁶, the first Romanian government’s press office being established by Petre Roman’s government in 1990 under the leadership of Ioan Mihai Rosca⁷.

If in the 90’s the training of a spokesman was made during the year, after 20 years we can say that in Romania there is a complex system of higher education (faculties of journalism and communication sciences); we have not only an extensive literature with many translations, but even school profile textbooks⁸ and schools for the training of the *specialized communicators* (faculties of communication, specialized sections), to which communication sessions, workshops, trainings, conferences, etc. are added.

After taking part in this literature (see the bibliography at the end of this paper) we can say

that we still meet general and unfinished formulations, uncertainties and unclear terminology, which means that, even if the institutionalized communication pedagogy has made consistent progress, we have a generation of young communicators whose training is moving rapidly towards professionalization.

The relationship between the Romanian institutions and the press, both Romanian and foreign, became an extremely delicate thing, universally recognized. “You cannot establish a dictatorship against the press. You must let it romp” said Doina Jalea, the spokesman of Vacaroiu’s government (1993).⁹

The post of the government and the president’s spokesman were followed for over 20 years by several people and personalities, a thing which is reflected in the quality of the institutional discourse.

The majority of the owners came from the written and spoken press, and, by 2006, few women have assumed this mission, namely: Iolanda Stăniloiu, Virginia Gheorghiu, Doina Jalea, Gabriela Vranceanu-Firea, Corina Cretu, Despina Neagoe¹⁰. It has often been asked the question whether a woman’s speech¹¹ is better received, especially if it comes from the media, and, as we expected, the opinions are divided.

When she was talking about “*Public Relations officers*” Doina Jalea did not make distinctions¹², but Virginia Gheorghiu believed that a woman is more appropriate because she can reduce the *potential conflict* between the represented institution and the journalists.¹³ Adriana Saftoiu has a more prosaic view: “If the spokesperson should be framed into a weapon the best category would be that of a firefighter. The spokesperson is a firefighter always ready to extinguish another fire.”¹⁴

According to some post-December officials, the appointment of a journalist was based on the belief that he knows best the needs of information, so the appointment was made from the provision strategies. After years of improvisation, the appointments are made today by the specialization in communication, especially when there is a *public relations* internship in addition to foreign institutions.

The institutional communication, internal and external, is usually or it should be strongly distinguished from the political message. Over the last 20 years, the Romanian experience shows that the changing of the decision-maker is followed by the changing of the communication factor, changes in training, personality and vision positively or negatively affecting the locator's message. The role of the institutional communicator was often reduced to putting in a favorable light of the head of the institution with the aim of a rise in his career. It goes without saying that the main element that facilitates or hinders the deployment of the *intra- and inter-institutional dialogue* – sometimes leading to bottlenecks – is the leader's personality and the degree of subtlety of his communicational skills.

Holding his speech and launching a media message, the spokesman accepts in principle that he represents the institution, and not himself, giving up the asserting of his own personality in the limelight for creating a good image of the institution and thus, of the dignitary/official. Contrary to this fundamental coordinated, many officials are still denying the need for communication with the civil society, either minimize it or represent themselves in public. Of course, not using the services offered by the specialist in the field – willing to answer to questions not only during the press conference, but whenever requested, directly or by means of modern technology – the results of the act of communication are as such, and the problems – far from being favorably resolved.

Most people interviewed by Adriana Seftiuc said that the harmony between the official and his spokesman positively or negatively affects speech. From this knowledge, sometimes mutual, the act of information improved, the analytical and synthetic act too, and thus the communicational one, too. From it, short-term strategies result, for the presentation of a news, and long-term strategies, of the department development. The spokesman's function of an *image creator* for the institution he/she represents (government or presidency) has, according to Alexandru Mironov, two coordinates: *mutual trust* between the President / Prime Minister and his spokesman and "perfect *availability*"¹⁵ of the

two characters. The knowledge and responsibility of both parts founded friendships that sometimes remained even after their leaving the office.

