

# ISSA Proceedings 2002 - The Rhetorical Shift In Interviews: New Features In Russian Political Discourse



The result of modern dynamic global changes in the world has created special interest in the communicative process as a means for overcoming certain prejudices and transgressing boundaries in modern societies. This transgression is connected with the development of new paradigms in discourse analysis, which allow seeing the meaning of words, public speeches and interviews in relation to the overall global context part of which they are. This becomes especially important when the speeches political leaders make and interviews they give become part of virtual communication via the Internet. Their speedy translations into English expand the audience to global size and we believe that the functional rhetorical impact is not limited to direct actors of the interview situation.

We chose the genre of the interview as a subject of our paper because of its great potential in disclosing the interactive strategies of the participants and pragma-dialectical features of the resulting texts, the study of which, as we'll attempt to demonstrate, can further develop the argumentation theory. Besides, this type of communication is connected with the what is known as *source approach* (McNair, 1995, XIII).

In the Oxford English Dictionary, the interview is defined as a "face to face meeting for the purpose of a formal conference, between a representative of the press and someone from whom he wishes to obtain statements for publication". The genre of the interview appeared in the US in the middle of the 19th century. Two eminent figures are credited for having invented the interview: Horace Greely, editor of The New York Tribune, and James Gordon Bennett Sr, the proprietor of The New York Herald.

The rapid development of this genre in mid-nineteenth century came as a result of many factors, the most significant of which was the new perception of public figures. According to Christopher Silvester, the editor of The Norton Book of

Interviews, “The interview created for the reader an illusion of intimacy with celebrities” (Silvester, 1996, 5). He calls the interview “a broken-backed form of discourse which is necessarily partial” (op. cit., 3).

At the same time, “the interview technique grew from the familiarity of journalists and readers with verbatim court reports” (op. cit., 4). Therefore, from early on the form of interview has been earmarked by its connection to the court procedure. As will be shown below, its rhetorical structure still retains the idea of the two competing parties in a situation similar to the one in the courtroom. The difference lying in the fact that there are has two “consistent isotopies in legal discourse: its legislative level and its referential level” (Greimas, 1990, 102-106) whereas we have in the interview one referential level.

Rhetorical approach is connected with the pragma-dialectics as a theory and we follow the idea that the Aristotelian norm of successful persuasion is not necessarily in contradiction with the idea of reasonableness. Thus formal (a-rhetorical) approach is not necessarily looked upon as contradictory to anti-formal - functional, contextual one. Frans van Eemeren and Peter Houtlosser write of three levels of manoeuvring. “Rhetorical manoeuvring can consist of making a choice from the options constituting the *topical potential* associated with a particular discussion stage, in deciding on a certain adaptation to *auditorial demand*, and in taking policy in the exploitation of *presentational devices*” (Eemeren, Houtlosser, 1999, 165). Topical maneuvering in confrontation stage is conducive to the most effective choice among potential issues for discussion by restricting the disagreement space. Auditorial demand is creating a “communion” and by presentational devices following Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca new rhetoric concept, we believe that rhetorical figures attract attention and bring the change of perspective (Op. cit. 167). This changing perspective is of special importance to present-day public speaking in Russia.

Our paper focuses on rhetorical devices and argumentative techniques as they appear in the interviews given by Russian President Vladimir Putin in the course of the last three years from 2000 through 2002. The interest in the rhetorical features that appear in the public addresses of the new generation of Russian politicians rises from the fact that the latter are in stark contrast to the preceding practice of Soviet Public speaking. We can now say with confidence that the Soviet rhetoric based on unsubstantiated evaluative utterances demised together with the regime (Maslennikova, 1998). In their public appearances, the Russian

leaders of the interim period showed varying ability of public speaking, which attracted linguistic attention rather for its faults than for its merits. The new generation of leaders stands out for a considerably improved use of argumentation and ability to answer spontaneous questions, let alone correct use of grammar. In this respect, President Putin's interviews can serve as interesting and gratifying material for the study of subtext, allusions and tropes in argumentation.

