

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Polyphony Of Interpretations In Providing Argumentation In Modern Media Text



The 21st century political discourse has mass media as its integral part in supplying persuasive tools influencing the public. In political communication mass media can be interpreted as a certain mediator between people and the politically elite. This mediating process can be carried out through the various communicative function roles that journalists use in providing information directly or indirectly. These are the role of the direct presenter (direct speech), the story-teller (indirect speech), the interviewer (question-comment procedure), and the commentator (analytical narrative speech). These roles and corresponding types of speech always have references to some precedent texts. Thus information is provided not through one voice, but through many voices construing the polyphony of the media text, both oral and written.

The polyphony of interpretations as a mass media phenomenon is understood as the processing of fragmented meanings coming from different sources used by journalists on the TV screen, the computer screen or on paper presentation. There can be a chain of actual and fictitious senders and receivers, often intentionally quoting the same messages referring to the same events but implying different interpretations. The vector of devising polyphony lies both in presentation and in interpretation of fragments which can be compared to “clips” of different styles and carrying out different functions. The communication participants may be separated from each other in time and /or space, and the gaps can be bridged through various means of recording and transmission or interpretation.

In terms of linguistic semantic theory the object depicted by the text is reduced to the meanings that could be deduced by the receiver via getting signs of the reliability of the information. These signs form a system which is inherent in the text. Here we argue that it is through Peircian semiotics that we can define some major chords in the language of the media text.

Charles Sanders Peirce (1931-1958) introduced the *interpreter* and the *interpretant* to his semiotic system. The interpreter designates the receiver and decodes the message. The result of the decoding can be stated with certain accuracy only by introspection. Whereas, the interpretant is the key which the interpreter uses in order to understand the message and it is the interpretant that the linguist uses in constructing the semantic structure of the object. There is one more aspect in Peircian theory of interest to the language analyst dealing with media texts. This is the idea that all three types of signs: *index*, *icons* and *symbols* can be identified in the media text. Originally the main distinction between these signs was in the domain of observable or unobservable planes of expression. An index has a visual message, an icon is a visual message which has some integrated meaning, and a symbol is a sign connected with the referent only by certain conventions. Actually it is the conventional rules that make the symbols interact within a system. These signs are not separate classes. Peirce (1985) considers them as *modes* where one can become predominant over the others, and notes that there are no demarcation lines between the signs. (Peirce, 1985, pp.166-171). In addition, the researches in developmental psychology have shown that conventional signals appear in constant interaction between these three types of signs (Bates, 1979, pp. 33-68).

We extrapolate this idea into media text as a text combining these three types of signs. Here a hypothesis can be drawn that when referring to a particular event, or particular words in the domain of indexes is constructed, when using visual messages, including photos, caricatures in press, For example, in the case where icons interact with indexes we deal with complex modes and when terms, slogans are concerned with we are mostly concerned with symbolic communication. The polyphony in interpretation of concepts from the vantage point of the sign system can be connected with symbols, indexes, and icons.

The main concern of this paper is to show the polyphony of the modern press in providing argumentation from the point of view of “political linguistics” as a part of discourse linguistics, bearing in mind Peircian semiotics. First, some aspects of political linguistics as a special discipline will be covered. Then the focus will turn to signs as symbols and indexes, finally different types of *ipse dixit* functions used by journalists in the press will be covered.

Discourse linguistics is connected with different text genres that can deal with a variety of research paradigms (Tretyakova, 1999). According to rhetorical tradition there are three genres which are forensic, deliberative and epideictic

having a common characteristic of trying to persuade an audience. The forensic genre relates to judicial situations, the epideictic to ritual and the deliberative one relates to political situations. (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1994, p.145). It is the deliberative genre that underlies the modern tendency in shaping the study of the language of politics as an independent discipline.

This discipline has been called “political linguistics”. Unlike political discourse analysis that mostly deals with the political constituent and the interpretation of social practices aimed at reaching consensus, political linguistics is aimed at identifying the typical language forms used as functional tools of communication within political discourse. In actuality, this discipline combines diverse research programs concerning the critical analysis of the politicians’ language, the study of language in the decision making process, and types of persuasion and methods for manipulating the public.