Undoubtedly, the spokesperson's speech can be influenced by many *factors: internal or external, objective or subjective*, such as: the lack of a comprehensive professional legal framework, insufficient or inadequate technology, the existence of an inadequate information system of the press office, not even modernized under technological aspect or of several states of tension / conflict among the staff, the institutional centralization, which requires the "hierarchical and unequivocal circulation of the information from the center to the area"¹⁶, problems of mentality, as, for example, the idea that the counties are representing the informational *periphery* consuming information, without reaction, and the capital – the center of the locator. Hence, the *communication complexes* lie from *the center* to the *periphery*.¹⁷

From this complex of factors lies a faulty *communication* or even a *lack* of communication or an *anti-communication*, so a failure between institutions. The bad image of the institution that issues the information has the purpose not only the decrease of the public confidence in the effectiveness of the institution or in the image of the official, but also the decrease of the civil society confidence in the state institutions and in the democratic system. With the nostalgia gaining adherents, not so much through the phenomenon of knowledge, but by ignorance, the democratic culture is confronted with several failures.

The lack of a tradition, of a vast experience and of a forward thinking have created to the spokesman the image of an *information tool*, of a transmission belt from the official to the external environment. Gradually, as the development of democracy, the spokesman transforms himself from a *passive factor* into an *active* one. The quality of a *department manager* does not give the quality to be well and deeply informed on the issue to be communicated. First, he becomes *manager* of the *information universe*, because he *organizes* and *reorganizes* the entire information system, he *manages it*, he not only *analyzes* the

information needed at a time, but he also *synthesize* it, to reach the conclusions he needs and for drafting the official documents to be communicated. The informational management gives to the spokesman the *breadth* and *depth* of the information act, passed in a personal level through a more aware and more responsible attitude in relation to the media. He becomes thus a *catalyst for communication*¹⁸, and the *speech creativity* is only apparently restricted, none of Adriana Saftoiu's interviewees could complain of a lack of creative activity. We find, therefore, that the function of a spokesman is a great consumer of mental and even physical energy, none of them working eight hours provided under *the Labour Code*, but much more effectively, the actual working time being normalized.

According to Adriana Saftoiu, "the spokesperson has a paramount role in an institution. They usually all realize this fact at the end of their mandate. The spokesman with his/her frustrations, the official with his reproaches always directed to others"¹⁹, this because, at that time, the mid-90s, many officials believed that no one handles better their image than themselves. Meanwhile, the Romanian official's opinion on the effectiveness of the spokesperson has changed, but, as expected, not deep enough.

One of the most delicate aspects of an activity in the public administration, especially when the aspect of a wide *visibility* comes into discussion – as it is the case of the spokesperson – is the *professional ethics*. Clearly, the concerned position stands in the category of the overspecialized officials, because we consider first the several latitude and longitude coordinates posed by the job description.

Starting from the axiom that a proper professional ethics cannot be built only on right, personal, human ethics, we find that each person who has succeeded in recent years as a presidential or governmental spokesman drafted his/her public activity not only according to their own personality and training in the communication art, but also according to the official's personality who stood at the head of the department.

Coming back to Adriana Saftoiu's reference volume, through the vast experience offered to

the public, the interviewed persons directly and openly acknowledge the influence on their work by the official's personality directly hierarchical and by the officials from the coordinated latitude, such as, for example the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Hence, when we say the official's *personality* we automatically include his ethics.

The more or less generalized opinion that the spokesman's mission is to pimp the lie and make it *digestible* to the internal and external auditors is, if not dusty, at least anachronistic. It will be certainly at least partially valid in the period before Bill Gates era; but today, while the information travels at supersonic speed, this fact can not be neither concealed nor denied, but only *explained*.

But the causality is not accessible to anyone, because its understanding is the result not only of accurate and good information, but also of a deep analysis and a competent summary. However, spokesman's mission comes when you need to *explain* the causality fact in the conduct and, especially, in the analysis of its consequences, so that the public know and understand the event correctly.

Keeping the mentality on the *need* for changing the *speech* and accordingly for acting can have serious and often hard to fine consequences, hard to repair when we speak about the *image of the institution*.

The democracy implies the right to expressing an *opposed* views, to constructively critical views, and, therefore, there is a competition in the public communication domain, sometimes not gentle at all. The spokesman's activity takes place in a very elastic and interpreted relationship with the media. The meetings can be equivalent to an entry in the arena of lions, but they can also be very friendly.

