

УДК 811.111

POLITICAL MYTH AND PHANTOM ENEMY
E.N. Molodychenko (Архангельск, Россия)

Е.Н. Молодыченко. Политический миф и фантом врага. В статье представлен обзор лексико-грамматических, семантических и риторических языковых инструментов реконтекстуализации реальности в политическом дискурсе. На основе анализа дискурса американских президентов делается вывод о том, что наиболее эффективными и наиболее распространенными методами моделирования альтернативной реальности в данном дискурсивном пространстве являются номинализация, семантическая неопределенность, гиперлексикализация (эвфемизация) и метафоризация.

Ключевые слова: модель, политический дискурс, реальность, реконтекстуализация.

Є.М. Молодиченко. Політичний міф та фантом ворога. У статті представлено огляд лексико-граматичних, семантичних та риторичних мовних інструментів реконтекстуалізації реальності у політичному дискурсі. На основі аналізу дискурсу американських президентів робиться висновок про те, що найефективнішими та найпоширенішими методами моделювання альтернативної реальності у цьому дискурсивному просторі є номіналізація, семантична невизначеність, гіперлексикалізація (евфемізація) та метафоризація.

Ключові слова: модель, політичний дискурс, реальність, реконтекстуалізація.

E.N. Molodychenko. Political myth and phantom enemy. The article presents an analysis of lexico-grammatical, semantic and rhetoric language means of recontextualizing reality in political discourse. On the basis of the analysis of American presidents' discourse it is concluded that the most efficient and widely spread methods of modeling an alternative reality in this discursive space are nominalization, semantic ambiguity, over-lexicalization, and metaphorization.

Key words: model, political discourse, reality, recontextualization.

It's more or less a common knowledge that politics, at its core, is all about persuasion [Mutz et al., 1996: 1-2]. And since political action is primarily a discursive action it all boils down basically to using language in the form of text and talk to produce changes of whatever sort in reality. Such a posit draws upon the generic idea permeating the major part of discourse analysis research papers that, as Fairclough states it, "texts as elements of social events have causal effects – i.e. they bring about changes" [Fairclough 2003: 9]. Most immediately and directly, texts can

trigger changes in our knowledge (we can learn things from them), our beliefs, our attitudes, values etc. They also have long-term causal effects. Texts can start wars, or bring about changes in education, or industrial relations etc. Their effects can include changes in the material world, such as changes in urban design and architecture. All in all, texts have causal effects upon, and contribute to changes in, people, actions, social relations, and the material world [Ibid.: 9].

On the other hand, texts can be seen as reflecting reality i.e., stated in terms of critical discourse analysis, they can represent certain social practices with a vague measure of accuracy. In other words, representation always involves recontextualization [see Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999: 96]. In this way, as it is widely noted in political, social and linguistic literature likewise, political discourse (as an aggregate of texts functioning in realm of politics) is heavily responsible for creating what is known as a political myth, i.e. a different sort of reality which has little or nothing to do with the order of things 'out there' and is created inter- and intratextually.

This twofold approach to texts both reflects and restates the key theoretical notion of discourse as advocated by critical analysts which assumes a dialectical relationship between particular discursive events and the situations, institutions, and social structures in which they are embedded: on the one hand, these situational, institutional and social contexts shape and effect discourse, on the other hand discourses influence social and political reality. In other words discourse constitutes social practice and is at the same time constituted by it [Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999: 92].

In this paper it will be contended that certain transformations in the process of recontextualizing social practices can be traced back to specific linguistic means and that such means can go a long way towards creating political myths. We will present a description of several linguistic means that, as our analysis shows, are widely used in political discourse and we will supply the descriptions with examples from American presidential discourse.

One of the most popular means of creating distorted representations in political discourse and other discourses geared towards persuasion ends and otherwise is *nominalization* [Fairclough 2003: 144-145; van Dijk 2008: 826]. Linguistically nominalization is an incongruent metaphorical representation of a process. Thus, we can say that entities are congruently represented by nouns and processes are congruently represented by verbs which allows for all the semantic roles like agents and patients [Fairclough 2003: 144]. Nominalizations, au contraire, eliminate semantic roles and such grammatical categories as tense and mood. They reflect reality not in terms of processes and actions as represented by verbs but in terms of objects and entities, that is, as 'reified processes', represented by nouns. As nouns, nominalizations can take on the roles, functions, and characteristics of nouns [Dunmire 2005: 490]. These phantom entities act as phantom agents in the transitivity structure of the texts and can become responsible for certain actions. Consider, for

example, the following phrases uttered by G.W. Bush in his speeches in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy:

If we wait for **threats to fully materialize**, we will have waited too long [Bush 2002a].

We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst **threats** before **they emerge** [Bush 2002a].

This **threat hides** within many nations, including my own [Bush 2002b].

In the above we see the abstract entity ‘treat’ performing actions and activities as an agent. No specific agent that can really be the cause of an action or process is indicated though.