Before we present our findings we would like to introduce the three basic ideas underlying our analysis:

1. From the vantage point of political discourse, we will follow the understanding of political language offered by Brian McNair, Denton and Woodward. These scholars stress the intentionality of political communication, which encompasses "all forms of communication undertaken by political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives" (McNair, 1999, 5). Political communication is normally connected with the struggle for power and establishing the dominant or more stable position in social environment. Though discourse theory constitutes a relatively new approach to political analyses, attention has been drawn to the articulation in political practices (Howarth 1995, 118; 124-127) including not only "collective actants" like political institutions and organizations (see a company as a collective actant for persuasive and interpretive analysis in Greimas Social Semiotics (Greimas, 1990) but individuals as well..

We claim one of these rhetorical shifts in interviews are in their pragmatic structure. The interviewer addresses his/her questions to the interviewee, who addresses his/her answers to the newspaper readers or televiewers. It is most obvious when we watch live interviews on television: the interviewee alternatively faces and addresses the viewers and the journalists. The interviewee is also prone to indirectly address the audience, both national and international through such statements as: "We would like the people of our countries to feel safe...". "Petersburg is known for its patriotism, it has always been a characteristic feature of its residents".

2. With all respect to the Bakhtinian School, we will attempt to deviate from the too well-established dialogical approach to text, and postulate that any text is, in actual fact, a combination of dialogical and monological constituents. Not to go into the extremes we will argue that a monologue is a certain a *speech momentum* in developing a topical content of one speaker. Either of these two

constituents can play the dominating role in the text's pragmatic structure, thus implementing the speaker's strategy. This strategy bears the influence of the speech genre: some genres are predominantly dialogical while others move the monological constituent to the front. Compare fiction and scientific discourse with the monological dominance in the latter. What is of significance for the purposes of this paper is the fact that while one of the constituents predominates in the text, the other one becomes covert, constituting the subtext which can be revealed through a set of markers.

3. Hence, we would argue that, paradoxical, as it may seem, interviews can be approached as two parallel argumentative texts, each of which is designed by the participants according to their communicative strategies. One of them, produced by the interviewee is explicit while the other which belongs to the interviewer remains implicit, and only occasionally comes to the surface of the text the genre of interview allows for an open battle of constituents since it is in the interview that the monologue and the dialogue are most obviously at odds with one another. The goal of the interviewee is to express his or her view on an issue, while the goal of the interviewer is to direct the communication in accordance with a certain scenario. The aggregate of the answers is an organized set of mini-monologues of varying length, which are integrated into a longer monologue. The predominance of the monological constituent in the speech of the interviewee is readily revealed in the fact that many interviews are published without the interviewer's questions, retain a sufficient semantic and pragmatic unity of the text.

The techniques of preparing the main message for the interviewees can be traced in President Putin's account of his conversation with President Bush prior to their joint press conference in Liubliana in June of 2001 (Johnson's Russia List #5312).

Putin: "I must say that I think from the very outset that I had a definite plan for our conversation just as he did. I suggested starting a discussion on specific issues, on those issues that provoke the greatest concern in the world, in relations between the two sides, and give rise to a certain atmosphere, to be specific, problems of antimissile defense."

He listened carefully and then said: "Listen, let us talk on the whole about how relations have developed between the two countries over the past few years, the state that we are now, and where we are now, and let us look to the future.

... I must say in this respect he definitely took the initiative and changed the

nature of the conversation but I was very pleased with this formulation of the question. I think that we did not utter just formalities at the news conference. A situation has indeed arisen that can be characterized by a fairly high level of trust.”

4. The communicative structure of the interview can be studied in reference to the actors' roles through defining the type of the interview. These interview types are fairly generalized forms like types of arguments, which are abstracted from any particular content (Tretyakova 1995) and they reflect the “communication key” which can be compared to a general code of conduct (Eemeren, 1996) where dispositional attitudes are disclosed within the interview proper. Apart from types there are certain schemes that reflect relations between what is stated as a premise and what is stated as a standpoint.

