

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Binary Oppositions In Media Argumentation



## *1. Introduction*

This paper addresses the study of relations between descriptive and normative argumentation models. It examines persuasive tools in a modern media text by introducing cognitive binary oppositions into the analysis.

These oppositions make a certain “reasoning scheme” that is lavishly used in the modern press. The approach taken in this paper might be called political linguistics; it aggregates diverse research programs mainly connected with the critical analysis of the language of politicians (speechwriters), journalists, TV presenters as well as the study of language in the decision making process, and types of persuasion and manipulation of the public. We argue that introducing binary oppositions into the analysis follows modern trends of complex approaches to linguistic data encompassing cognitive analysis, argumentation analysis and semantics.

In our introduction we deal with more basic foundations of the case study which is to follow in our main part. These bases deal with cognitive linguistics and structural semantics. At present, cognitive linguistics has achieved certain progress in defining mental spaces as small conceptual packets showing frames and scenarios as we think and engage in discourse; these conceptual packets map onto each other in intricate ways, and provide abstract mental structures for shifting viewpoints and directing our attention to very partial and simple structures. It has become possible to disclose an elaborate web of connections helping the memory for purposes of understanding and persuasion. These mental spaces are presented as very partial assemblies containing elements structured by frames and cognitive models that are interconnected and can be modified as thought and discourse unfold. From the cognitive point of view language is the process of real time perception and production of temporal signs and sequences that present discrete units but act in functional semantics as dynamic open systems. (Tretyakova 2006, pp.275-277). This type of analysis allows identifying language units in terms of dynamic procedures.

In structural semantics binary oppositions were looked upon as opposites which were studied in the field as semantic antonymy. Linguists identify three types of antonymy: (1) *Gradable antonyms*, which operate on a continuum: (very) *big*, (very) *small*. Such pairs often occur in binomial phrases with *and*: (blow) *hot and cold*, (search) *high and low*. (2) *Complementary antonyms*, which express an either/or relationship: *dead or alive*, *male or female*. (3) *Converse or relational antonyms*, expressing reciprocity: *borrow or lend*, *buy or sell*, *wife or husband*." (McArthur 1992). The modern cognitive paradigm allows us to broaden the concept of antonyms in linguistics by introducing inferences that could be drawn from the concepts of antonymy implying the procedure of choice on the one hand and the concept of binary opposition relying on the functional semantics of an evaluation process. Apart from words that disclose an inherently incompatible binary relationship, when making oppositions, it is the cognitive aspect of antonymy that makes these words function as effective persuasive tools. These oppositions allow the analyst to identify opposite points of view. In this paper we are more closely dealing with gradable antonyms which allow us to show the axiological aspect of binary oppositions used in argumentation schemes.

The argumentation scheme of a media text is best described through the pragma-dialectical approach as it allows us to identify stages of appearance of binary oppositions and their persuasive effect. In the pragma-dialectical approach of van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson and Jacobs (1993) natural argumentative discourse models were described through normative models which gave us tools for a more theoretically grounded identification of the argumentative force of utterances. We argue that the binary oppositions start argumentation situation in press forming public opinion. Daniel O' Keefe (2003) wrote on persuasive effects in presentation of normative vs. realistic argumentation. Although evasion, concealment and artful dodging are and should be excluded from an ideal model of critical discussion (van Eemeren et al., 1993, p.173) and clarity is crucial for argumentation, still in reality the ideal happens very seldom. The arguers might think that explicit articulation can undercut their persuasive success but we show that this is not the case especially from the vantage point of binary oppositions. In fact binary oppositions define the framework within which argumentation is built. They direct the argumentative vector of the arguer's reasoning. This is especially true in the case of arguments based on the notion of conflicting systems of belief. Beliefs are not independent of each other but make sense only within a system. Within these systems there are fundamental beliefs and there are peripheral

beliefs that are tempered by both empirical experience and the conceptual core content of the system of beliefs. Both kinds of beliefs may change over time or their location can change from periphery to core or core to periphery (Gough 2009). Argumentation can be represented in terms of the dynamics of binary oppositions: a thesis opposes an antithesis, an argument opposes a counterargument, a proponent opposes an opponent. An examination of these can easily unveil the conflicting system of beliefs depending on discourse type as every discourse is characterized by its own set of values that can be fundamentally at odds with the system of values of other types of discourse.

