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CAMPAIGN POSTERS IN AMERICAN AND RUSSIAN ELECTORAL LANDSCAPES

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Abstract

Following the growing body of research dedicated to multimodality in communication we were interested in examining how multimodal texts function in political communication. To this end, we conducted a contrastive analysis of campaign posters, which are viewed as semiotically complex texts, set in American and Russian pre-electoral contexts. We aimed at examining the functions of respective texts as well as establishing the status and interrelation of their modes and extratextual connections they create. The categorical content analysis revealed that campaign posters manifest a combination of semiotic modes, which encompass verbal, iconic, graphical and colour ones. The contrastive analyses of functions performed by posters established that in American presidential campaigns posters are used to acclaim as well as to attack, while in Russian electoral landscape they are employed only to acclaim, which makes visual political communication less aggressive. American campaign posters are characterized by interaction of visual and verbal modes, which enhances the political message they are designed to convey. Russian posters, on the contrary, tend to display disconnection of modes and the lack of creative usage of verbal and pictorial elements, which decreases their communicative value. Another difference lies in the employment of intertextual links with broad socio-cultural contexts. American campaign posters contain numerous references to prior texts, mostly belonging to pop culture, which makes them appealing to the recipients. Russian posters, by contrast, tend to refrain from the usage of intertextual elements, which reduces their expressiveness.

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1. Introduction

Campaign posters are texts of a special type, incorporating both linguistic signs and the signs belonging to other semiotic systems. They are embedded in the social and cultural context, which allows for some culture specific features that are expressed both verbally and visually. At the same time campaign posters used in different countries share some common characteristics as they perform similar functions. They are viewed as a medium for communication between politicians and voters which becomes especially meaningful in the pre-election period. Election campaigns aim at persuading voters by way of political messaging to take the desired attitudes (Motta & Fowler, 2016). To reach voters politicians employ different means, such as speeches, televised debates, banners, leaflets, newspaper and television advertising. Modern technologies have introduced some changes to the way campaigns can target electoral base. In an attempt to connect to the voters, political parties and candidates increasingly use social media, and their Facebook and Twitter pages are viewed as essential campaign tools. However, traditional media such as political posters still retain their relevance in electoral campaigns. Campaign posters have been an integral part of political communication in the United States of America since Abraham Lincoln's election, at the end of the XIX century they became essential for political campaigning in Western Europe (Seidman, 2008).

Unlike in the US, Russian political advertising is in its early stage of development, since the majority of the country's political parties emerged in the XXI century and the election campaigns can hardly be called a long-standing practice. Though campaign posters are quite a new means of political communication in Russia, they have become a distinct element of its electoral landscape. The political relevance of campaign posters can be explained by the fact that they help parties and candidates to build their political images, to attract attention and as a result to establish name recognition (Gaise, 2017).

1.1. Approaches to campaign posters study

Campaign posters can be considered an effective electoral advertising tool for several reasons. They are quite easy to produce and distribute. Another important thing is wide reach that characterizes this medium. During the election campaigns posters are difficult to avoid, since they occupy visible positions in public places (Steffan & Venema, 2019). They have become a ubiquitous campaigning tool in Russia because televised debates, TV advertising and social media political ads have quite a limited use. They are in no way an archaic form being replaced by television and online platforms (Burges, 2011). On the contrary, they remain one of the most vibrant forms of campaigning as an available medium with a broad public appeal.

The functions of campaign posters are discussed in the book Election Posters around the Globe (Holtz-Bacha, 2017), which contains comparative research on electoral posters from over 28 European countries, indicating similarities and establishing national differences. Benoit (2019) and Wert (2016) provided an in-depth look at American presidential election posters. Benoit (2019) employs the functional approach to conduct a longitudinal analysis of presidential posters illuminating both verbal and visual symbols. The research investigates both function or tone and the topic of messages (Benoit, 2019). Posters belonging to the 1972 presidential campaign were examined by Holt (1986). The study of Barack

Obama's election posters from 2008 carried out by Seidman revealed the dominant role of visual elements and their creative use in political advertising (Seidman, 2010).

