

PHILOLOGY AND LINGUISTICS

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COGNITIVE APPROACH TO BRITISH POLITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article focuses on the issue of cognitive approach to the political discourse analysis. Complex interrelations between discourse and society cannot be analyzed adequately without the cognitive discourse analysis. In this article a new theory of context is presented to show the relevance of a sociocognitive approach to political discourse. To illustrate this we took a concrete example of political discourse – the speech held by David Cameron in Manchester at The Conservative Party's annual conference on 2nd October, 2013. Grammatical, stylistic, rhetorical, pragmatic, and other structures that describe the various dimensions and levels of the speech are examined. Meanings and forms of political discourse are formed by either event models or ideologies and attitudes, but they are always a function of context models.

Keywords: political discourse, cognitive analysis, politicians, mental models, context models.

Introduction

Modern politics is becoming more personalized and individual traits of political leaders are becoming decisive for political choices of the general public as their potential voters and supporters. The following factors are bound to contribute to the process of personalization: higher educational level of people, easy

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access to available information, the likeness of programmes advocated by political rivals and the complexity of domestic, international and global issues they have to discuss. For these reasons politicians in most countries have become more concerned with making a favourable impression on their audiences. Modern mass media, especially television and the Internet have become tools of creating images of political figures [1]. Thus the problem of political discourse analysis has shown its importance from the textual and perspective point of view. Speech is said to be a power in itself. The most important thing for a speaker is to make the hearer understand the message and respond in a desirable way. Language and politics are interconnected. A politician can use a language to command, request, persuade, and to declare [2].

Method

“Although we are all aware that nobody can actually ‘look’ into somebody’s or one’s own brain...all of us are convinced that some mental processes must exist which link text production and text comprehension to both explicit utterances, text and talk as well as to social phenomena” [3, p.180]. It is believed that the complex interrelations between discourse and society cannot be analyzed adequately without the cognitive discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is a discipline that brings together scholars from different areas. A broad multidisciplinary approach to political discourse combines a profound and explicit study of text and talk structures with the analysis of their social and cognitive contexts as a basis for critical discourse analysis. Moreover, the study of ideologies, institutions, groups, power, and other aspects of culture and society are needed [4, p.161]. According to Teun A. van Dijk there is a well-known gap between a study of political structures and properties, which require an account at the macro-level of political analysis and a study of political discourse, which belongs to a micro-level approach. This gap can be linked only with a theory of political cognition [5, p.203]. To solve the problem of political communication is possible by using a cognitive approach to the political discourse analysis. We believe that the cognitive analysis of a political discourse involves any verbal or non-verbal utterance addressed to another individual in the process of communication. This utterance shows what social group the speaker belongs to. It is proved by the fact that the specific way of phrasing requires the use of language in a particular context [6, p.63]. In this article we make an attempt to show the relevance of a sociocognitive approach to political discourse by presenting a new theory of context, suggested by Teun A. van Dijk, and defined as subjective participants’

5th International Conference on the political, technological, economic and social processes 2015

constructs of communicative situations, and made explicit in terms of mental models – context models – in Episodic Memory [4, 5].

Results

To illustrate this we took a concrete example of political discourse – the speech held in Manchester at The Conservative Party's annual conference by David Cameron on 2nd October, 2013 [7]. Through the contextual analysis of the speech it is shown how such context models control and explain many political aspects of interaction that cannot be accounted for in autonomous approaches to text and talk. According to Teun A. van Dijk “Context models thus provide an explicit theory of relevance and the situational appropriateness of discourse, and hence also a basis for theories of style” [4, p.159]. Among a great variety of ways to analyze any political discourse, which naturally depend on specific aims, contemporary discourse and conversation analysts mostly agree on the opinion that the analysis should at least explicitly deal with the structures or strategies of the speech “defined as a communicative event or as an instance of social interaction” [4, p.160]. So we will have to examine the grammatical, stylistic, rhetorical, pragmatic, argumentative, interactional and other structures that describe the various dimensions and levels of the speech. This is probably the main task of discourse and conversation analysis. The study of political cognition focuses on various aspects of political information processing, which involves the acquisition, the use of structures of mental representations about political situations, events, actors and groups. Main topics of political cognition research are as follows: the organisation of political beliefs; the perception of political candidates; political judgement and decision making, stereotypes, prejudices and other sociopolitical attitudes; political group identity; public opinion; impression formation; and many other topics that deal with memory representations and the mental processes involved in political understanding and interaction [5, p.207]. In production of a political discourse the speaker mostly starts from the personal *mental model* of an event or situation, which defines the subjective opinion of the speaker on the situation. Thus, the speech of David Cameron is delivered on the basis of his model of current situations in England with him being the Prime Minister of the country. “Mental models represent people’s experiences and people’s episodic memory in thus populated by mental models. These are subjective, and possibly biased representations of ‘reality, and may also feature evaluations of events or situations (opinions), as well as emotions associated with such events...” [4, p.169]. Models are significantly more detailed than the discourse itself, which is based