Political discourse has certain characteristics that distinguish it from ordinary discourse. It refers mainly to the specific use of “ordinary” words and includes a certain number of specific terms. There are even special genres such as debates, interviews, meetings and diverse media forms as a way of influencing society. Political communication is normally connected with the struggle for power and establishing the dominant or more stable position in the social environment. Though discourse theory constitutes a relatively new approach to political analyses, attention has been drawn to articulation in political practices including not only “collective actants” like political institutions and organizations, but also individuals. When dealing with the language as a persuasive instrument through which diverse political programs are undertaken we can look at it as a sign system dealing with different interpretations. The two major domains of interpretations discussed here are based on the language structures reflecting rituals and quotations.

Rituals are associated with symbols. *Symbolic interpretation* of a sign is connected with a learned, agreed upon contiguity. The relations between symbols of the system are regulated through conventional rules. The symbols of political discourse have transplanted certain ideas and concepts into the social conscience. Such notions as “freedom”, “democracy” and “justice” can imply a number of different and competing meanings. Each of these concepts may have different interpretations and practices. Frans H. van Eemeren (1996), for example writes: The representative system of Anglo-Saxon-type democracy, with its technocratic

style and ineffective way of policy making, may easily undermine popular support for democracy, especially in Eastern Europe where the newly-developed democracies need to carry out a stringent program of social and economic reforms (p.8).

Indeed, by the end of the 1990s the term “democrat” had become a derogatory one in Russia. In order to make the organizational system function well one should observe four different dimensions:

- (a) the *rational* dimensions that refers to formal structural aspect of the system;
- (b) the *social* dimension dealing with human resources;
- (c) the *political* dimension that pertains to the power aspect and
- (d) the *symbolic* dimension that relates to the ceremonial, ritual aspect of the system. “It is only if all these four dimensions are given their proper due that the organizational system is likely to appreciate the full depth and complexities of the real-life practices” (pp. 9-10).

Nowadays the term ‘empire’ has become ambiguous in its interpretation:

Today, the ‘American empire’ is a term of approval and optimism for some and disparagement and danger for others. Neoconservatives celebrate the imperial exercise of US power which in a modern version of Rudyard Kipling’s “white man’s burden” is a liberal force that promotes democracy and undercuts tyranny, terrorism, military aggression and weapons proliferation. Critics who identify an emerging American empire, meanwhile, worry about its unacceptable financial costs, its corrosive effect on democracy, and the threat it poses to the institutions and alliances that have secured US national interests since World War II (Foreign Affairs, 2004, p.37).

The transfer of concepts through language is specifically evident in totalitarian regimes which took place in Fascist Germany and Soviet Russia. At present, hegemony practices of introducing “dominant rules that structure the identities of discourses and social formations” are concealed under liberal and democratic rhetoric. It happened in the Conservative Party policy during M. Thatcher time (Howarth, 1995, pp.124-127) and is taking place in present US foreign policy. An example illustrating how hegemony is achieved can be drawn from Humpty Dumpty’s conversation with Alice in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*. (Carrol 1987):

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “It means just what I choose it to mean. Neither more nor less.”

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "who is the master. That is all" (p.124). The concept of hegemony is centered on who is going to master the situation. That is to say, it depends on the choice of political force that is going to decide the dominant forms of conduct and the meaning in a given social context. This has reference to the language of ideologies. Here we come across such symbolic rhetoric.

Another area of political language analysis is connected with the analysis of propaganda language. They are known sometimes referred to as Political Doublespeak. Examples of this are Haigspeak, Nukespeak, Falkland talk, Clintonspeak, Gorbachevspeak etc. All this political jargon is pretty close to what G. Orwell (1984) in "1984" called "Newspeak" and could be characterized by the overuse of clichés, euphemisms, and references to the past. Many of these language issues are found in modern political discourse. The globalization process, happening now due to the electronic means of communication, depends a lot on the use or overuse of clichés and stereotypes.

A certain move from symbolic interpretation to an indexical one can be shown in the interpretation of politically correct language and in number of euphemistic journalese phrases. When speaking of the language of political correctness or euphemisms we can speak of *indexical symbols* or symbols conveying an indirect meaning. They can be judged as indexes as they demonstrate reference to certain concepts "clicking" to a different scheme and tone. The manipulation is carried out through reference to the same object carrying other connotations such as: *tax increase = revenue enhancement; used car = pre-owned car, pre-driven car; married=formerly single* etc. Such phrases are starting to be used in the press as journalese euphemisms: *ethnic cleansing= genocide; destroy=suppress the target; to lie= to be economical with the truth; active air defense = air bombing raid; pacification=punitive operation; collateral damage=unintended killing of civilians* etc.