Russian campaign posters have not been studied extensively so far. The research of regional electoral campaign posters carried out by Magera (2003) emphasized their communicative and rhetorical properties (Magera, 2003). Walter (2016) contrasted Russian and German political posters (Walter, 2016). He argues that posters contain a combination of visual and verbal components, which aims to reduce political information to a form, appealing to a collective addressee. Nikolskaya (2019) provided an exploratory investigation of the interaction of verbal and pictorial elements in political posters from 2018 regional election campaigns in Russia.

1.2. Campaign posters as semiotically complex texts

Campaign posters are texts that tend to incorporate verbal as well as non-verbal elements, which makes them multimodal (Benoit, 2019; Dumitrescu, 2010; Holtz-Bacha, 2017). Forceville (2016) undertook the analysis of multimodal discourses structural characteristics. The scholar defined a mode as a sign system which can be subject to interpretation because of a specific perception process. He postulates that modes correlate with senses and include the following types: pictorial signs; written signs; spoken signs; gestures; sounds; music etc. (Forceville, 2016).

The structural elements of election posters are identified as verbal and visual modes (Benoit, 2019). Visual modes deal with the graphical arrangement of the text, including its typeface and layout, as well as its colour scheme and pictorial images. They display a great degree of interaction which enables them to convey a certain message. The modes used in posters can be attributed to the following categories: verbal, graphical, iconic and colour (Pavlina, 2019). Forceville (2016) argues that all modes combine freely with each other, however, none of them exists on its own, being a constituent element of a multimodal text. Chandler defines the interrelation of different modes within one text as intratextuality (Chandler, 2002).

As Bakhtin (1982) and then Kristeva (1986) observed, every text bears references to prior texts. Campaign posters as multimodal texts are no exception. Each mode can be symbolic, which allows for establishing some links with different codes belonging to social and cultural contexts. Such references are analysed through concepts of intertextuality (Chandler, 2002; Rajewsky, 2005). Barthes stipulated that the viewer decodes not only the perceptual message, but also the cultural message (Barthes, 1977).

2. Problem Statement

Since posters are semiotically complex texts, their verbal and visual components are arranged as a collection of elements that have different value or status. It is logical to assume that the type of interaction between the verbal and nonverbal modes in Russian and American posters will reveal some differences. The effect posters produce on the viewer depends on the degree of amalgamation of visual and linguistic elements as well as on their connection with a broad socio-cultural landscape. It is of interest to establish how intratextuality and intertextuality work in American and Russian multimodal texts and to see whether such interactions enhance the texts messages or fail to produce the desired effect.

Campaign posters are traditionally used in electoral contexts to create a favourable image of the politician or to attack the political opponents (Benoit, 2019). However, which function prevails in Russian electoral advertising and how it compares with American campaign advertising require further investigation.

3. Research Questions

  i. Are posters more commonly used to acclaim or to attack in US presidential campaigns? What are the functions of posters in Russian pre-electoral landscape?

  ii. What external sources are used in Russian and American campaign posters to shape the political message?

4. Purpose of the Study

The research aims at contrasting Russian and American campaign posters which are viewed as a system of various semiotically heterogeneous modes employed to transmit some politically relevant information to the collective recipient.

  i. The purpose is to establish the pragmatic functions of campaign posters in modern electoral communication in Russia and the USA.

  ii. The object of research also includes the examination of intratextual and intertextual relationships revealed in Russian and American multimodal texts.

5. Research Methods

The Sample contains 50 US presidential campaign posters and 50 Russian campaign posters. The sample spans 2000–2020. Since no archives for this period of time are available, collection of posters is based on the digital images found on the Internet. The Russian posters include those used during elections to the State Duma as well as regional elections in Nizhny Novgorod and Moscow. The sample posters are limited to the texts containing both verbal and visual elements.

The research used categorical content analysis which presupposed the examination of the sample posters from the standpoint of their functions and the interaction of verbal and visual elements. The verbal and visual elements were classified into the following categories: verbal, colour, iconic and graphical modes. Then the value of each mode in the poster was assessed.