What is more, since process is being *metaphorically* represented as an entity it actually has the ability to acquire the properties of a physical entity, so it can be seen or otherwise perceived and even obtains physical dimensions. Consider the following:

Today in Iraq, we **see a threat** whose **outlines are far more clearly defined**, and whose consequences could be far more deadly [Bush 2002c].

In this example the physicality of the phantom entity is evoked by the usage of what is known in NLP theory as the visual predicates – the verb *see* and predicative *clearly defined*.

Another popular means is *semantic ambiguity*. One of the basic ways to convey ambiguity and ‘talk something, but say nothing of substance’ is to use lexical items with very vague, ambiguous rational semantics but very strong emotional component to them. There are many ways to use this one in political persuasion and myth formation. One way these means can be harnessed in construction of political myths is when politicians polarize themselves and their enemies or political rivals. Consider the following examples:

I will continue reaching out to friends and allies, including our partners in NATO and the European Union, to promote **development and progress**, to defeat the terrorists, and to encourage **freedom and democracy** as the alternatives to **tyranny and terror** [Bush 2004].

In the abovementioned we see ambiguity evoked by the usage of abstract nouns *development, progress, freedom, democracy, tyranny, terror*. The thing about such abstract nouns is that they convey very little sense in terms of rational semantics, i.e. one might find difficult to say what is meant by them exactly in terms of concrete, measurable items [see also Lazar and Lazar 2004: 227-230]. Such equivocal construal leaves the interpreter to inhabit them with almost any meaning which rings true given their knowledge, beliefs, attitudes etc. What is quite certain, though, is that the first four nouns are markedly positive in appraisal of whatever entity they refer to. This gives the speaker an opportunity for positive self-presentation by way of connecting with the ‘good things’ (like *development and progress*) and distancing from the ‘bad things’ (*tyranny and terror*), without stating anything in particular. It is contended that in such cases there is a conflict of pragmatics of self-referential lexical items used to describe certain phenomena, not the conflict of intrinsic properties of

the external phenomena themselves (the existence of which in reality is quite hard to witness).

Another way to recontextualize a situation or a social practice in a skewed and warped manner is to *over-lexicalize* it in text. Given the hypothesis of there being an isomorphism of some kind between syntax of the sentence and the way the situation it models is perceived by the recipient [see Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 129-133; Lakoff 1987: 54-55 for discussion], we can suggest that the abundance of lexical items used in a string of sentence(s) to represent an event or a situation will bias the perception of the situation, with multiplicity of similar lexemes (used simultaneously) accounting for the intensity of the experience. In other words, when more or less the same situation is described with multiple lexical items of more or less identical meaning, a very specific sense is foregrounded. Consider, for example, the following:

We've seen innocent people taken from their homes, forced to kneel in the dirt, and sprayed with bullets; Kosovar men dragged from their families, fathers and sons together, lined up and shot in cold blood [Clinton 1999].

In the above we can see that the second sentence is merely a reiteration of the same model 'wrapped up' differently in terms of lexico-grammatical choices (cf.: people taken from their homes → men dragged from their families; forced to kneel in the dirt → lined up; sprayed with bullets → shot). Another way to illustrate this means is to show how the situation gets (intentionally?) overlexicalized in discourse to the point that that there appears an obvious inconsistency and overlap in categorization. Compare the following example:

The terrorists' directive commands them **to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans**, and make no distinction among **military** and **civilians**, including **women and children** [Bush 2001].

So we can say that, for example, *civilians* is a category that includes both women and children, and they all can be *Americans* which in turn can be *Christians* and *Jews*. Applying the term '*Explicit Emotional Enumeration*' proposed by Reyes-Rodriguez [Reyes-Rodriguez 2008] we can suggest that the objective of such explicit emotional enumeration is to shift the perception of the situation from a rational to an emotional footing and in so doing boost the persuasive force.

To shift the perception from logical cognition to emotional and create a political myth personalization can be used. *Personalization* is, for example, a metaphorical representation of a country as person. This idea draws upon the NATION IS PERSON metaphor proposed by Lakoff [Lakoff 2004: 69]. In this way, Iraq in American presidential discourse tends to be presented as a person, which can be illustrated by the following example:

What we're confronting is a **classic bully** who thinks he can get away with **kicking sand** in the face of the world. And so far, we have acted with restraint, as is our way [Bush 1990].

In his speech on the brink of the Gulf War G. Bush calls Iraq a *bully* which is a metaphor further sustained with detailing the actions of such a bully through *kicking sand*. While calling Iraq a bully may seem almost an innocent baby-talk, we believe

that such choice in linguistic usage, if reiterated consistently, entrenches the metaphor in collective conscience with respect to a certain country and can have serious political repercussions. Thus, in American presidential discourse it became a commonplace to substitute Iraq with its leader Saddam Hussein, with Saddam Hussein constantly being portrayed as a madman via various lexical choices. Consider the following example:

As Americans, we want peace -- we work and sacrifice for peace. But there can be no peace if our security depends on the **will and whims** of a ruthless and aggressive dictator. I'm not willing **to stake** one American life on trusting Saddam Hussein [Bush 2002c].