Adriana Saftoiu summed up the spokesman's relationship with the press as such: "The press is a very well trained predator which immediately feels the politicians' weakness, which it speculates without regret. You get what you deserve and if somehow you do not deserve what you get, then he tells you it's your job that you did not know how to defend yourself."²⁰ Eugen Serbanescu stated that in exercising his mandate

in Victor Ciorbea's Government (1996-1998) it was "very difficult to thank all the trends, all the personalities who did not have the same political affiliation"²¹, so the speech had to include more or less political compromises.

In the post-Bill Gates era, the simple consciousness that the press can know the event just before spokesman's results leads to an attitude of extreme caution in the trend towards *dressing*.

Once found the so-called *dressing*, the "competition" – first represented by the release – will immediately and drastically act, the consequences on the image of the institution being serious and those upon the spokesman being almost irreparable.

A cynic might say that modern society forgives its own lie, it explains it by tampering the truth, but it never forgives that one of another. A first conclusion of the anti-*dressing* plea would be the *need to gain the confidence of the conversation partner*.

This *first* professional quality – and human also, ultimately – the *trust*, as her opposite, the *mistrust*, is acting *vertically* (in the hierarchy, in their own institution) and *horizontally*, outdoors, in relations with other local or European institutions, or with other bodies, etc.

When the owner comes from among the journalists, as was most of the holders until around 2000, he has partially the trust of the media and the start is more promising, but not always the start remains constant. The trust of other institutions and the media, which they are working with on horizontal is done slowly and usually ends positively, if the holder is not making an imprudent of diplomatic nature.

Clearly, the *strategy of winning the public trust* can only begin based on the idea that the *common sense* and reason are not incompatible with the communicative act. Any public approach begins with the call (consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly) to your *own common sense* and the *common sense of the dialogue partner*, which in some cases interfere with the well-intentioned reason, which will reject any assertion that it defies. Any reason, any argument, contrary to or not, will be accepted by the dialogue partner, even if it will be shared,

which ultimately underlies the very continuation of a started dialogue.

Of course, the mutual assertion is valid.

Speaking of trust and common sense in public communication it can quickly get to *the truth* that there is a *tyranny* which opposes to the *dressing strategies*, which ultimately consists in *manipulating the truth*²².

The *International Code of Ethics for Public Relations* itself, adopted in Athens, on the basis of the UN Charter in 1965, denies the use of any methods and handling techniques "designed to create subconscious motivations which the individual cannot control by his own free will, so that he cannot be held responsible for actions taken on them"²³, the handling being considered, therefore, an immoral and potentially dangerous strategy. From truth to lie, there's no way a right and / or short way. However, not every truth is *partially* broadcast (i.e, incomplete) or *truncated*, the collages serving to suggest, to support a favorable idea for the moment.

The transformation of truth in pure lie, so in its *vice versa appearance*, is not simple and direct, but it is done by changing the locator's projection upon reality, by *overstatement*, by *permitting* a reverse projection, made by another issuer, or simply by *omission*. Sanda-Maria Ardeleanu was making a very subtle distinction between the *message* and the *imaginary*, and referring to the public discourse, she was asserting: "The validity of discourse depends on faith in an imaginary scheme that swings between" can ... » "and the real victory..."²⁴

The regulation of the demand and information supply in the media is not made from the offer to the demand, but conversely, from the demand to the supply. For example, a spicy detail of a star life can be presented as the event of the day and a drug discovery or significant discussions between the two important politicians may be a secondary key for that rating is imposing the rules. This means *maximizing / minimizing* the information according to the receiver's *perspective*, so that, when it reaches him, to advantage the speaker. If the media requires an image of the reality²⁵, it may be different of the reality as such.

The use of the multiple methods and means of handling the information in order to change the outcome that the real information would produce, this ultimately means, the underestimating of the dialogue partner. However, this is considered in the literature as one of the serious errors of the official discourse. But in the contemporary media the manipulation is a familiar, unforged strategy.

Ioan Mihai Rosca calls it "*manufacturing technology for news or press releases*."²⁶ To appreciate your dialogue partner as being less informed about the problem and less intelligent can bring the disaster. More than 2500 years ago, Sun Tzu strongly recommended in *The Art of War*, the opponent's deep *strategy of knowledge*, just for a good counteraction, not only in times of war, but also of peace.