Further examples can be provided by politically correct English when ordinary words are replaced by politically correct ones. Such example include: "stewardess", "secretary", "fireman" and "poor" when replaced nowadays by "flight attendant", "office administrator", "firefighter" and "culturally deprived" respectively. As a result it is clear that this language change has been

purposefully done. We can speak of a certain “political diglossia” as we see differences between ordinary language and political language, as well as ordinary language and propaganda language.

There are all sorts of clichés and catchphrases with reference to the precedent texts: “We did the best, you know the rest” (The phrase by Russian Vice-President Tchernomyrdin) or “Process is underway” (Gorbachyov); “I have a dream” (M.L.King); “Speak softly and always carry a big stick” (Roosevelt). Some phrases have become comment clichés without any references to a particular person: “There’ll be a holiday in our street.” “A fish rots from the head first”. “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours”. These phrases are constantly on the move and they start to be used in everyday speech as comment ironic or sarcastic phrases. Such program slogans “Economy should be economical” (Brezhnev); “New Frontier” (Kennedy); “Axis of evil” (Bush) can be met as catchphrases in everyday speech.

Political Doublespeak as a sign and a special code may hold the whole model of expression that deals more with purposeful violation of maxims of cooperation. Dealing with the textual implicatures and interpretations of speeches by journalists are is particularly interesting. An example of this can be taken from the following Bush statement made in 1999 concerning Affirmative Action cited by A Reznikov (2002):

I support the spirit of no quotas and no preferences. But it’s important to say it’s not what you’re against but what you’re for. In our state, I am for increasing the pool of applicants, opening the door so that more people are eligible to go to the university system. (p.77) This statement got two interpretations: “The Washington Post” thought that the President supported Affirmative Action and a “New York Times” correspondent thought that he attacked it (pp.77-78).

Some statements of political bizarre provide analysts with unique material for interpretation. Quite interesting or rather weird is the Bill Clinton’s comment on the meaning of the ambiguity English verb “to be”: “It depends on what the meaning of the word “is” is, and never has been, that’s the one thing. If it means there is none that was a completely true statement.” (p.86). The interpretation of the existential predicate is shifted into the sphere of tense/aspect mode. Thus ambiguity of interpretation allows camouflaging the very idea of interpretability. This hoax of intentional misleading has become one distinctive feature of modern political discourse.

One more US President’s statement concerns such abstract categories as “the

truth” and “time/tense” reconstruction: So that anyone generally speaking in the present tense saying that was an improper relationship would be telling the truth if that person said there was not, in the present tense – the present tense encompassing many months. (cited in Reznikov, 2002, p. 86) The concept of “truth” is tainted with the concept of “power” as the latter one establishes the norm for interpretation of the truth.

These newspeaks of political figures provide analysts with a number of aphoristic devices and fallacious arguments. Thus, it is possible to conclude that political discourse may be looked upon as an example of argumentative discourse aimed at producing a change in political and social paradigm or a change in the coverage of some old problems.

The third type of interpretation lies in the sphere of *iconic* presentation where pictorial and verbal information play an interactive part. This is extremely important nowadays especially keeping in mind the clip information effect in for example the situation caricatures. Caricatures can be interpreted as icons and iconic text as an act of code – making. In this respect iconism is not a single phenomenon. The polyphony here is construed in two domains of discourse practices – the visual and narrative. The structure is composed of two frame types which are referred to as pictorial and textual. The pictorial frame deals with background and key objects interacting with the headline, the lead. The content of the article interacts in the argumentative scheme. The interpretation of the icon, symbol and index scheme may lie in the sphere of looking for precedent texts and situations.

Having observed the interaction of symbols, indexes and icons in the interpretation of the language of media text it is necessary to stress the importance of the triad <Language – Text – Discourse> within the framework of the existing paradigms for political language research. The first is dealing with signal units. The second deals with the code in both articulation and the functions producing the text-type, and the third deals with the argumentative scheme.

The pragma-dialectical approach for argumentative analysis proves to be very fruitful as it includes philosophical, theoretical, empirical, analytical, and practical components. It is based on the assumption that a philosophical ideal of reasonableness must be developed from which a theoretical model for acceptable argumentative discourse can be derived (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992). Ordinary dialogue provides us with lots of discrepancies which can still be

encompassed by the pragma-dialectical approach. The study of argumentation is approached with four basic meta-theoretical premises, each of which represents a point of departure from other contemporary perspectives, that is externalization, socialization, functionalisation and dialectification. These factors in the notion of argumentation are realized by making use of pragmatic insights from discourse, conversational analysis and dialectical insights from critical rationalist philosophy and dialogical logic.

