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**THE ROLE OF COGNITION, COMMUNICATION, AND SEMIOSIS IN GENERATING NON-PROFESSIONAL POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

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*Abstract*

The study features the problem of constructing the three-dimension space of non-professional political discourse. Analysis of the main vectors according to which ordinary native speakers produce discourse about politics shows the presence of determinants framed due to three anthropocentric dimensions: cognitive, communicative and semiotic. The activation of the recipient's mental activity, which is the role of the reader of news texts, is reflected in the discourse they produce. The agent of discourse presents his perception of the message, analyzes events, compares them with the general political worldview and predicts their development, modifying the news in accordance with the mindset of the commenter. In this regard, one of the dimensions of discourse can be described as cognitive – the prevalence of information processing mechanisms reflected in the Internet product indicates the importance of this type of activity in the perception of political news text. Another dimension of communication points to another important stimulus for the generation of discourse, occasioned by the need for exchange of information. The reader perceives the political news text as a dynamic element of the global "conversation", as a call to communication, to action by "word". The next dimension, which represents the individual in the aspect of continuous semiotic activity, in the state of generating new meanings and assimilating existing ones, is the third determinant of generating virtual discourse – semiotic.

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**Keywords:** Non-professional political discourse, internet-commentary, semiotic model, cognitive model, communication model, interpretation.



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## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the information age, ordinary speakers have been increasingly involved in the process of verbalizing their political worldview. The three basic spaces of human language existence – cognition, communication, and semiosis are reflected in the product of this process – a non-professional political discourse that occurs at the intersection of the political and personal discursive domains, and is produced on Internet platforms designed for posting comments. "Homo scrivens" is forced to process significant amounts of information, largely presented in a written format. For this reason, it is in a constant process of semiosis, both consuming ready-made symbols of culture and ideology presented by the media, and resorting to the signification of the personal universe. Getting new information in the form of news mediated by the press from the world of politics is reflected in the text and discourse generated by an ordinary native speaker who implements cognitive strategies for generating text (Dzyuba, 2018). His discourse contains "a direct subjective reaction to someone's opinion, expressed in a free form that reflects the level of culture and worldview of a particular person" (Bolotnov, 2015, p. 113).

The described specific type of the political news recipient reveals multifunctional nature: he also communicates across multiple communication vectors: the political discourse addresser vs addressee, the sender of the message (media) vs recipient, message content (events, reflected in the discourse) vs the Internet community interpreters' (commentators) of secondary messages (Kim, 2017; Plotnikova, 2011). Thus, the new, complex role of the addressee in the virtual space of Internet communication requires the study of the mechanisms underlying the generation of non-professional political discourse.

## 2. Problem Statement

A preliminary analysis of commentaries aimed at discussing political issues at the everyday, non-professional level shows the presence of three parameters for the recipient's perception of discourse. Discourse is seen as a sign event, as a source of knowledge (a stimulus for cognition), and as a communicative event (a message, conveying a certain objective). In this context, the addressee acts as a multi-functional agent: he is the person who decodes the message when reading, interprets it, and reacts to the message, creating a personal discourse. The addressee simultaneously becomes the author, unlike the "passive" reader, who does not verbalize his attitude to what he has read, he takes an action as his reaction is reflected in the form of a text that functionally corresponds to the genre of the commentary. "The audience is not an end point in the movement of mass media text, but an active participant in the communication process" (Nadejkina, 2017, p. 137).

## 3. Research Questions

The results of preliminary observation of the texts-reactions of users who verbalize their perception of mass media discourse, indicating three determinants of variation relative to the source text: semiotic (discourse as a sign event), cognitive (discourse as an incentive for conceptualizing knowledge) and communicative (discourse as a message built with a specific purpose) allow us to formulate the research questions:

1. What are the strategies, chosen by the addressee when generating the text according to the model designated according to the method of perception of the commented discourse "Discourse as a sign event"?
2. What are the strategies implemented by the addressee when generating a text using the "Discourse as a representative of knowledge" model?
3. What are the strategies chosen by the addressee – author of comments when generating a text using the "Discourse as a purposeful message" model?
4. Are these strategies universal and equally used by all NPD agents?