The contemporary mentality of the spokesperson's relations *versus* the media representatives do not appreciate *the state of war*, but the attitude of *cooperation*, while the idea of location on different positions still remains valid, as the general principles of the Chinese strategist. The distance from the truth, whatever the evasion channels would be, will be immediately discovered in the era of the oversofisticated technologies and will generate complex problems of communication in our case, often insurmountable. *How and when, why* the confidence of the message sender is gained, but especially his confidence is lost, are questions whose answers depend on the adopted strategies and applied by each holder.

From this perspective, the spokesman's business, apparently finished with the support of discourse and the issue of the message, and in reality with the analysis of the feedback, has one of the biggest challenges: the need to find a balance between the loyalty to the institution and that one to truth and thus to public²⁷, which is always heterogeneous.

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There are few qualities needed in the spokesman's mission and the literature will not ever mention them all, be it due to internal dialectic process of training specialists. Seen in the early

'90s, when Ioan Mihai Rosca held the position in Vacaroiu's government (1990-1996) as a "simple mechanism that transfers the information back and forth, from the Executive to the press, preferably without thinking too much, without the initiative"²⁸, the spokesperson is, in essence, a complex personality that could not perform the difficult task without a long and thorough training, without a long complex mental acquisitions.

The spokesman's manual, to the reader's disappointment, specifies only four sequences: the credibility, the ability to speak and write quickly, the sense of humor, a lot of patience²⁹, immediately visible in the act of communication. The outstanding qualities not listed here may be supplemented from the reading aids, from knowing the personalities who held the position or the confessions of those who have completed their mission.

The higher education, a solid general knowledge in which the psychological qualities are at the top of the pyramid, the written and oral communication skills, the quality to interact with the fellows through a lack of aggression and the power of persuasion, the unbeatable logic and the strategic, foresight thinking based on strong arguments, selfcontrol, and – why not? – the personal charm, all together can contribute to the effective exercise of the assumed mission.

Besides *talent*, a set of intellectual skills, accumulated and formed in self-built decades of a lot of work, a long intellectual self-organization of the self-intellectual personality, of responsibility and even patriotism, is also required. The efficiency of discourse, the reception of the message as it was issued, not only the result of their intellectual personalities, but also of the teamwork, as the specialization required by the contemporary society is not compatible with *homo universalis* since time immemorial. Here is about the *information management*, to be subsequently communicated to the target group through the exercise of *communication techniques*.

The spokesperson's good psychological qualities often bring a decisive act of public communication. Before public exposure, the speaker studies the target group in anticipation of possible situations under pressure. The insight

and persuasion that are exercised within the maximum level for the art to see people is elevated to science.

There are analyzed, if possible, the *verbal* (cognitive) and *extraverbal* (*non verbal* = study of the events that accompany the speech: mimics, gestures, dress, formal and interpersonal space, etc.; *paraverbal* = *peculiarities of voice, pronunciation intensity, speech rhythm, etc.*) ways of speech of the receiver (using knowledge related to *kinesis* = communication through gestures, body movements, *proxemics* = territoriality, the way people are physically in touch, *sinergology* = science that studies the significance of the gestures made unconscious, body language analysis³⁰ etc..) valued as highly expressive and of maximum reliability.

It is true that during the public exposure, the spokesman exhibits *the official view* about the event or phenomenon in public discussion, the impartiality, objectivity and fairness characterize his speech in the most obvious way. The personal opinion of the speaker is an exception, because it is contrary to the official status. It seems, therefore, that the job holder is unable to make known his own personality, which is a wrong opinion, if an in-depth analysis. Without exaggerating the things, it can be said that the spokesman, through a proper *advice* at the right time, defends his role as the *gray eminence* behind the scene.

Bogdan Baltazar's denominations - the spokesman of Roman's government (1990-1991), the first holder of the post, who has become a standard personality for his successors for almost 20 years - argue the assertion above, when they shows that his opinion, written on notes, supported the Prime Minister Petre Roman during the meeting with Jim Baker, and Bob Dole, when the Americans were launching charges on the Romanian government³¹.