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on them. Most of the knowledge remains implicit. Another important notion of a cognitive analysis of a political discourse is *context models*. Contexts are considered to be subjective definitions of events in some particular situation. They are the basis of our pragmatic interpretation of discourse. Any political discourse is usually planned according to context models. Context models are generally the aim of discourse understanding and usually control discourse itself and its understanding. Contexts usually define not only what people say, but how they do it: syntax, lexical choice, intonation and so on. Political discourse is not only limited by context models, but also by the way the speaker presents the event discussed. Thus, contextually in his speech David Cameron focused the audience's attention on not just clearing up Labour's mess, but doing something creative. He described his vision of a "land of opportunity", grounded in two values: defence of free enterprise – the engine of prosperity, jobs and tax revenue and self-help. He spoke about reforming schools to create "ladders of opportunity" for every child, welfare to help the jobless stand on their own two feet. David Cameron spent considerable time criticising Labour as "the party that wrecks the economy" with particular emphasis on Labour's plan to put up corporation tax. Let us now describe some political discourse structures in the given speech made by David Cameron and consider how relevant they are for the political process and for political cognition. We will have an opportunity to see how these structures will illustrate the global ideological and political strategy of positive self-presentation a negative presentation of the rivals. The plan of our analysis is as follows: 1) Topics; 2) Schemata; 3) Local semantics; 4) Style and rhetoric.

Topics

The topical information which is considered to be the most important in the discourse is supposed to define the function of the event and context models of speakers. Thus, as a rule, only the positive information and characteristics of "us" are stressed while only the negative information about "them" is usually presented. So the main topics of David Cameron's speech are:

- a) Around the world the United Kingdom really matters.
- b) M. Thatcher was the greatest peace-time Prime Minister our country has ever had.
- c) Great Britain will never forgive Labour the mess.
- d) Mission of Great Britain is to be the Land of Opportunity.
- e) Economy recovering with innovation as the key to success.

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f) Improving education and children's care.

The implied idea of these topics proves how central the economy is to the political battle. The real point of the speech is to crystallise the choice of the party in power in future election. It is stressed many times that the previous party in power was a big mistake that "wrecked" the country's economy. The prime minister grounds his vision on two main points: first, an intensive defence of free enterprise – the engine of prosperity, jobs and tax revenue, and second, is self-help. He's reforming schools to create "ladders of opportunity" for every child, welfare to help the jobless stand on their own two feet. His attack on the left for its lack of ambition for poorer children resonates and his vision of a classless, colour-blind society rather than Labour's socially-engineered equality is convincing. Cameron reassures the audience that his party is fighting for a majority, without creating another coalition. Empirical research proves that in general the topics, issue definitions are likely to have a significant effect on people's opinion.