A binary opposition also deals with the aspect of categorization. The modern global world is full of opposites that could be defined through diverse categories – good opposes bad, big opposes small, right opposes left, night opposes day, old opposes young, and globalists oppose anti-globalists. These oppositions create society's beliefs and misconceptions of what is good and what is bad, or what is ethical and non-ethical, and from a young age we subconsciously conform to these without even knowing it, and even as adults we continue creating these oppositions in our minds when processing facts and evaluating facts. A binary opposition as a pair of opposites powerfully form and organize human thought and culture.

Linguistic, cognitive and argumentative aspects of “binaries” are interconnected interactive tools providing basic analytic categories for unveiling the manipulation technique in modern media. We would also like to add that the category of binary opposition is so deeply rooted in cognitive patterns that we cannot evade them as this concept is entailed into our cognition. We believe that an effective way of reasoning is through the appeal to the members of binary oppositions and analysts would do well to recognize this if they are to define the vector of an author's reasoning.

The focus of the present research is to analyze the linguistic representations of binary oppositions in argumentation structures in a debate in which each party has a different set of presumptions, equally basic and in conflict with each other. The case study chosen for analysis deals with an urgent debate going on in Russian/St. Petersburg media over the project proclaimed as a “Gazprom Tower” or later as an “Okhta Centre”.

## *2. Project history*

The Okhta Centre, the HQ building for Russia's state-controlled gas company Gazprom will be built in the Krasnogvardeysky district of St. Petersburg, on the bank of the Okhta River. Part of urban regeneration project aiming to reclaim the city's stature as a major European centre for culture and commerce, this community and business area is said to be the tallest building in St. Petersburg.

The 396 meter high Centre will be comprised of contemporary office buildings, apartment blocks, shops, cafes, restaurants, a library, a sports complex with a swimming pool, a recreational park, an embankment and boulevards. The development will also include a theatre and sculpture park, as well as a Modern Art Centre, plus the Museum of the History of the First Settlements in St. Petersburg.

The project initiators turned to foreign, not Russian, architects, inviting seven to submit designs. Six agreed: Jean Nouvel of Paris; Massimiliano Fuksas of Rome; the Swiss team of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron; Rem Koolhaas of Rotterdam; RMJM London; and Daniel Libeskind, who of course designed the master plan for the World Trade Center site. Among the six renowned architectural companies, the tender was won by the international architectural practice RMJM London Limited. RMJM renamed the Gazprom City as the Okhta Centre in March 2007. The first stage of the project was completed in November 2006. The skyscraper is expected to be built by 2010, and the entire project is scheduled to finish by 2016.

According to the competition-winning design, the Okhta Centre will be divided into three zones. The first zone, occupied by the skyscraper of the Gazprom administrative complex, is located in the triangle where the Okhta river meets the Neva river, will house offices, a parking area for 3000 cars and an IT center. The second zone situated north of the first, will incorporate additional social facilities such as a modern art museum, a multifunctional theatre and a concert hall. Situated to the south of the first, is the third zone proposed as potential development territory. The anchor facilities to be built by RMJM include a sports and leisure complex along with a swimming pool, an indoor ice rink, a fitness center and spa, a shopping center and an apartment hotel. The rest of the last zone will be kept for future investors and architects.

It is the height of the skyscraper that has caused controversy, for the proposed 400 meter high tower of the Gazprom Okhta Center will completely dominate St.

Petersburg's skyline. Its height of 396 meters exceeds the dimensions of the city's television tower (310 meters) and completely overshadows the tallest historical landmark – the spire of Peter and Paul Fortress (122.5 meters).

### *3. Okhta center debate*

The Okhta centre project has gotten big publicity and has been widely discussed in the Russian media with arguments put forward from both sides. For the linguistic analysis in this paper we shall consider the main arguments of both parties.

#### *3.1. Arguments for the Okhta centre project*

The argumentation of the proponents may be represented in the following way.

