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**REFLECTION OF POST-TRUTH POLITICS IN THE MIRROR OF**  
**THE BRITISH POLITICAL INTERVIEW**

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*Abstract*

The article is focused on the popular notion of post-truth politics in contemporary mass media, which firstly appeared in the UK and the USA and is becoming global. In the United Kingdom the notion of post-truth was manifested in the context of the country's discussions about the exit from the European Union. Careful consideration is given to the nature of post-truth, its features and linguistic means of realization are elaborated in the case-study of modern British political interviews. Political interview is a widespread genre of political discourse, with two distinguished communicants (an interviewer and an interviewee) representing a conversation both extempore and rule-governed in the dominant form of question-answer sequences, which is aimed at informing the mass audience, nominated as the final addressee, about topical issues. As a genre of political communication, it corresponds to its general principles and characteristics, which are clarified in the article. The methods of discourse analysis, pragmatic analysis and contextual analysis are used in the research. Post-truth includes fake news and statements, intentional concealment of information, equivocation and use of evasive techniques. Post-truth politics transmitted through the mass media puts a threat to our reality. We can no longer rely on any information we get and facts become all relative.

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**Keywords:** Post-truth politics, media discourse, political discourse, political interview, equivocation, evasiveness.



## 1. Introduction

The world media have an enormous influence on the social conscience, they form and modify public opinion. The mass media are known under the name of the “Fourth Estate” referring back to the original separation of powers theory by a famous French philosopher Montesquieu (2002). The first reason for that is undoubtedly their all-pervading character bound to the wide spread of the Internet in the XXI century. Since the beginning of the Internet era many people from all around the world have got access to this huge universal database. The Internet is not only a digital storage of our heritage, but also an encompassing network where people can share their news, thoughts and ideas, events, knowledge, experience – their lives. Satellites provide us an immediate accessibility to this system which is why we have a very fast speed of information transfer. All the messages, textual, audio, video or others, are transmitted really quickly and we get to know in an instance what has just happened in the farthest corner of our planet.

Yet we don't have any ways to verify those messages and what we can is only rely on the received information without any possibilities to understand or prove it, so our perception is more intuitive than cognitive. Intuition doesn't deal with logics, deductions, argumentation or facts. On the contrary, it's connected to our psychic and emotions, and is guided by ambivalent psychological concepts, such as stereotyping, analogical thinking, expressive appeal, ingroup favouritism and outgroup hostility, generalization, etc. Hence the second reason for the omnipotence of mass media is their ability to influence our minds and form our thoughts distantly and globally without a real deterrent. The check-and-balance system doesn't work for the power of media.

## 2. Problem Statement

Nowadays with the rising influence of the media some of the associated dangers and problems become extremely important. Barber (2017), the US managing editor for the Financial Times, stated in his lecture at Oxford university in 2017 that there is a serious problem of fake news. He is alarmed that the word “fact” has disappeared in its original meaning, because people initially view all the information and all the facts as unreliable and disputable. Facts are subdued to individual judgement and thus are all relative.

Given that the media shapes our thoughts by “how it is said” rather than “what is said” many scientists warn of coming into the era of post-truth. The term is related to or denotes circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. Due to its topicality post-truth was named Word of the Year 2016 by the Oxford Dictionaries (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2016). It shows the extent to which post-truth spread in our society. It takes place in various spheres – in the news, in politics, in business, in advertising, at workplace.

To the contrary of what might be assumed, such communication doesn't raise indignation or rejection. It has become so commonplace that it is perceived as a matter of course. More than that, addressers of post-truth messages often have an image of someone demonstrating effective communicative skills, being smart, confident and knowing how to handle the situation. A manager or a politician who manages well is less real than a manager who only looks as if he does. Apparently, post-truth cases are no longer exception, but a rule. There has happened a shift from quantity to quality: an abundance of distorted

information has finally led to the change in our comprehension. We buy into those myths and see such instances as a right way to behave, that is why this issue is so pressing.

