

Political Speeches or How to Manipulate a Mass Audience Verbally

Nelly Ticheva
Sofia University, Bulgaria

Abstract

The idea of this paper originated from the fact, still unexplained, that political speeches (PSs) emerged as the object of the earliest interest in the analysis of whole texts. Nowadays, however, despite the rapid advance in text linguistics, discourse analysis, socio- and psycho-linguistics, the preferences point to other genres and, within the domain of Political discourse (PD), to more dialogical forms, PSs are considered 'simple', 'static' and an already exhausted area of research. What can hardly be contradicted is that there should be reasons for the original emergence of PSs as the primary object of pre-linguistic interest. The above-mentioned 'simplicity' is one of the possible clues. An explanation of that 'simplicity' could be the place PSs occupy in people's conceptual networks, regarded from a prototypical standpoint; or the mental model structuring PSs. They can be the best examples of manipulating an audience by means of language.

I. Objectives of the paper

The objectives of the paper are:

- To present a study on the structure of PSs which was conducted in terms of the Mental Construct, or MC (a suggested cover-term for all types of Mental models) governing the text-production of PSs.
- To demonstrate the connection between the particular MC and cultural, social, historic, etc. factors.
- To demonstrate the manipulative potential of PSs through analysis of the operation of the particular MC.

II. The basis for the study

1. The first thing that prompted to the hypothesis were the results from an Experiment (Ticheva, 2000) I conducted with 100 third and fourth-year students at the Department of British and American Studies, Sofia University, who were asked to give a definition of a PS.

The experiment shows that the most important factor in defining a speech as political is social status difference/distance. Prototypically, the speaker is of much higher social status than the addressee(s). The reason for that can be

seen in the image of the politician as a leader of society. However, leading would imply the image of a person moving before others rather than standing higher than them (i.e. the distinction should be along a horizontal plane and not a vertical one, as is the case).

Another explanation is more likely. No matter how well founded democracy is, nor how well educated people are (the informants were University students!), politicians are clearly not perceived as civil servants working for the benefit of society. They are not thought of as people empowered by the rest of the population, and, consequently, dependent on the ones who elect them. Once a part of that 'population', but now occupying the position of a politician, a person is transformed into something else. Deeply entrenched in people's psyche is the stereotype of the politician as someone 'ordinary' citizens feel inferior to.

In a discussion with the students after the Experiment, the image of a person standing on a platform, i.e. standing higher and talking to the others from above, was unanimously confirmed as the first image to spring to mind when hearing 'political speech'. More interestingly, the listeners were pictured as numerous and *undistinguishable* from each other, the 'grey mass' stereotype looming large again. In (even educated) people's minds, listeners of PSs are prototypically inferior, powerless, subject to the personality and actions of the speaker.

2. The experiment also proved that what listeners expect to be 'there' in a PS and what allows them to agree on a chunk of speech as being one whole (or, gives them a 'sense' of its being incomplete) is an expectation in terms of a particular language-signalled MC. This MC represents, first and foremost, a particular situation type (roles, relations, existing problem/ task) and only secondly does it depend on the language signals used. As far as contents and actual linguistic realization go, never in the course of the experiment was there an attempt to introduce changes to the genre itself, i.e. the most stable and easily accessible concept was the genre. Such direct access to stored information calls forth the concept of basic-level categories. They are *gestalts* in nature which means that although their internal structure is analyzable, it is the wholes that are more basic than the parts.

3. Consequently, a) a PS could be such a basic-level directly accessible concept; b) simplicity (I.1. and I.2.) is actually direct access to basic-level concepts; c) PSs seem 'simple' precisely because they are psychologically most salient and *gestalt-like*.

III. The Hypothesis

1. If a genre is a basic-level MC, then it can be a realization of a basic image schema as postulated by Lakoff (1987). The results from the Experiment. show PSs to be about a problematic situation/ task (purpose not satisfied) - remedy - unproblematic situation/ no task (purpose satisfied). Lakoff (ibid.) claims that there is a correlation between a structure in the domain of purpose and a structure in the domain of movement (the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema). In the domain of purpose, there is an **initial state** in which the purpose is not satisfied, a sequence of **actions** leading to the **desired state** and a **desired state** in which the purpose is satisfied.

Therefore, PSs are likely to be structured analogously to the domain of purpose, and, consequently, analogously to the domain of movement. In addition, that can explain why PSs were the first to loom large in analyzing whole texts, why their text-structure has hardly been altered and why they are likely to be efficient for more time ahead in the form they exist now - they are structured according to and motivated by our basic bodily experience of movement.