The meaning 'madman' is realized through semantics of lexis which implicitly conveys that Saddam Hussein is moody and psychologically unstable (*will and whims*) and that relations with him are a game (*to stake*), where the outcome is treacherously unpredictable.

Categorizing Saddam Hussein as a madman we at the same time concede that Iraq is a madman-state. This way of conceptualizing Iraq in turn alters the logic of reasoning, shifts it from rational based realm to emotional realm: we might actually start to assume that Iraq is a country whose actions are emotionally grounded not logically based and that being such a madman-country it can actually attack the US or any other state just acting 'on a whim' [see Chang and Mehan 2008 for further discussion]. Which is, of course, hardly possible, for any such decision should be based on preliminary 'feasibility analysis' of the undertaking. In case of Iraq, such decision would probably never have been made at least for fear of retaliation by US WMD.

The argument above was meant to show that lexico-grammatical, semantic and rhetorical choices in language use can seriously influence the construal the models of situation they are meant to encode. We contended that through specific linguistic means texts can model an alternative reality which doesn't (necessarily) correspond to the order of things in the world itself. Through this the twofold relation of discourse and physical world is manifested. On the one hand, discourses reflect certain social situations and events and in doing so recontextualize them and through recontextualization a new reality is modeled. The measure of accuracy wherewith the actual reality is transformed largely depends on which discourse it gets recontextualized into. Some discourses are believed (and are intended) to reflect reality with a very high measure of accuracy (e.g. scholarly discourse), other, like political or advertizing discourses, tend to be less accurate. On the other hand, texts bring about changes in reality, as was stated at the beginning of the article, either directly, or indirectly. So it then begs the question what kind of change discourses intentionally biased and inaccurate in reflecting reality and geared to creation of political myths can bring about?

REFERENCES

1. Bush, George H.W. Remarks to the Military Airlift Command in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. November 22, 1990. URL: http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=2482&year=&month=. Accessed: 23.01.2011.
2. Bush, George W. Address to the Nation. September 20, 2001. URL: <http://presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/09.20.01.html>. Accessed: 23.01.2011.
3. Bush, George W. Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy at West Point. June 1, 2002a. URL: <http://presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/06.01.02.html>. Accessed: 23.01.2011.
4. Bush, George W. More on the Next 4 Years—Radio Address, November 6, 2004. URL: <http://presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/11.06.04.html>. Accessed: 23.01.2011.
5. Bush, George W. Remarks to the U.N. New York. September 12, 2002b. URL: <http://presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/09.12.02.html>. Accessed: 23.01.2011.
6. Bush, George W. The Iraqi Threat. October 7, 2002c. URL: <http://presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/10.7.02.html>. Accessed: 23.01.2011.
7. Chang, G.C., Mehan, H.B. Why we must attack Iraq: Bush reasoning practices and argumentation system. In *Discourse & Society*. Vol. 19(4). Sage Publications, 2008. – Pp. 453–482.
8. Clinton, Bill. Statement on Kosovo. March 24, 1999. URL: <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3932>. Accessed: 23.01.2011.
9. Dunmire, P.L. Preempting the future: Rhetoric and ideology of the future in political discourse. In *Discourse & Society*. Vol. 16(4). Sage Publications, 2005. – Pp. 481-513.
10. Fairclough, N. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. – 270 p.
11. Lakoff, G. *Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives*. Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junction, Vermont, 2004. – 144 p.
12. Lakoff, G., Johnson, M. *Metaphors we live by*. The University of Chicago press, 2003. – 276 p.
13. Lakoff, G. *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. University of Chicago Press, 1987. – 614 p.
14. Lazar, A, Lazar, M. M. The discourse of the New World Order: 'out-casting' the double face of threat. In *Discourse & Society*. Vol. 15(2-3). Sage Publications, 2004. – Pp. 223-242.
15. Mutz, D. C., Sniderman, P. M., Brody, R. A. (Eds.). *Political Persuasion and Attitude Change*. Univ. of Michigan press, 1996. – 295 p.
16. Reyes-Rodriguez, A. Hot and Cold War: The Linguistic Representation of a Rational Decision Filter. In *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*. Vol 2(2). [Ejournal], 2008. – Pp. 31-47. URL: <http://cadaad.org/ejournal>. Accessed: 23.01.2011.

17. Van Dijk, T.A. Critical Discourse Analysis and Nominalization: Problem or Pseudo Problem. In *Discourse & Society*. Vol. 19(6). Sage Publications, 2008. – Pp. 821–828.
18. Van Leeuwen, T., Wodak, R. Legitimizing Immigration Control: A Discourse-Historical Analysis. In *Discourse Studies*. Vol. 1(1). Sage Publications, 1999. – Pp. 83-118.

Евгений Николаевич Молодыхенко, кандидат филологических наук, доцент, заместитель директора Института филологии и межкультурной коммуникации Северного (Арктического) федерального университета; e-mail: philology@narfu.ru