### **3. Research Questions**

In the process of problem solving it is necessary to understand and accept the problem in the first place. When we are aware of its presence, we already have a point to consider. Being able to articulate the problem of post-truth communication is important for identifying it. Learning about this notion, its nature and characteristics is required to deal with it. What messages can be defined post-truth? How are alternative facts usually presented? What are the intentions of the speaker? What are the linguistic means of post-truth realization? These are the questions we need to answer in our study of post-truth communication.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

Political communication, which is mostly broadcast by the media, has a general constant purpose of gaining power. Producing false statements and altering the truth are used to reach this purpose. That is why some philosophers even call post-truth a strategy for the political subordination of reality (McIntyre, 2018). Clementson (2016) states that politicians have a reputation for deception. In his study of the US presidential debates, he believes that equivocation and deception are essential for political discourse. Politicians use an array of speech tactics and rhetorical figures to shade or emphasize information, to send inflammatory and incorrect messages and to alter public opinion. Thereby they engage in the post-truth politics. We are particularly interested in the instances of post-truth in political interviews, because the genre presupposes a larger share of spontaneous speech in contrast with other genres of political discourse.

It is no coincidence that we have chosen British media as a data source. In the United Kingdom the notion of post-truth was manifested in the context of the country's discussions about the exit from the European Union (European Union Referendum Bill, 2016), known as Brexit. The referendum was held in the year 2016 and the withdrawal, including the repeal of the initial European Communities Act 1972, is expected in the year 2019 (European Union Withdrawal Act, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of our research is to analyse politicians' utterances containing distorted information and to reveal linguistic means of post-truth realization in the case-study of British political interviews.

### **5. Research Methods**

#### **5.1. Political interview definition and characteristics**

Political interview is a widespread genre of political discourse, with two distinguished communicants (an interviewer and an interviewee) representing a conversation both extempore and rule-governed in the dominant form of question-answer sequences, which is aimed at informing the mass audience, nominated as the final addressee, about topical issues. It is a frequent, eventive and highly intentional genre of political discourse with peculiar interlocutory nature. It combines features of political and media discourses (Novikova, 2018). As a genre of political discourse, it corresponds to its general principles (Chudinov, 2007):

1. rituality and informative value,

2. institutionality and personal character,
3. esotericism and accessibility,
4. reductionism and completeness of information,
5. standard nature and expressivity,
6. dialogue nature and monologue nature,
7. explicit and hidden evaluation,
8. aggressiveness and tolerance.

Most often a political interview is connected to some relevant events or political processes. Political interview can even be an official document if given by a prominent politician (a minister or a president), because such interviews rather reflect an official position of the government or a political party than an individual point of view (Pustovar, 2017). Participating in any interview, a politician always tries to present himself in a positive context, to be persuasive, to withstand the opposition and to win public support.

## **5.2. Political interview methods of research**

We have studied contemporary interviews (the period 2015-2019) with the British authorities. In our research of political interview conversation we looked at the speeches of interviewees and analysed their forming of post-truth politics. Discourse analysis can be named a general method of political discourse studies, in particular the genre of political interview in question. The leading method of our research is pragmatic analysis, because we need to study language in its correspondence with the initial intentions of speakers and purpose of communication. We also used contextual analysis as an additional method to help understand semantics and distinguish proper connotations in broader contexts. These methods are the tools in our attempt to define distorted information, manipulation, alternative facts, fake statements and certain linguistic means of post-truth realization.

## **6. Findings**

### **6.1. Post-truth case study analysis, example №1**

In observing the language of post-truth politics as a case study of British political interviews we have come across both false claims and mixed records. Further on we shall look at some particular utterances and analyse them.

-You mentioned NATO just now. He (Donald Trump) has called NATO obsolete.

-He has shown... also I've spoken to him about NATO. NATO is very important it has been a of our security here in Europe. And we work together in NATO and we both made a point before about contributions being made by countries. The United Kingdom is spending 2 percent of its GDP on defence. I believe that's important (BBC News, 2017).