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

The purpose of this study is to identify and describe the vectors of discourse generation and how they are implemented in a network of nonprofessional political discourse produced by a special type of authors-ordinary native speakers who act as active readers and verbalize their reaction as an addressee of Internet media. The characteristics such as "randomness, non-standardized format, but also vitality, pragmatism and attention to all the smallest details of the surrounding reality", as noted by Klushina (2016) in regard to scientific study of discourse, can be related to NPD as it is impossible to precisely characterize the object of the study (p. 82). Therefore, the presented work is an attempt to systematize the empirical data. The parameters of an ordinary addressee's interpretation of mediated political discourse indicate a correlation with trends in the scientific paradigm: the first determinant corresponds to a systemic-structural and semiotic one, the second to a cognitive – discursive one, and the third to a communicative-pragmatic one. This phenomenon can be considered as a reflection of the naïve systematization of language and speech phenomena occurring in virtual communication.

#### **5. Research Methods**

Non-professional political discourse occurs at the intersection of institutional and everyday discourses. Taking into consideration the multifaceted and complex nature of the phenomena, researchers study discourse patterns from different perspectives. Regarding the mass media discourse, the NPD is defined as secondary and is therefore understood as a set of secondary texts that reproduce the original news of political topics to varying degrees, but contain a subjective author's assessment. The predominance of the subjective in the NPD also enables the researchers to classify it as a personal discourse, in which the agent aims at representing some aspects of their own perception of the world regarding a particular event (Karasik, 2018). The emphasis on the study of the non-professional component of the NPD allows us to identify the mechanisms of people's (everyday) conceptualization and categorization of the world by an ordinary native speaker.

The empirical data are the comments left on the information websites, well-known Internet news agencies, on the pages of which discussions of news from the sphere of politics regularly emerge. The Internet websites involved *Republic* (154 comments), *The New York Times* (665 comments), *The Guardian* (1741 comments), and *Politico* (50 comments). Importantly, Internet commentaries are not the only type of texts that generate NPD, but they are one of the most relevant types of text production,

currently observing increasing quantitative and qualitative dynamics (Yergaliyeva, Melnik, Zhumabekova, Yergaliyev, & Omarov, 2018).

In the first stage, we used derivational textual analysis of discourse and text. Applying comparative analysis of the original political news stories and comments posted to them allowed us to identify the above lines of comment generation: semiotic, cognitive, and communicative.

The further study entailed the analysis of the discursive space of the NPD by utilizing the elements of linguistic personality approach to text and discourse. Each commentary was considered as a manifestation of the typical and unique in the heterogeneous space of the NPD. Strategies for generating comments were identified and compared with the above parameters. At the last stage, we investigated linguistic and stylistic means of varying Internet texts, and explicit as well as implicit ways of generating discourse within each of the established models.

## 6. Findings

The determinants of perception and generation of everyday discourse by the language personality of an ordinary native speaker allow us to consider these processes within three models that correspond to the general approaches to the consideration of discourse and text: semiotic, cognitive, and communicative. By the term "determinant", we mean the prevailing vector of text production and also the compositional and semantic framework of discourse generated by a single author.

The scientific thought has long been enquiring the phenomenon of semiosis. As the researchers note, "verbal signs are by their nature symbols, the signified meaning of which is not given, but only set by a hint of a signifying internal form that allows for ambiguous interpretation and endlessly generates new and new meanings" (Zubkova, 2010, p. 54). The features of sign formations noted by researchers give the reader-interpreter the opportunity to re-assign ready-made forms depending on the personal meaning and situation, which puts him in the position of the subject of semiosis or interpreter.