The next stage involved the contrastive analysis of functions and modes employed in sample Russian and American campaign posters. Symbols interwoven into the posters' fabric were interpreted and their effect on the political message conveyance was analysed.

6. Findings

At the first stage of research all texts were segmented into their constituent elements or modes. The verbal mode encompasses signs belonging to a natural language. The graphical mode includes layout,

style, size and arrangement of verbal and pictorial elements of the text. Pictorial components such as photos, pictures, drawings and pictograms, are viewed as an iconic mode. All elements of multimodal texts are arranged according to a certain colour pattern, which represents a colour mode.

After the modes were established, all American sample posters were examined to reveal their functions, intratextual features and extratextual links. Then the Russian posters were analysed along the same lines.

6.1. The pragmatic functions and interrelation of modes in American campaign posters

The functions posters perform in American presidential campaigns include the creation of the positive image of the politician called acclaim and some critical evaluation of opponents called attack. Acclaim posters prevail in the sample. They either depict the politician's character and ideas or contain a direct appeal to vote for the candidate. Such an appeal can be expressed metaphorically as in the poster incorporating the image of a train and the call All Aboard the Trump Train!

In attack posters the appeal to vote against a certain contender is expressed either explicitly (e.g. Dump Trump) or implicitly by a combination of symbolic elements.

The two functions can combine in one text. In the 2016 campaign poster two contenders Berny Sanders and Hillary Clinton pit against each other. The poster is executed in a boxing style. The verbal component The Battle of New York. The People vs Establishment is supported by the visual image depicting Sanders's liberal electorate standing behind him, while a row of microphones behind Clinton symbolizes mass media support opposed to the popular one. Thus acclaiming Sanders the poster attacks his opponent in an expressive way.

The analysis of status relations among the modes revealed that most commonly the iconic mode assumes the dominant position in the texts. The verbal mode functions as a key to the image, adding new related information. For example, a poster, that features Beto O'Rourke riding a skateboard, contains the text For President 2020. The image provides information about the politician's character, while the text specifies his goal "to skateboard" to presidency. The iconic mode becomes supplementary if the verbal element of the text is based on alliteration or rhyme like in Biden is Bae or Can't Stump the Trump. The upward shift of the verbal mode status also occurs when a play on words is employed. Posters acclaiming Berny Sanders use the acronym U.S. and the pronoun us in a creative way: Not me U.S. Another example reveals the integration of graphical and verbal modes that enhances the effect of the whole text: A U.S. for the Rest of U.S. Sanders 2016.

The presidential campaign posters are characterized by numerous links to external codes, they tend to employ allusions to various social and cultural aspects that serve as prior texts. The slogan from Trump's 2016 campaign Make America Great Again is augmented to fit the purposes of the new campaign. In pro-Trump posters it is used as a source text for Make Liberals Cry Again. In anti-Trump 2020 posters the initial text is discernible in such creations as Make Florida Trump Free Again and Make America White Again. The verbal components bare some references to song lyrics like in pro-Sanders posters This Land is Your Land or Imagine. The iconic and graphical modes are also symbolic. The cultural icon of the 1940s Rosie the Riveter is used as the initial visual image for posters acclaiming Hillary Clinton (2016) and Elizabeth Warren (2020). Candidates are also portrayed as superheroes and

comic pop art style makes campaign posters culture specific. Political posters use references to TV commercials playing on their slogans and visual images. The poster attacking Trump has a recognizable logo of Burger King which serves as a background for Trump's graphical image. The logo Burger King is transformed into Border King to fit the political landscape of the presidential campaign 2020. Intertextual elements bring to the surface some hidden meanings, which provides intellectual challenge to the viewers and, as a result, enhances the appeal of the political message.

6.2. Functional and semiotic properties of Russian campaign posters

The analysis of posters used in visual electoral communication in Russia revealed that they aim to acclaim candidates, providing some information about their ideas and in some cases about their character. Unlike in the USA, the Russian electoral landscape does not contain posters that attack political opponents. In Russian electoral discourse criticism is traditionally expressed verbally in political debates, campaign speeches, etc. Posters used in public space in pre-election periods are devoid of aggression which normally characterises texts designed to attack political rivals.