The standpoint of the proponents is an evaluative thesis:

*The construction of the ultramodern skyscraper in Saint-Petersburg will improve the image of the city.*

The understanding of this thesis is a necessary condition for its adoption. But it is not a sufficient condition. The reader must be ready to accept that the structure of his cognitive space may change for a new knowledge that will take the place of an accepted thesis. There is a possibility of rejecting theses or arguments subconsciously. This happens if the proposition of the thesis contradicts the system of thoughts, ideas and beliefs of the reader. In this case the thesis will be rejected however correct and persuasive the reasoning is. The reader's cognitive space rejects it before the argumentation starts. That means that the arguer should take precautions so that the thesis won't be rejected subconsciously at the stage of understanding. The thesis won't be rejected if it isn't at odds with the system of values, thoughts and beliefs of the reader. Since the arguer is not familiar with the mentioned above system (he can reconstruct the system hypothetically) he builds his reasoning appealing to the cognitive space that is shared by all members of the community (Goudkova 2009).

The reasoning employed mostly deals with binary opposition 'good – bad'. Language indicators in the thesis are "ultramodern" and "improvement". To support their standpoint the proponents put forward the following arguments:

(1) *The skyscraper is needed for the city 'development'. It will provide 'new jobs'. The construction will 'encourage the development' of Okhta – depressive industrial outskirts.*

- (2) *Like the Eiffel Tower Okhta-centre will become a 'new symbol' of the city and Saint-Petersburgers will 'love' it as Parisians like the Eiffel Tower.*
- (3) *The city lacks "fresh" architectural ideas. Peter the Great, the founder of Saint-Petersburg, was for 'innovation' and Gasprom follows his suit.*
- (4) *The construction is necessary for the 'rich taxpayer' to 'remain' in the city.*
- (5) *The site of the would-be skyscraper has no archeological significance but all artifacts, if any, will be saved.*

From pragma-dialectical perspective we consider the argumentation as a convergent one, for all premises appear to constitute separate reasons which independently converge on the conclusion (Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, 1992). We base our consideration on the simple fact that all arguments don't belong to one party but each argument represents a separate group. The analysis of the arguments shows that the arguer directs the argumentation vector to the positive member of the binary opposition "good - bad.

In the first argument the main binary opposition in the frame of which the reasoning is built is "development-regress". The arguer shows that the construction of the skyscraper will affect positively the development of the city. And he constructs the argumentation in such a way in order to activate the concept "development". Lexical indicators of the concept in question are "development", "new jobs", "encourage the development". The implications inferred from the argument are the following. Being an opponent of the construction means being an opponent of the city development which is needed especially in this depressive industrial region.

The second argument represents comparison argumentation. The skyscraper is compared to the world known Eiffel Tower in Paris. The Eiffel Tower used to cause a lot of dispute. Many citizens were opposed to the Tower as they considered it incompatible with the architecture of Paris. The proponents of the Okhta centre believe that the situation is the same. And the skyscraper is to become an Eiffel Tower of Saint-Petersburg. It will be appreciated by future generations. Concept-semantic analysis let us identify the structural binary oppositions. Similar to the first argument this is the opposition "development-regress". The lexical indicators for the positive member of the opposition are "new symbol" and "love". The adjective "new" has a clear positive connotation.

The third argument as well as the second is structured by the binary opposition

“development-regress,” the lexical indicators for which are “fresh ideas” “innovation”. The argument is supplemented by the argument from expert opinion. The expert is Peter the Great who designed Saint-Petersburg as the first European city in Russia and modernized and westernized Russia greatly. The Gasprom actions are compared to Peter the Great’s deeds. Like Peter the Great the company invited foreign architects to propose their designs to take part in the competition. The binary opposition “development-regress” is a universal opposition as it belongs to the cognitive system of all people. Development is always viewed as a positive concept and regress as a negative one.

The binary opposition that structures the fourth argument doesn’t belong to universal oppositions. The form of the opposition is “profitable –unprofitable” and it is a basic opposition for economic discourse, for in the field of economics the concept “economic profit” is at the same level as the concept “good”. Lexical indicators of the concept “profit” are “rich taxpayer” and the predicate “remain”.

The fifth argument is a factual argument, the proposition of which is that the site of the construction has no archeological significance. This argument can be considered as a counterargument and will be dealt with further. Normally factual arguments don’t represent any appellations to value system.

Thus the main concept to which the proponents appeal is the concept “economic development”. Saint-Petersburg is a big modern metropolis and should develop accordingly. Since it is an important industrial centre it can’t remain a city-museum. The proponents of the construction claim that the skyscraper is “good” for the city. The whole argumentation is build with that in mind.