From the philosophical point of view crucial the model of critical discussion that provides the procedure for establishing whether or not a standpoint is defensible is in grounding the pragma-dialectical theory. The model specifies various stages and rules of the resolution process, and the types of speech acts used at each particular stage. The rhetorical insight helps to define strategic maneuvering in resolving the differences of opinion. (Houtlosser, 2001). From the linguistic point of view there appears to be a certain symbiosis of pragmalinguistics, functional semantics and dialectics.

The most obvious language structure dealing with the polyphony concept is the citation and quasi-citation structures. The argumentative scheme in providing polyphony of voices through direct or indirect citation actually camouflages the tendency to manipulate readers. The argumentative scheme in providing polyphony of voices through direct, indirect and quasi citation. Starting with the medieval exempla citing was later used as a type of reference to the authority in obtaining approval for reasonable statements and actions. It became an index of truth providing a special universal form of a speech act which defined the act of perception of other speech acts connected with the idea of truth. Guaranteed truth of statements used as citations is used by journalists now as a preconceived idea. Coherence of utterances with citation is based on the structural (i.e. semantic and argumentative) relations of the primary speech genre and the secondary one. As it has been shown argumentative schemes, thesis, and arguments present a diverse interactive field for uncovering the relations between types of quotations and premises and arguments (Tretyakova & Smirnova, 2005).

One of the most popular types of type argumentum, *ad ipse dixit*, deals with theological grounds. The function of the analysis is the imperative for action as follows from the example:

A 20 - storey tower block should be built 50 meters from the entrance of the Tate

Modern.

Ken Livingstone, London's mayor, takes a similar view, because the project includes affordable homes.

A spokesman for London Town said that the building would "boost the vitality of the area" and that the project would include a grant for environmental improvements

(*Guardian*, July 9, 2003, p.9.)

Here the action is justified by the noble goals beneficial for most of the people. Benefactors are respectable people of the community.

The polyphony of textual structure, devised by the interaction of an argument and certain appeals is expressed by the embedded proposition. For example, the arguments at the primary and secondary levels can interact. For example, *ad vericundiam* interacts with the argument *ad populum*. Instead of developing the premise proof the persuasion procedure is psychologically concerned with different appeals/references such as appeals to material wealth, public interests, fairness etc. (pp.85-86). In the analysis of cited *ipse dixit* arguments different functions can be drawn out. These are referential as in a previous example, metalingual if the citation has one more reference to other words, emotive when the argument has reference to emotions:

The focus of attention is dealing with the threat of uncertainty. Among other functions the aesthetic function of humour or irony can be mentioned. For example, M. Chirac never achieved anything substantial. "Le Point" magazine illustrated his often unremarkable and sometimes ropery career by a joke about the man who falls from a skyscraper and shouts at each floor: "So far, so good." (*Times*, March 15, 2002, p. 26)

The difference between pseudo citations and citations lies both in the structural and functional sphere with quasi-citations being more multi-functional with conative, aesthetic, phatic, and poetic functions.

Conclusion.

It is possible to conclude that political discourse may be looked upon as an example of argumentative discourse aimed at producing a change in the political

and social paradigm or a change in coverage of some old problems. Along with political discourse we can speak of political linguistics which can be called an integrated discipline incorporating political discourse methods and the apparatus of communicative linguistics. In the study of political discourse and political linguistics rhetoric and argumentation theory are incorporated into linguistic research.

Discursive practices of modern media texts with “clip” structures and the “clip mentality” of the receivers make Peircian semiotics applicable to the interpretation of the text. The concept of the interpretant allows interpreting symbols, indexes and icons as modes showing multidimensional communicative reality in a media text. One of these structures used in modern press as a specific means of persuasion is connected with citation.

Framing political discourse as a metaphorical battlefield allows looking at the language as a means of combat and communicative situations as strategies. Linguistic discursive analysis focuses on ritualized communication, political doublespeak, the procedure of decision making, and the resolution of confrontations. We can conclude that political linguistics refers to the study of the language of persuasion in the political sphere (including the language of the mass media) and it is part of argumentation studies as it concerns pointing out various persuasion devices.

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