On the whole we analyzed 12 interviews given by President Putin to both Russian and foreign correspondents. These interviews fall into three main categories:

- a. *the unison interview* characterized by coinciding pragmatic strategies of the participants, or, as it were, an interview in which questions do not create any problems for the interviewee and allow him to express his ideas and views in full. In this case the interviewee lives up to the interviewers' expectation.
- b. *probing interviews* presuppose neutrality of the questions asked while the goal of these questions is to obtain extensive reaction to the burning political issues of which the interviewer becomes the mouthpiece;
- c. *aggressive interview*, whereby the interviewer's goal is to reveal the negative aspects of the interviewee's views, position and even personality. In the extreme cases the journalist may have in mind damaging the reputation of or completely destroying the political actor he interviews.

### 1. *Unison Interviews*

A unison interview is often used for public relation practices and there exists a presupposed agreement between the interviewer and the interviewee. Thus the space for topical maneuvering is extremely wide. In fact, the interviewer does not set any restrictions on the answers. On the contrary, he or she plays to the advantage of the celebrity interviewed. Consider a most recent example of the interview given to The Russian National Broadcasting Company (RTR) and one of Petersburg newspapers, “Nevskoe Vremia” on the 10th of June 2002.

Q.: “Vladimir Vladimirovich it is in some way symbolic that these days we are

celebrating the 330th birthday of Peter the Great, the tsar who had not only founded a new capital of the empire, but had also created this very special atmosphere for which the city is known. Since very early time, people have been talking of the spirit of St.Petersburg. What does it mean for you? Does it exist for you?"

Putin: "Yes, it does. It does exist for me, especially, because Petersburg was founded at the time which we call the golden days of Russian statehood. To a certain extent, it was a break-through into the future. And it is this spirit, the spirit of innovation, the spirit of pioneering, of breaking-through, which is, in my view, characteristic of Petersburg. However, that is not the whole story. I have not just randomly mentioned that Petersburg used to be the country's capital in the golden days of its statehood. It explains, in my opinion, the fact that Petersburg has never separated its destiny from the destiny of the rest of the state. In this sense, and in the best sense of the word, Petersburg is known for its patriotism, it has always been a characteristic feature of its residents.

As a young man I had practically never traveled out of town. When I finally visited an average Russian city - I was simply crushed because I had lived under the impression that all other cities in the country should be like Petersburg, like Leningrad. What am I driving at? I am driving at an idea that it is the architecture, it is the harmony, the harmony in everything - in the outlines of individual buildings, streets and parks - that shapes up the taste of any resident, whether he goes to the Mariinsky Theatre every week or not, whether he visits the Russian Museum or the Hermitage every month or not. The city itself makes an imprint on its residents, creating harmony in their souls and giving them an incentive to strive towards harmony in their lives. It is also very important, in my view, - I would say it is one of the distinguishing features of Petersburg and the people who live in this city."

In the excerpt above, we can reveal the following features of a unison communication:

- a. the complete accord between the interviewer and the interviewee, thus confrontational interaction is reduced almost to zero;
- b. the agreement on the predominantly positive axiological features of the evaluations;
- c. the implied comparison: in this case to the time of Peter the Great, which is flattering to the current president.

The role of the interviewer is to a large extent reduced to hinting to a topic and allowing the interviewee to freely and without interruption express his views on the issue.

As for president Putin's answer, we can observe his rhetorical arsenal, including shift of registers (cf. "Petersburg has never separated its destiny from the destiny of the rest of the state" as opposed to "I was simply crushed"), the use of rhetorical question as a composition organizing device ("What am I driving at?"), the construction of his remarks from general to the specific with vast examples from his own life.

## 2. *Probing Interviews*

A *probing interview* presupposes maximum objectivity on the part of the interviewer who makes a point of sticking to the facts rather than attitudes and assessments. Probing interviews are used for the disclosure of public image of elite actors or examination of some phenomenon.

The interviewee's space for maneuvering is to a large extent restricted by the nature of the questions. Besides, the monological constituent and most importantly the pragmatic function of the interviewer's text is implemented with the purpose providing direction for the answers.. Monological constituent here is so strong that the disclosure can be done as an Interview in a book form it happened with the book about V. Putin (Gevorkyan *et al.*, 2000) or the set of Interviews with Noah Chomsky following the attacks of September 11, 2001 on World Trade Center and the Pentagon which were compiled as a book (Chomsky, 2001).