### *3.2. Arguments against the Okhta centre project*

Similarly the argumentation of the opponents can be analyzed. The standpoint of the opponents is:

*The skyscraper will spoil the panoramic views of the city and ruin this city-museum*

The opponents hold opposite views and appeal to the negative member of the binary opposition “good – bad”. Language indicators of the appellations are the predicates “spoil” and “destroy”. These predicates have clear negative connotation thus directing the argumentative vector to the negative member of the opposition: “bad”.

The opponents support the claim with the following arguments:

(1) *The skyscraper will 'spoil' the historic view of the city. The ultramodern silhouette of the skyscraper will 'ruin' the familiar city skyline.*

(2) *The huge office centre will create 'traffic congestion' in the Krasnogvardeysky district and neighboring territories.*

(3) *The skyscraper 'ruins' the concepts of the founders of the city.*

(4) *The construction of the Okhta -centre will result in 'excluding' Saint-Petersburg from UNESCO World Heritage List.*

(5) *The construction site has archeological significance for there was a Swedish Fort of the 17<sup>th</sup> century there.*

We consider all the arguments as convergent ones by the same reasons we used to identify the proponents arguments as convergent. Conceptual-semantic analysis let us identify binary oppositions that structure the argumentation and single out lexical indicators of the main concepts. The opponents put forward their arguments directing the argumentative vector to the negative member of the opposition. The skyscraper is bad for Saint-Petersburg.

It can also be seen that the opposition binary "preserving traditions – destroying traditions" structures the argumentation of the opponents.

Lexical indicators in the first argument are the verbs "spoil" and "ruin". These are verbs with clear negative connotation that serve the arguer's intention to appeal to the negative member of the opposition bringing about negative images.

The second argument is a counterargument for the argument that the skyscraper will provide new jobs. The concept that is activated is the concept "economic development". But the opponents appeal to the negative aspects of the concept. Any concept is a complicated comprehensive structure with positive and negative aspects. That's why there is a possibility to appeal to different parts within the same concept. We deal with such reasoning in this argument. The opponents appeal to negative sides of development: "traffic congestion". Traffic problems are dire for Saint-Petersburg for it is situated on islands and with the increasing number of vehicles and the shortage of bridges across the Neva the situation is becoming worse and worse. That is why the argumentative force of the argument is very strong.

The lexical indicator in the third argument is the verb with negative semantics



“ruins”. It is the argument from tradition, for the proposed 396 meter high tower of the Gazprom Okhta Center would completely dominate St. Petersburg’s skyline – the building would be three times taller than anything currently standing nearby.

The fourth and the fifth arguments are factual. The lexical indicator in the fourth argument is “excluding” and it represents the appeal to the negative member of the opposition “preserving traditions – destroying traditions”. If Saint-Petersburg is excluded from UNESCO World Heritage List it will lose its uniqueness and become an ordinary metropolis. The fifth argument should be analyzed with the fifth argument of the proponents as these arguments represent two conflicting propositions. The opponents claim that the site has archeological significance while the proponents say that there is nothing there at all.

#### *4. Conclusion*

The case study of a “tower” concept in Russian argumentative media discourse with the help of binary oppositions allowed us to unveil major trends in organizing the discussion of the same topic in which the journalists hold opposing views on the problem. Both parties pursue a goal of winning the argument and persuading the audience that their position is the right one by building up their argumentation in the frame of a universal binary opposition “good-bad”. The proponents direct their argumentation to the positive member of the opposition, while the opponents to the negative member accordingly. To achieve that they appeal to different concepts which are inherent in the background cognitive knowledge of the audience. The argumentation of both parties is structured by the main binary opposition “good – bad” that takes the form of sub oppositions: “development-regress” and “preserving traditions – destroying traditions”.

Linguistically these oppositions are represented with lexical markers with positive and negative connotations. The identification of basic oppositions and sub oppositions in the argumentative debate with the help of a cognitive paradigm broadens the concept of antonyms in linguistics through introducing inferences that could be drawn from the concepts of antinomy implying the procedure of choice on the one hand and the concept of binary opposition relying on the functional semantics of an evaluation process on the other.

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