2. The following was the hypothesized structure of PSs:
 a) **INITIAL STATE** (**role:** leader, **role:** led, **problem/ task, time, space**)
 b) **PATH** (**role:** leader, **role:** led, (sequence of) activities)
 c) **DESIRED STATE** (**role:** leader, **role:** led, **absence of the problem/ task, time, space**)

IV. The Method and results

The cognitive approach was adopted. Such a method is the appropriate one due to the nature of the hypothesis, which relies on MCs in revealing the existing language peculiarities.

The

Corpus

PSs of different authors, time periods, countries and languages were selected at random. The corpus includes data from 2 languages (English and Bulgarian); consists of 50 randomly chosen PSs in English (25 - British, 25 - American) and 25 PSs in Bulgarian; includes PSs by 16 British, 13 American and 12 Bulgarian politicians; encompasses a period of 413 years; the British politicians are aged 21 - 66, the American ones - 32 - 68; the Bulgarian ones - 36 - 65; of the British politicians 4 are women, of the American - 2, of the Bulgarian ones - 2.

A Sample of the Analysis

The first part of the analysis (only which will be reported here) was based exclusively on reference to extra-linguistic phenomena. As the aim was the verification of the existence of the hypothesized MC slots, the investigation was based on referential meaning - any lexical items or syntactic structures referring to the hypothesized slots were sought.

a. Initial State (IS): Leader, Led, Problem/Task

Example

N

1

I'm speaking to you today from Shanghai, China, at an international meeting of Pacific Rim nations where we are continuing to enlist the resources of the civilized world in our war against terrorism. (G.W. Bush, 01)
 role: leader I, we, our
 role: led you, our
 problem/ task war against terrorism

Results: Table 1

SLOT POSITION	EXPLICIT	NOT EXPLICIT
ROLE: LEADER	92 %	8 %
ROLE: LED	78 %	22%
PROBLEM/TASK	98 %	2 %

Explanations as to the figures:

1. In the first row (**role: leader**), in 4 out of the 8 % in the NOT EXPLICIT column, the PSs begin with a story (believed to be related to the current situation). Directly after the story there comes a typical IS paragraph, in which **role: leader is** made explicit. In these PSs, the author as if needs to begin with a kind of a retrospection, a more specific contextualization of the current situation. He/ She embeds that current situation into a broader situational realm, locates it along a larger path. Therefore, it could also be argued that the actual percentage is 96 to 4 for PSs in which **role: leader is** made explicit.
2. In the third row (problem/task), in one PS what was made explicit was the absence of a task (expected to be typical of DSs). This can still be interpreted as a reference to a (past) problem/task. On this basis, it could be argued that the actual percentage is 100 to 0 for PSs in which problem/task is made explicit.

Discussion

1. The results (percentages high in the 90s) prove conclusively that IS has the hypothesized slots of **leader**, **led** and **problem/task**. This confirms the possibility for the PATH schema to be operational as hypothesized.

2. Prototypically, **leader** is more often referred to than **led**. The marked, non-representative cases are: a) when **leader** is only present, and **led** are not specified at all; b) when **leader** is not specified, and, thus, **led** are made more prominent than **leader**; c) when neither **leader**, nor **led** is specified.

3. The fact that **leader** is more often referred to than **led** reflects the leaders' striving to preserve the existing status quo - they reinforce their own higher social status by implying themselves to be more important and, therefore, more often talked about. Secondly, more frequent reference to something is actually re-running of the same mental processes. In its turn this stabilizes the MC of the object in question - frequent mentioning of a leader as such entrenches his/her social position as a default parameter and thus helps perpetuate his/her higher status. In other words, repetition makes roles and values be taken for granted.

4. The most 'innocent' examples when **role: led** is not specified are when the leader declares his/her intention of thanking somebody and refers explicitly only to that somebody. However, the intended addressees are extremely rarely only the people gratitude is being expressed to. They are a much broader audience which is not directly mentioned. An example:

Let me begin by expressing my profound and heartfelt thanks to Congressman Gephardt and the leadership and all the members of the Democratic caucus for what they did today. I thank the few brave Republicans who withstood enormous pressures to stand with them for the plain meaning of the Constitution ... (Clinton, 1998)

As the text shows, the leader does not shrink from referring very often to himself, although the opposition leader – led seems to have broken down in favour of other parties (i.e. people gratitude is expressed to).

In fact, expressing gratitude should mean putting oneself in a lower position as compared to that of the person one is grateful to (one thanks people who in one way or another appeared stronger, more competent, better qualified, etc in a certain situation). Alternatively, one thanks people who solved a problem which automatically means that the one(s) responsible for solving it did not manage the task by themselves. This should make people question the status of the responsible one(s). However, for the leader such an alternative is highly undesirable, since he/she was elected precisely in order to solve the problems. To avoid talking about their own responsibilities, politicians speak as if they have the right to evaluate other people's behaviour, thus assuming a position 'above' the ones they 'thank'(i.e. they evaluate). This is only one of the strategies the MC provides politicians with in order for them to reassert themselves even in cases when they are supposed to admit to failure.