Consider the following example from President Putin's interview to American journalists on the 12th of November 2001 (Johnson's Russia List #5541):

Q: "Mr. President, you supported the USA in this difficult and responsible time of war against terrorism without any preliminary conditions. What would you like to get in return and what result do you want to achieve?"

This is my first question.

My second question is concerned with the statement by bin Laden to the effect that he had nuclear weapons, which the media reported. Do you think this may be true? And a related question:

"Are you sure of the reliable safety of the Russian nuclear arsenal?"

Putin: "Let's begin with our vision of the results of our joint efforts in the struggle against terror and what we would like to see at the end of this joint work. To

begin with, we would like to see positive results of the joint efforts against terrorism, to attain a joint positive result, with terrorism eradicated, routed, liquidated not only in Afghanistan but also throughout the world.

We would like to root out the conditions that engender extremism of different stripes. We would like to liquidate the channels of financing extremism in all its forms. We would like the people of our countries to feel safe.

And lastly, the derivative result of this joint work. We would like to create such new relations between Russia and the USA that would enable us to develop relations in all other spheres of collaboration. We would like to create a new quality of our relations. And we would certainly like to see the USA as a reliable and predictable partner.

This strategic task is much more important, as I see it, than any short-lived material advantages.

As for the international terrorists' threat to use mass destruction weapons, we have had this in the Caucasus. As a rule, these threats are made and used to engender fear and uncertainty in the people, to influence the political leadership of the countries that are struggling against terrorism.

In the Caucasus this ended in an attempt to use home made jury-rigged devices, which could have an adverse effect on the environment. Indeed, they made such attempts, but they were ineffective. I think that in this sense the man you mentioned differs little from his disciples who are operating in the North Caucasus, in Russia. I would not overestimate the danger. But it would be likewise wrong to underestimate it, above all because we know about bin Laden's connection with some radical quarters in Pakistan. And Pakistan is a nuclear power after all.

And we certainly should extend all possible support to general Musharraf in all his undertakings designed to consolidate the public forces in the country, support his attempts to ensure the involvement of Pakistan in the struggle of the international community against terror" (Johnson's Russia List # 5541, 1-2).

The interviewer begins with stating the internationally acknowledged fact of Russia's support in the US war on terror voiced by President Putin immediately after the bombing of the Twin Towers in NY City. However, the question following this statement downplays the ethical value of Russia's position and focuses on the political and economic rewards Russia could be looking for in return for its position: "What would you like to get in return?" We can observe an immediate shrinking of the topical maneuvering space.



This is the point when the interviewer and the interviewee find themselves in a position similar to that of a courtroom. President Putin, finding himself in the position of the Council for the Defense and well-aware of the speaker's intention, implicitly returns to the initial point of discussion: *Russia and the US are equal partners in the fight against terrorism.*

However, towards the end of his answer, adhering to his principle of confronting and answering any question, he fires back: "This strategic task is much more important, as I see it, than any short-lived material advantages." By placing this part of his answer in the strong position at the end of his mini-monologue, he enhances its finality and importance.

The second question also starts with a statement. What makes it different from the first question is lack of proof which makes the speaker resort to reinforcement through reference to other sources: "the statement by bin Laden to the effect that he had nuclear weapons, which the media reported."

The nature of the question "*Do you think this may be true?*" is obviously different from the previous one: the interviewee is not limited in either the scope or direction of his answer. Hence, the change in the format of the response which turns into a mini-lecture on how to deal with information coming from the terrorists. Putin follows the classical pattern thesis-antithesis-synthesis:

*thesis:* these threats are made and used to engender fear and influence the political leadership;

*antithesis:* it would be wrong to underestimate the danger, because of bin Laden's connection with radical quarters in Pakistan. And Pakistan is a nuclear power after all;

*synthesis:* we should support General Musharraf's attempts to ensure the involvement of Pakistan in the struggle of the international community against terror."

Each part of President Putin's answer is supplied with argumentation ranging from statement of fact to the intentional repeated use of the Caucusus example which draws an implicit parallel between the war in Afghanistan and the Russian war in Chechnya.