To perform their function effectively multimodal texts are expected to be laconic and expressive, which means that both verbal and visual modes should work in unison sending a non-contradictory message to the viewers. The interaction of modes should also make each candidate recognizable, to help them 'stand out of the crowd'. However, campaign posters used in the nation-wide and regional elections in Russia show a great degree of uniformity of linguistic as well as visual elements. Their design tends to be quite standard, with a candidate's portrait placed against a monochrome background, the personal name executed in a standard font and a slogan. In the vast majority of cases linguistic parts do not integrate with visual elements: the slogans singled out in the campaign posters are so general that they can fit any electoral campaign. They are mostly unimaginative and fail to provide specific information about each candidate. For example, Order, Comfort, Wellbeing, or Revive Our Region as well as For the Benefit of People, In the Interest of People are so universal that it may prove difficult for the electorate to establish any links between the slogans and the candidates, so the political message is likely to fall flat.

The effective interaction of verbal and nonverbal modes was established in ten percent of sample texts. For example, in the campaign poster, acclaiming the ecologist Lilia Belova, who ran for the Moscow region governor in 2018, all modes amalgamate. The name of the candidate's party Green Alliance is executed in the green colour, the slogan Make Moscow Region Green Again allows for more than one meaning and correlates to the name of the party and the colour mode of the poster. The iconic mode, containing the image of the politician set against some green leafy trees, supports the verbal mode. Each component in this poster has a certain semantic value, when combined the modes are perceived as a whole text, characterised by a clear message and a high degree of expressiveness.

Some multimodal texts display a clear indication of the candidate's electoral base. The 2016 poster, acclaiming Zhirinovsky, contains the reference to the party's support of gardening enthusiasts: Zhirinovsky's Garden Bed. Time to Sow the Good! The Party of Growth poster appeals to the young electors, using the slogan Vote for the Young. Provide the Country's GROWTH! It is complemented by another slogan of this party No Country for Old Men, which is expressive, despite being morally questionable. This slogan is an attempt to attract the viewers' attention, using some intertextual links. The

text became recognisable since it coincided with the title of the film well known to the electorate. The research revealed another external source for campaign slogans – Russian classical literature. The verbal element For Those Who Find it Hard to Live in Russia bears reference to Nikolay Nekrasov's poetic line Who Finds it Good to Live in Russia. However, such links with social and cultural contexts are not common in Russian visual electoral communication. The prevailing trend is to employ cliché slogans, some standard layout and fonts, unimaginative colour pallets. Moreover, the modes tend to be used discordantly, which reduces the communicative effect of the text.

7. Conclusion

The contrastive analysis of campaign posters used in Russian and American electoral discourses leads to the following conclusion:

Posters are used in the US presidential elections either to acclaim or to attack. American posters, encompassing 2000–2020, are a powerful means that allows one to create a positive image of politicians, specifying their character and ideas, as well as to criticise political rivals. By contrast, in the contemporary Russian electoral context posters are employed only to acclaim. The function of attack is not typical of the country's visual electoral landscape, being mostly confined to verbal political communication.

The American posters are characterised by a higher degree of interaction of verbal, iconic, colour and graphical modes than their Russian counterparts. The discordance of mode usage makes multimodal texts less powerful, the candidates acclaimed in such posters are hardly discernible from each other.

In American posters prior texts merge with new ones and such interplay encompasses both verbal and visual modes, making the multimodal text semantically multi-layered, allowing for some intellectual challenge. This creative use of various symbols drawn from socio-cultural contexts facilitates the transmission of politically important information to the electorate. Russian posters, on the contrary, reveal a very limited use of external sources, which decreases the expressive potential of the texts.

To facilitate political communication it may be recommended to make both visual and verbal modes semantically meaningful and expressive, to fuse them in order to enhance the political message. The intratextual and intertextual links which are aptly employed in visual commercial advertising should also become the focal point of visual political advertising.

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