5. **Role: led** is also not specified when the leader wants to avoid mentioning the burden the situation places or will place upon the led (i.e. the potential electorate).

*I do not propose to say many words tonight. The time has come when action rather than speech is required. Eighteen months ago in this House I prayed that the responsibility might not fall upon me to ask **this country** to accept the awful arbitrament of war. I fear that I may not be able to avoid that responsibility.* (Chamberlain, 1939)

Instead of directly telling the truth: 'I want you to go to war', the leader changes 'you' as a value for **role: led** to the rather impersonal 'this country'.

In addition, there are many instances of self-reference as if to, first, imply that the leader **does** take a great share of the burden (which is not true) and, secondly, to reconfirm his status as a politician.

6. Another strategy the leader can resort to in such cases is to elaborate on a situation different from the current one, preferably far and away from here and now:

Just 2 hours ago, allied air forces began an attack on military targets in Iraq and Kuwait. These attacks continue as I speak. Ground forces are not engaged.

This conflict started August 2nd when the dictator of Iraq invaded a small and helpless neighbor. Kuwait -- a member of the Arab League and a member of the United Nations -- was crushed; its people, brutalized. Five months ago, Saddam Hussein started this cruel war against Kuwait. Tonight, the battle has been joined. (G Bush, 1991)

In this way, the leader, first, distracts led's attention from directly concentrating on their own role in the situation (that they will bear the burden of it). Secondly, he reconfirms his own status as the one having the

right to **define** that situation, and to do that **for** (instead of) the led, which again is a manipulation strategy.

7. This aim to retain the higher status is obvious when in reality the leader is denied that status. **Role: led** is not mentioned to avoid directing led's thoughts from their future relation to the leader, which he/she wants to preserve as it is. In such PSs even more numerous self-references are typical:

*Good evening.
Just moments ago, I spoke with George W. Bush and congratulated him on becoming the 43rd President of the United States, and I promised him that I wouldn't call him back this time. I offered to meet with him as soon as possible so that we can start to heal the divisions of the campaign and the contest through which we just passed.
(Gore, 00)*

8. **Role: led** is also not specified when accusations are made and personal responsibility is not taken. In such cases the roles of those accused are made explicit and referred to repeatedly. The leader acts as if he/she did not occupy a higher social position - a reference to it would bring about thoughts questioning his/her own responsibility. However, he/she implicitly retains his/her higher status by assuming the right to define the situation for the led. In such cases even in longish introductions the typical specification of **roles: led** and **leader** are completely avoided.

9. **All** the PSs in which **role: leader** is not specified begin directly with accusations. In them personal responsibility on the part of the leader is not taken. On the contrary, the leader assumes the right to judge others and as if stands above and outside the problematic situation discussed.

10. **Problem/task** has the highest percentage of explication. It is invariably related to the topic of the PS - the first expression referring to the semantic field of problem is the filler for **slot: problem/ task** as perceived by the speaker. As revealed by the data, all subsequent reference to the same semantic field can be subsumed under the more general, first reference to the problem.

The fact that it has the highest percentage, higher even than the percentage of **role: leader**, is indicative of the fact that to politicians the existence of social problem(s) is of crucial importance. In fact, it is the preservation of the existing social order that is of paramount importance to them - they occupy the positions they do in order to solve social problems and the constant chain between problem solving and problem arising is what makes their social roles endure. That is why, PS deliverers feel obliged to talk about problems - to justify their own existence. Providing a bit of showmanship, they try and present issues as frightening, important, dramatic, etc. in order to imply and sustain the led's 'need' of their leaders. Otherwise, there would be no need for their kind. Additionally, to politicians it is the social order itself that is sometimes even more important than their position at the time of delivering the PS. They might subsequently no longer occupy that position but if the existing social order endures, they have a chance of re-gaining the position. If it does not, their chances seem minimal.

11. In relation to failure in **task** fulfillment, people's first reaction is usually to blame the responsible ones - those of higher status. Why, then, do not leaders shrink from discussing tasks at all (existing problems prove them undeserving of their position)? There are at least several reasons:

- a) They talk about problems/tasks, first, because to preserve the existing social order any problem stemming from it should be solved, although this is extremely rarely the actual reason.
- b) Secondly, they do it because the responsibility to carry out those tasks is theirs. The existence of at least some problems is undeniable and they are sometimes forced at least to talk about them.
- c) Talking about problems also serves to deceive the led that the leader **does** something on the issue, when most often talk is all he/she does.
- d) Talking about the common problems/tasks also can create an illusion of higher status people sharing the problems of lower status people. This potential of PD to create an illusionary closeness between social levels is one of the most exploited ones. Such closeness can also be harmful to the leader - if he/she does not differ from his/her led then he/she might be considered non-deserving of his/her higher status. From here stem the so-called 'populist' remarks.
- e) Talking about the problems/tasks allows the leader to (re-)define them for the led, often in terms entirely suited to his/her own purposes, which is deception.