The answer to the third question, presented somewhat on the sidelines but in actual fact, one of utmost importance: "*Are you sure of the reliable safety of the Russian nuclear arsenal?*" remains unanswered, which is a rare case for Mr Putin's interviews and Q and A sessions.

Another example of a probing interview is the one given by President Putin to the correspondents of the Russian newspapers "Izvestia," "Komsomolskaya Pravda," and "Trud" in March of 2001 (Johnson's Russia List #5135):

Q.: "You became president of the Russian Federation almost a year ago. What have been achieved since then? What are the successes; what are the failures?"

Putin: "We haven't achieved everything we planned. In my view, however, we've done the most important things. Specifically, we've made considerable progress toward strengthening Russian statehood. Remember the state we were living in? One in four regional laws was unconstitutional or counter to federal legislation. Two-thirds of regional laws have now been brought into compliance with the constitution."

One more example from the same interview illustrates the use of evaluative constructions with preceding argumentation:

For the sake of brevity, we will allow ourselves to summarize a fairly lengthy question.

Q.: "Why does Russia have to pay off the Former Soviet Union's debts while the other states of the former union refuse to recognize Russia's jurisdiction over the Former Soviet Union's property abroad which was supposedly granted in return for assuming the payments."

President Putin: "All this property is still considered Soviet, and therefore its ownership is considered debatable. But we are paying billions in debts on behalf of the former Soviet Union States. *That is why I don't think much of this decision.*"

### *3. Aggressive Interviews*

Aggressive interviews are of special interest for the purposes of this paper since they usually have negative assumptions or preconceived ideas as their point of departure. These are the texts in which the interviewer takes an active position in the course of the Q and A procedure. The interviewer's goal is to reveal the negative aspects of the interviewee's views, position and even personality. In the extreme cases the journalist may have in mind damaging the reputation of or completely destroying the political actor he interviews. It is a very challenging dialogue where presentational devices play an important role, as they are signs of an instrumental relation between the premise and the standpoint.

The complexity of aggressive interview lies in the shifts that may lead to the preference of disagreement instead of resolution of the discussion. One of the

goals of this interview not just to seek information but to argue certain points of view. The convergence of topical potential, auditoria demand and rhetorical devices may form a comprehensive expressive interview. By expressive function we mean emotional intensity of speech strategies that is reflected in the expressive syntax - repetitions, split sentences, pseudo-questions and figurative speech with metaphors and catchphrases.

One example of this kind of interviews is Putin's interview to a Canadian Correspondent Michel Cornier CBC. It starts with a brief introduction and a general question "Have you decided, Mr President, to give a pardon to Mr. Edmund Pope?"

Putin (translation):

"According to the legislation in force in the Russian Federation, such a decision may be effective only after a decision of the court. It will be effective on December 14 at midnight, since then I can take as decision."

Cornier,CBC:

"Have you decided, Mr. President, to give a pardon to Mr. Edmund Pope?"

Putin (translation):

"According to the legislation in force in the Russian Federation, such a decision may be effective only after a decision of the court. It will be effective on December 14 at midnight. Only after that can I make a decision."

Translation2:

"Under our legislation such a decision can only be taken after the decision by court, the court verdict has entered into a force and that will happen on the 14th December 14th at zero hours. And I will be in a position to take that decision only after that."

Here we have repetition of the same question and three ways of translation from Russian into English which show the importance of the issues under discussion and

1. give the audience readers right for the interpretation by analyzing the differences;
2. to take over the attention of the audience and
3. to take the initiative for topical maneuvering. The next offered topic is the images of the two countries:

Cornier CBC:

"Mr. President, the image Canadians have of the relationship between Russia and

Canada is about hockey. Now what image *do you want to project about Russia* to Canadians and the image that *you want to project about yourself to Canadians?*”

Putin (translation):

“The impression which has been with regard to hockey during first match between national team and Russian team in 1972 - we are good neighbours. We are strong states/ We have things to be proud of/ We are almost neighbours in our territory in the North/ We are in a position to resolve our issues on a good neighbourly position and we have the prospects of resolving our common problems jointly.”