The British Prime Minister Theresa May was asked the question about Donald Trump's negative attitude to NATO in the interview preceding her trip to meet the president of the USA. First of all, she chose not to comment on Donald Trump's statement, quoted by the interviewer, but to talk about her own view of the organization. In this we see inclination to evasiveness. In any communicative interaction we should address the unity of a question-answer sequence. Having the initial question in our mind (about Donald Trump calling NATO obsolete) and expecting an answer to this one we get an impression that the answer,

which consists in NATO's importance for security, concerns the requested topic. In fact, it is not. Personal pronouns redirect the topic to the speaker herself and the answer rather represents the speaker's assessment of the discussed object. It is noteworthy that there is a break in the narrative in the beginning of the phrase. We cannot fully call it a stylistic device here, which it always is in the written speech (aposiopesis) (Denisova & Poznjak, 2014). In this spoken sentence a break in the narrative might be caused by unwillingness to proceed or uncertainty of what should be said.

While it is hard to directly deny a true quotation (obsolete) and presumably the speaker understood it in the middle of her speech, she had to break the narration and tried to alter Trump's idea of NATO being obsolete by connecting his negative characteristic with her contrariwise positive view of its importance with the help of an adverb "also" with the connective meaning of "in addition, too" (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010). Use of coordinating conjunctions (and, also), which usually serve to combine similar ideas, for pulling together opposing ideas can be considered manipulative. We also observe it in the next sentences ("and" as a coordinating conjunction and a sentence starter) where the connected clause (we work together) has no real semantic connection to the previous one (NATO is very important).

Thus, the ideas of the speaker together with the strong finishing assertion (I believe that's important) aim at showing positive attitude to NATO of both the speaker and Donald Trump, which is not true for the latter. In addition to that, the speaker uses words with mostly positive connotations (important, security, defence). In the study of a broader context of the interview and the global context of the preceding and following political events, we may propose that the unwillingness to comment on the required information and to acknowledge D. Trump's true negative ("obsolete") attitude to NATO as well as otherwise creating his false positive image lies in the desire to mitigate the relationships between the speaker and the president of the USA, to establish a positive mood before the meeting of the leaders and to minimize risks in the oncoming negotiations.

## **6.2. Post-truth case study analysis, example №2**

Another example of not telling the truth is taken from an interview with Stephen Barclay – Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. He was asked whether the country was ready for exiting the European Union.

-How many of them (the computers) are up and running now?

-Well we have weekly meetings looking at all the key programmes.

-Of the 12 how many are there?

-Let me come onto it. So, the number of no deal plans off track have actually improved, so there's been a 5% increase in terms of those that are on off track.

-How many of the computer programmes are working now?

-Well I'm not going to get into every single programme but the key

-You should know this, it's really important.

-The key issue is we are moving resource in Whitehall, we are stepping up our plans, we're engaging very actively on it

-You don't seem to know the answer to this (BBC one, 2019).

First of all, concealment of the true number of computers is evident due to the need of cross-questioning. An interviewer needs to repeat the same question for four times, still getting no answer. We

cannot accept that the interviewee simply does not know the answer and assume he is concealing it, because he admits “engaging very actively on it”, working with this and “moving resource” and “having weekly meetings looking at all the key programs”. What is more, he asks for permission to give an answer “let me come onto it”, at the same time he contradicts “I’m not going to get into every single programme” and he doesn’t get round to the answer. All the main verbs used in the speech do not carry exact meaning (engage, step up, improve), but they have positive connotations which creates a generally positive tonality for the subject discussed.

When we studied the global context and the whole interview, our supposition of the speaker hiding the truth was later proved by the interviewer giving exact data: “The answer is one of the 12 are working so far. 11 of the 12 are not yet working... The National Audit Office says there are 12 computer systems that are absolutely critical to no deal” (BBC one, 2019).

## 7. Conclusion

The conducted research of modern British political interviews shows examples of post-truth communication which contains using alternative facts, distorted information, false messages. With the help of manipulative attempts, attributing the wrong meaning to the words and the use of positive semantics politicians create an untrue image of themselves or the discussed object. In most cases untrue statements were connected to the intentional concealment of real facts. By that we can talk about strategic manipulation. Bull (2015) views equivocation as a form of deception, as a deliberate and calculated communicative strategy.

Our last analysed example is peculiar because in this case the truth was revealed by the interviewer while in most examined interviews such instances of lies, mixed records or false statements stay firm and unquestioned, establishing what we today know as a post-truth politics. Evasion occurred in the majority of the messages and can be distinguished as an attributive characteristic of post-truth political communication in modern British political interviews.

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