12. In the only PS in which there was no existing problems, the leader wants to present himself as undeservingly being ejected from office after solving all tasks. He also wants to preserve his higher status, that is why he presents the common situation as not exhibiting any problem worth mentioning. Once again there are numerous self-assertive self - references (7 I's):

Good morning. I said most of what I wish to say when I had the opportunity of speaking last evening. Perhaps, there are just one or two things it would be appropriate to add this morning. (...) I hope, as I leave Downing Street this morning, that I can say with some accuracy that the country is in far better shape than it was when I entered Downing Street. (Major, 97)

b. Initial State (IS): Time, Space

Example N 2

I'm speaking to you today from Shanghai, China, at an international meeting of Pacific Rim nations where we are continuing to enlist the resources of the civilized world in our war against terrorism. (G.W. Bush, 01)
 time today
 space Shanghai, China; where ...

Results: Table 2

SLOT POSITION	EXPLICIT	NOT EXPLICIT
TIME	92 %	8 %
SPACE	58 %	42 %

Explanations as to the figures:

1. In the first row (**time**), in 20 % of the PSs the time-reference is to a past moment, in 8 % it is to a period stretching back in the past and including the present moment, in 64 % it is to the present moment and in 0 % the time-reference is to the future.
2. In the second row (**space**), in 8 out of the 40 % in the NOT EXPLICIT column, there are verbs of movement, e.g. 'walking towards the future'. Those can also be perceived as explicating **space**. Therefore, it could also be argued that the actual percentage is 68 to 32 for PSs in which **space** is made explicit.
3. There is no correlation between the explication of **time** and **space** in the same PS. In 50 % of the few PSs in which present time was not mentioned, space was not mentioned either; in the remaining 50 % only space was mentioned.

Discussion

1. The results confirm the expectation that **time** and **space** (especially **time**) are made explicit in the majority of the ISs. This proves that indeed the beginning of a PS typically outlines a point in time and space represented as a **situation** encompassing **leader**, **led** and **problem/task**. It also confirms that the PATH schema is operational as hypothesized.
2. On the basis of the previous point, it can be concluded that the beginning of a PS (IS) prototypically is structured resembling a starting point. Prototypically this point is determined in terms of time, place, leader, led and reason(s) for them to move from the IS, i.e. something they perceive as a problem or task. The human perception of bodily movement does provide the source domain for the metaphoric mapping in the creation of PSs.
3. Time-reference differences reconfirm that the prototypical intention of the speaker is to define the present situation, the starting point – in most PSs it is the present moment which is explicated. Past-time reference is used to 'embed' the present situation in a longer path, starting before the present moment. It also implies the present moment as a coordinating point from which 'past' is defined.

It is indicative that in IS there are no examples of future-time reference. All three observations are further proof that a PS follows a line of development from the past through the present and into the future, IS being in the past or present, DS (as was also proved) relating exclusively to the future.

4. There is considerable difference between the percentage of reference to **time** and to **space**. To the deliverer of PSs **time** seems to be of much greater significance than **space**. A possible explanation of that fact could be that the place at which a PS is delivered is rarely perceived as directly bearing on the topic. A confirmation is the fact that in **all** PSs on commemoration occasions and anniversaries place is explicated, i.e. it is presented as important in the current situation. However, there is a more likely reason, not necessarily contradicting the above explanation: from a cognitive perspective, time is basically structured

through space. Therefore, time expressions as if imply place of the current situation.

c. Desired State (DS)

Analogous analysis was conducted on DS. The results again reconfirmed the operation of the MC as hypothesized.

Extensive linguistic analysis of the values of the different roles, i.e. the particular lexical items and syntactic structures used, also confirmed 1) the operation of the hypothesized MC; and 2) the manipulative potential of the PATH schema.

Conclusion

- The hypothesis that the structure of PSs is a realization of a basic-level MC was proved. PSs were proved to be structured analogously to the domain of purpose, and, consequently, analogously to the domain of movement
- The analysis confirmed a) the operation of the hypothesized MC; and b) the manipulative potential of the PATH schema.

Comparative and contrastive analysis of PSs in English and Bulgarian proved the operation of the same MC in both languages, although there existed differences between the structuring potential of the MC through the two languages.

A possible implication of the study is that cognitive discourse analysis should be targeted at establishing the combination of language and non-language processes used in communicating by means of the particular text. It can be based on MC identification (i.e. determining the basic MC(s) governing the text-production of a particular genre). Studying the particular MC operation can also be revealing about the language peculiarities in communicating through that particular text or genre.

References

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