### 6.1. Semiotic model. Discourse as a sign event

In the NPD discourse, negotiation of meanings occurs at the explicit level. In accordance with the semiotic triangle of Ch. Pierce, the object of semiosis is a virtual communicant, the sign becomes its alias, and the interpreter is the image that appears in the minds of observers (readers of comments) when this sign is perceived (Auxier, 2018). Hence, we take into account that in virtual communication, NPD producers are mostly readers perceiving symbolic nature of discourse. Consequently, their representation in discourse occurs at the level of signifying their speech mask (virtual identity). Indeed, the assignment of an alias, as a prerequisite for entering the community of commentators, is a form of semiosis. For instance, on the website of The New York Times, a commenter with the pseudonym *Just Thinkin'* is likely to choose rational strategies, argumentatively and consistently express their point of view. This author is characterized by the use of discursive connectors of scientific and journalistic style, e.g.: *It seems reasonable for the Senate to say, So clearly; In the case today.* In an excerpt from this "full-text" comment, we read:

*We American citizens would certainly feel that, even if we disagree with their judgment, they held a reasonably fair and expeditious trial* (Cai & Parlapiano, 2020, Commentary section).

The semiotic generation model also provides for the selection of a stimulus for text production (Saveleva, 2019). Such an incentive in this case is a symbolic situation, a set of values that were chosen by the media to indicate events in the external world – the world of politics. Therefore, in the NPD, we often observe the presence of external derivational links between the media and the thread of comments to it. Keywords and expressions seem to flow from replica to replica, forming the effect of an echo, designated by Bolotnov (2015) as an information echo (p. 44). This effect is observed when reading a series of replicas to a single news item, e.g.:

- (1) *They did not kill a General, they killed a criminal.*
- (2) *How do you know that a criminal was killed?*
- (3) *Well, Yes, but he killed the "criminal"* (Mardasov, 2020, Commentary section).

The recontextualization of verbal discourse codes is continuous, ready-made forms move to the NPD not only from the original media news, but flow from comment to comment, and are reassigned in various ways, as “the speakers and hearers do not always assign one invariant meaning to the grammatical form ” (Bybee, 2010, p. 55). In the process of semiosis, it is possible to negotiate meanings borrowed from the interpreted discourse, embedded in commentaries as "someone else's word", e.g.:

*"Britain may be leaving Europe ..."so says the Guardian but only Britain is leaving the EU, not Europe!* (Golby, 2020, Commentary section).

Code-alternation transformations are also observed, and other variants of the verbal code (foreign language inclusions) are involved, which is immediately picked up by the commenters:

- (1) *In eliminating Suleimani, trump displayed what is called the broken clock rule* (In Russian discourse this expression was given in English with the further translation) -- *even a broken clock shows the time correctly twice a day.*
- (2) *Absolutely accurate comparison, trump is a broken watch that, however, never went normally.* (Mardasov, 2020, Commentary section).

Semiosis in the NPD produces meanings and designates them according to the current moment; it is extremely situationally dependent on the mediated news and the current political situation. Therefore, virtual written communication today is a generator of values for the "current moment" (the term of T. V. Shmeleva): *It's just a coin marking a historic event, like it or not perhaps we need a bit of perspective* (Golby, 2020, Commentary section).

Despite this, meanings are born and revived in discourse, the NPD is the intersection of the past, present, and future.

## **6.2. Cognitive model. Discourse as a source of knowledge conceptualization**

Reflection of language functioning in regards to structuring and storing information still raises many questions. Their study leads to the appearance of such cognitive phenomena as concept, frame, mental schema, mental model, and others (Dijk, 2006; Lakoff, 2008; Turner & Fauconnier, 2002).

Conceptualizing the role of discourse in information processing, Dijk (2006) notes,

... in discourse understanding, mental models are the goal of understanding: we understand a discourse when we are able to construct a mental model for it. The traditional but vague notion of 'making sense' of text or talk involves the production or actualization of a mental model. (p. 169)

The analysis of comments produced by the cognitive model reveals the commenter's tendency to place the discussed concept / fact / event in a conceptual structure that has an antinomic character: *new – familiar, part – whole, abstract – concrete, regular – sporadic*. The organization of conceptual space in the form of dichotomies corresponds to the phenomena of categorization and classification in natural language. In discursive activity, the individual embeds events in mental models, logically arranging them according to the *new – familiar* dichotomy. When translating a phenomenon from one segment of the conceptual field to another, the cognitive anchoring mechanism observed in the discursive activity of NPD subjects operates (Makarov, 2003). The attribution of knowledge to the familiar can be made through a space-time coordinate, such as in the following statements:

(1) *At this point in time, we don't need wishy-washy. We're WAY past that point* (Cai & Parlapiano, 2020, Commentary section).