Schemata

Political discourse usually has a traditional outline and seldom varies. Thus the speech at the conference has the same essential categories no matter what party the speaker belongs to. What usually varies is the order, accents, type and amount of information included in these categories. They are stressed or mitigated being a function of favourable self-presentation or unfavourable presentation of an opponent. In the given political discourse David Cameron naturally expresses his opinion and criticises those who are within the framework of argumentative structures, which is considered one of the most well-known feature of a political discourse. The prime –minister does his best to persuade the public that his party and he himself are the only possible people to overcome the difficulties, save the country and make it as great and prosperous as it used to be. His mental models and his conservative views support that conclusion: "This week in Manchester we've shown this Party is on the side of hardworking people. Helping young people buy their own home. Getting the long-term unemployed back to work. Freezing fuel duty. Backing marriage. Cutting the deficit. Creating jobs. Creating wealth. Make no mistake: it is this Party with the verve, energy and ideas to take our country forward". It is also natural that he rejects possible arguments attacking his rivals: "Margaret Thatcher had an almighty mess to clear up when she came to office and so did we. We will never forget what we found. The biggest Budget deficit in our peacetime history. The deepest recession since the Second World War. But

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it wasn't just the debt and deficit Labour left, it was who got hurt. Millions coming here from overseas while millions of British people were left on welfare. The richest paying lower tax rates than their cleaners. Unsustainable, debt-fuelled banks booming - while manufacturing withered away. The North falling further behind. Towns where a quarter of people lived on benefits." These statements are a model of future action in the political context: Labour are never to be elected as a leading party again.

Local semantics

As it has already been mentioned, political context models define what information of models of events will be duly presented in political discourse or not. It concerns not only the global meaning but local meaning as well, i.e. factual sentences in the speech or talk. Local meanings are generally controlled by the political views of the speaker and the audience. Thus, many utterances of David Cameron are chosen as a function of his mental model of the situation in Great Britain which in its turn is formed by his conservative ideology: "This party at its heart is about big people, strong communities, responsible businesses, a bigger society - not a bigger state. It's how we've been clearing up the mess. And it's how we're going to build something better in its place. So let's stick with it and finish the job we've started". The main implication of this speech is that Labour policy is destructive for the country. On the other hand, this political speech underlines the positive qualities of the conservatives and British people, contrasting "us" and "them", forgetting that a considerable number of people support Labour. Constantly speaking of the opponents' negative sides, the prime-minister is not always fair. Let's take a key battleground issue of corporation tax. Cameron accuses Labour of pledging to raise corporation tax, despite the fact that Labour's policy is actually to restrict a planned cut in the main business tax to small businesses. In current situation, when the economy is recovering, the key measure of sustainable growth is business investment and so far it has carried on going down. D. Cameron claims that innovation is the key to success and rejects a shift towards a low-wage, low-skill economy. Yet without investment the UK is likely to fall further down the innovation league tables. So "whether or not local meaning is explicit or implicit, asserted or presupposed, detailed or global, general or specific, direct or indirect, or blatant or subdued, will typically be a function of the ideologically based event models" [5, p.231].

Style and rhetoric

The analysis would not be full without studying such tools as lexicalization, syntactic structures, sound features, intonation,

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rhetorical devices, etc., that define semantic representations of political discourse. From a cognitive point of view “this variation is a function of structures and opinions in event models” [5, p.232]. For example, negative attitudes towards political opponents are often expressed with the help of stylistic devices:

That's what the land of opportunity means. That's what finishing the job means. (framing device).

Is that enough? Is that enough that we clear up Labour mess and think “job done”? *Is that enough to just fix what went wrong?* (rhetorical question)

When the world wanted rights, who wrote Magna Carta? (rhetorical question)

After the Berlin Wall came down I visited that city and I will never forget it. The abandoned checkpoints. The sense of excitement about the future. The Knowledge that a great continent was coming together. (parcelling,)

So today I want to talk about our one, abiding mission. That as our economy starts to recover, we build a land of opportunity in our country today (metaphor)

The number of such devices is so great that it deserves to be described additionally [8, 9, 10, 11].

Conclusion

Having made this short analysis of political discourse structures we have come to the conclusion that practically all of them can be accounted for in terms of a cognitive view that combines different kinds of mental representations with text and talk. In general, meanings and forms of political discourse are formed by either event models or ideologies and attitudes, but they are always a function of context models. As it is known the cognitive analysis is necessary for describing and explaining what role political discourse plays in the political process. What really matters when creating a political discourse is the models the speakers build. What is more, political discourse can be not only social and political, but also personal. That is why socio-cognitive analysis is the only way to describe these complex phenomena properly.

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