Cornier CBC:

“What image do you have of Canada? *Do you know the country at all?*”

Putin (translation):

“It is not very difficult to make a conclusion with regard to what kind of country Canada is because I visited that country just one time about six years ago. I was in the south of Canada in one of scientific centers and in addition I have to say that we are very similar countries with regard to sizes of our territories. We are vast countries. Russia. As we know is the largest country as to its territory in the world and Canada follows in that list.”

Here we have pointed out appealing questions that can be interpreted as arrogant - projecting images and not expressing sincere attitude and insulting the interviewee by implying the lack of knowledge on the issue. Mr. Putin, taking no offence changed the key of the interview into positive mood by saying that Canada is a powerful state and that there is a very favourable attitude towards the country in Russia especially in terms of hockey.

The Interviewer leads his energetic path and the shift to assault appears in series of assertions and questions where modality plays an important role:

Comier, CBC:

“Mr. President, Canadians have maybe a bad image of Russia, the wrong image but they think it's a place that you can't really do business, that it's maybe poor or not yet very organized. Can you say anything to Canadians? Can you do anything to change that perception?”

Putin (translation):

“First of all, we have to root out those problems which do exist in reality and secondly objectively and in full to show the real picture of life in our country. It is true that we cannot say that our population is fairly rich. We cannot say that our population is rich - there are many low-income people and there are lots of poor

people. This is a fact.”

It is obvious that in his answer Mr. Putin is reflexive and he is giving comment on the posed questions using statements with modals as well. This proves the fact of rhetorical competence of Vladimir Putin because in his replies he does not omit forwarded unpleasant inquiries. He is reflexive as to the content and continues his speech program using the same wording but in another key thus introducing the rhetorical shift into a non-aggressive speech programme.

In the aggressive interviews that made the interviewee usually resorts to rhetorical figures as a means of expanding the maneuvering space. Here are some used by Vladimir Putin in a number of his interviews: *I'll kiss you later if you still want it* - a popular quotation from Russian version of "Charlie's Aunt" meaning a mild threat; *We'll keep the flies separate from hamburgers* - a popular saying meaning one should solve the problem after proper analysis; *Where is the money?* referring to the money which disappeared in the off-shore investments of the Russian oligarchs. These rhetorical figures occupying strong positions in the president's' statements create a rhetorical shift enhancing the communicative strength of the statement.

### *Conclusion*

The analysis of interviews given by Russian president V. Putin allows to conclude that modern Russian political discourse is based on classical rhetorical forms and that the interview as a genre is an effective form of political discourse serving as modern means of information exchange which expands the number of interview actors.

Rhetorical shifts in Interviews are connected with the interpretation of the interview as a discourse form with asymmetrical pragmatic structure when the addressee is shifted via TV, radio, the Internet to an extremely wide audience. This leads to a considerably more complex interaction whereby the actual effect of the Q and A exchange drifts into the domain of virtual communication.

Rhetorical shifts as we have tried to show are connected with the juxtaposition of two constituents: the dialogical and the monological one. The prevailing position of either of them allows to distinguish three types of the interviews. The *unison interview* is characterized by coinciding pragmatic strategies of the participants. There is actually no confrontation stage and both the premise and the standpoint are similar, reflecting the relations of analogy. Both speech strategies are based on predominantly coinciding axiological features of the evaluations. The role of

the interviewer is to a large extent reduced to the interviewee to freely and without interruption cover the whole of the topical space.

*Probing interviews* presuppose neutrality of the questions asked while the goal of these questions is to obtain extensive reaction to the burning political issues of which the interviewer becomes the mouthpiece. Relations between the premise and the standpoint are symptomatic, showing credibility and concomitance.

*Aggressive interviews*, whereby the interviewer's goal is to reveal the negative aspects of the interviewee's views, position and even personality. The interviewer's questions restrict to a minimum the interviewee's topical maneuvering space, making the latter resort to indirect means of expression and rhetorical figures, including communicative idioms. It is this type of an interview where the relations between the premise and the standpoint is an instrumental one leading to the use of diverse presentational devices of both actors. Reflexive strategy and rhetorical figures that attract attention become of special importance here.

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