(2) *After all we have been pandering to them for the last 3 years and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future* (Golby, 2020, Commentary section).

The perception of political news can result in structuring the information in accordance with the spatial-temporal coordination closely linked to the internal world of the subject:

*As they used to say in my childhood – "a swing for a ruble – a blow for a penny."* (Mardasov, 2020, Commentary section).

In this case, we can trace the personal chronotope associated with knowledge gained in childhood. Interiorization helps move an event from the new category to the familiar category.

Cognition is always related to a person's orientation in space. In the following example, even such a seemingly abstract area as politics is compared to the territorial positioning of the UK as an island state.

*Looks a lot like we are leaving the concept of Europe even if we can't float away from the continental shelf* (Golby, 2020, Commentary section).

It should be noted, that cognitive strategies for analytical and synthetic structuring of information in discourse are also implemented through the antinomy of *part – whole* and *single – universal*. An example is the following statements:

(1) *About what will arrive in Iraq-everyone is ready for this. And judging by the way oil behaves, the big negative is already in prices to a sufficient extent. So expectations are already low. Everyone is ready that there will be attacks on the oil infrastructure* (Mardasov, 2020, Commentary section).

(2) *The impeachment of Trump is coming at a crossroads in the country's changeover from white rule to an all-inclusive rule by the People* (Cunningham, 2020, Commentary section).

The categorization of reality associated with the classification of objects and concepts into certain groups can be traced through the discursive actualization of the *abstract – concrete* dichotomy. Abstract concepts are reduced to concrete ones in unexpected configurations that are relevant to NAPs. For

example, in the discussion of political phenomena of power, there is a movement of these concepts in different spheres of public life. In the following commentary, the author talks about legal matters:

*All their power and privilege mostly accumulated by criminal means (trump) or sustained bootlicking (Pompeo).* (Toosi, 2020, Commentary section).

And in the next statement, the event is transferred to the sphere of economics, and then, according to the logic of the commentator, there is a metaphorical transfer, which eventually gets the following representation in the discourse "Brexit (politics) – money (economics) – toilet (household) – Big Ben (national symbol)":

*The most Brexit Britain thing ever was when brexiters decided that they would happily flush another half-million pounds down the toilet to hear Big Ben strike this Friday* (Golby, 2020, Commentary section).

This chain of semantic transformations, presented in a linear expression, demonstrates the following pattern. As the analysis shows, logical transitions can include completely different conceptual areas. Thus, we observe the phenomenon of conceptual blending, which has received coverage in cognitive studies of language (Turner & Fauconnier, 2002). The theory of conceptual blending refers to the fact that cognitive transitions (analogies) take many different forms. The result of comparing concepts belonging to completely different spheres of human experience is the following statement:

*Since Every lie told by Johnson, Raab, etc., has been quintessentially Brexit* (Golby, 2020, Commentary section).

The sharpest contrast is observed when politics is compared to everyday human needs. In the following comment, the conceptual blending "reaches a climax":

*"Trump does not need oil at \$ 80 per barrel before the election, and he is not an idiot not to calculate this option in advance before making a decision about a strike". The only thing he has so far shown the ability to "calculate the option in advance" is to make a choice between McDonald's, or Wendy's for lunch.* (Mardasov, 2020, Commentary section).

The beginning of the comment is about global issues of international policy. However, the final phrase does not follow the usual logic, demonstrating a "go-down strategy" – the transition from the political leader withholding the national power to an ordinary person, first to his mental abilities, and then to the sphere of his physiological needs.