In an elegant and constructive way it is spoken not only about the qualities of the official discourse, but also the objectivity of research requires to emphasize if not the failures, at least the visible shortcomings from the public to the spokesman, another facet of the feedback, which in its essence is part of the evaluation strategy. The many qualities listed should be provided in

return the major hazards that a spokesperson should be aware and should avoid them.

If the spokesperson is a profound and correctly informed man that sends a *verified, analyzed and summarized* information to the audience on behalf of the institution he represents, his opposite is the non-informed, incoherent, poorly informed or intimidated man because of *the quality of the transmitted speech* lies the quality of the feedback.

The insufficient information on the subject of press, the insecurity, and the superficiality of the discussed topic, the incomplete information, all give the sense of a provisional improvisation and uncertainty on the activity of the dignitary and of the institution they represent. Not once, the Romanian government was accused that it contradicts through his spokesman that the disclosed information is imprecise, unclear, inconsistent, black points collected in the file of the internal and external credibility. Clearly, the communication failures result not only from the quality of information, but also from many subjective cases.

The inter- and intrainstitutional communication barriers have on their background: personality differences, on which is grounded the non-disintegration of tense situations, the imprecision of linguistic formulations or non-possession of the specialized languages (economic, technical, technological), the environmental interferences (noise, lights, etc.) or the insufficient training management (e.g. the inability to listen the dialogue partner, so that one to receive and decode the sent message, etc.).

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Endnotes

- 1 *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române*, București, Univers Enciclopedic Gold, 2009, p. 900.
- 2 Adriana Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, *passim*.
- 3 Cristina Coman, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
- 4 Adriana Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
- 5 See also Bernard Dagesnais, *Profesia de relaționist*, Iași, Polirom, 2002.
- 6 Adriana Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
- 7 See their own confidence in Adriana Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 195.
- 8 One of the guides was conducted in the Ministry of Defense and Interior, Constanta County Police Inspectorate, see Jipa Traian, Saragea Marian (coord.), *Strategii de comunicare. Ghidul relațiilor publice cu mass-media. Pentru uz intern*, Constanța, Ex Ponto, 2004; another in the Ministry of Public Information, see *Manualul purtătorului de cuvânt din instituțiile publice destinat uzului intern*, București, 2003.
- 9 Adriana Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 187.
- 10 Adriana Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, *passim*.
- 11 See the recently interesting plea for women's political skills in Roberta Anastase, Lia Ardelean, Sanda-Maria Ardeleanu, *Forța politică a femeilor*, Iași, Polirom, 2011.
- 12 Adriana Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 171.
- 13 Adriana Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 160.
- 14 Adriana Săftoiu, *Vocile puterii. De vorbă cu purtătorii de cuvânt*. Postfață de Emil Hurezeanu, București, Editura Trei, 2007, p. 9.
- 15 *Ibidem*, p. 65.
- 16 *Manualul purtătorului de cuvânt din instituțiile publice destinat uzului intern*, București, 2003, p.8.
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- 19 Adriana Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
- 20 Adriana Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 219.
- 21 Adriana Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 225.
- 22 See also details about the dispute over concealment, deception and lies in Brîndușa Armanca, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
- 23 Cristina Coman, *op. cit.*, p. 184.
- 24 Sanda-Maria Ardeleanu, *Mesaj și imaginar lingvistic în discursul public*, în „Limbaje și comunicare. Creativitate, semanticitate, alteritate”. Colocviul Internațional de Științe ale Limbajului „Eugeniu Coșeriu”, Ediția a X-a, Suceava, 22-24 octombrie 2009, vol. X₂, Iași, Casa Editorială Demiurg, 2009, p. 237.
- 25 *Manualul purtătorului de cuvânt din instituțiile publice destinat uzului intern*, București, 2003, p.25.
- 26 Adriana Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 195.
- 27 *Manualul purtătorului de cuvânt din instituțiile publice destinat uzului intern*, București, 2003, p.27.
- 28 Adriana Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 200.
- 29 *Manualul purtătorului de cuvânt din instituțiile publice destinat uzului intern*, București, 2003, p.19.
- 30 Sinergologia was founded by the French actor and director Ph. Turchet. He made known his theory in the volume *Sinergologia. De la limbajul trupului la arta de a citi gândurile celuilalt*, 2000; *Codurile inconștiente ale seducției*, 2004.
- 31 Adriana Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 20-21.