### **6.3. Communication model. Discourse as a purposeful message**

In the NPD processing, communication takes various forms. It occurs between the author of the media news and the readers, between the readers who publish comments and generate a non-professional conversation about politics, as well as between the addresser of political discourse and its addressee (Sukhanov, 2018). As we have already noted, the virtual addressee of political discourse is specific. In modern virtual communication, they have acquired an active status, explicating their reaction to the pragmatic message of the mediated political news. When discussing the behaviour of political leaders, commentators reflect on the "communicative personality of a politician" (Karasik, 2018, p. 34), explaining the pragmatic effect produced by the subjects of political speeches (Bolotnov, 2015). The addressee is particularly acutely aware of the manipulative effect of the media, their attempt to influence

"the minds and feelings of people", which "is carried out both through manipulation of public opinion and through open belief, which is eventually subordinated to the goals of manipulation of public consciousness" (Ozyumenko, 2017, p. 205).

To illustrate these points, the English-language discourse of American news publications is characterized by user reactions in which they "read" the communicative message of the media as a means of transmitting information that manipulates the addressee. This topic, which is relevant to the American NPD, is actively discussed and takes different forms:

1. Media strategies in general are discussed, e.g.:

*I would have been more interested in reading about the stances each candidate took on the questions presented. I noticed that this article and the media commentators spent more time on trying to look for moments to make this more of a "brawl" than a difference of opinions and policies.* (Goldmacher & Martin, 2020, Commentary section).

2. Commentators respond to the message of the media by addressing the media as the addressee directly, entering into a dialogue directly, or evaluating the very form of presentation of the message, e.g.:

*Just stop, NY Times. Please just stop. This non-story is a distraction from what really matters; the Trump administration is deeply corrupt and must go for the good of the nation. Any of the people on that stage last night would be a fine choice for president. Let's not lose focus by giving column inches to something so silly. Blue, no matter who is in 2020.* (Goldmacher & Martin, 2020, Commentary section).

The assessment of the message as deliberately generated in order to form a specific picture of the world for the addressee is presented in the following comment:

*This article & CNN's awful moderation of the "debate" make a loud case for our need for media reform. CNN's owned by a big corporation, and NYT is a corporation heavily influenced by billionaire shareholders (e.g., neoliberal Haim Saban) and advertisers posing conflicts of interest* (Goldmacher & Martin, 2020, Commentary section).

Notably, the interlocutors who communicate in the same space react to each other's messages. The range of observed reactions is wide – ranging from open statements of an aggressive nature to the ironic ones towards the "in-group" addressees, e.g.:

*You sound quite grumpy about it - which makes your use of the epithet "remoaners" quite ironic* (Golby, 2020, Commentary section).

At the final stage, the NAPs of Russian, British, and American publications were compared, and the prevailing models for generating NAPs were identified. In the Russian-language NPD, subjects are more strongly inclined to interpret discourse as a sign. In the English language discourse, cognitive strategies of discourse generation prevail. Media agenda setting techniques, as the source of the message, are given considerable attention in the American NPD. However, these are the implications for the further study.

## 7. Conclusion

In the virtual discourse generated by political news recipients, processes that are conventionally reduced to the three-dimensional space of human language existence are as follows: semiosis, cognition,



and communication. When generating a discourse an ordinary language speaker causes the production of extremely heterogeneous Internet texts, collectively referred to as non-professional political discourse. A commenter who produces a discourse on the proposed models acts as follows:

- an interpreter of ready-made signs proposed by political discourse mediated by the mass media, generally perceiving the discourse as a sign and participating in the process of semiosis both actively and passively.
- a conceptualizer who develops the acquired knowledge in the process of processing information verbally presented in a ready-made discourse, and includes it in his personal system of concepts through speech-generating activities.
- an agent as well as an object (faciens) of the communicative goal of a group of subjects: varying from political discourse, media, to the participants in a virtual conversation.

It should be noted, that the identified determinants of the generation of non-professional political discourse, observed on the example of virtual communication, vary depending on the ethno-cultural specificity. However, this fact is not conclusively confirmed and represents a research perspective.

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