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POLITICAL MANIPULATION IN ONLINE MEDIA: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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Abstract

The results of a study performed at the interface of linguistics, linguopragmatics, theory of ordinary language consciousness, Internet linguistics, stylistics and the theory of the text are presented in the article. The strategies and tactics of political manipulation in the mass media both from the perspective of the addressant who has created the original text, as well as from the recipient's point of view, who reacts to the manipulative techniques implemented in the news are investigated. The fact that readers perceive the same text, which contains the same manipulative techniques, in different ways is of great interest, and inevitably confirms their effectiveness. The conducted research made it possible to reveal the fact that the author chooses a strategy for manipulating the mass consciousness of the reader, but implements it using different tactics: personification, "grey world", overthrow and concealment, which is confirmed by the linguostylistic analysis of the original text. The evidence that the majority of readers were exposed to manipulation is shown in the interpretation of the results of the experiment. The response of recipients to the transformed text was different from the comments on the original news: for example, the comments received during the experiment were more diverse, this is due to the fact that in the absence of manipulative techniques, recipients had to develop their own reaction based on pre-text attitudes and facts obtained from the news.

1. Introduction

The relevance of the research is connected with the growing interest in the phenomenon of language personality, as well as with the emergence of Internet communication, which takes a mass character. The interpretation of language possession as a dominant personality trait has led the scientific community to form a linguistic personology, including a linguopolitical personology (Chudinov & Nikiforova, 2018), which is actively developing at the present time.

Political linguistics has been gaining popularity recently. Nonetheless, a vast majority of studies has been conducted in the framework of linguopersonology: the attention of scientists is focused on the language personality of the addressant, creating the text on a political topic, and the recipient reacting, for example, to the news by means of a comment. The objects of study are specific political figures (Chudinov & Nikiforova, 2019), political genres (Saveleva, 2019; Yergaliyeva et al., 2018), strategies and tactics of manipulation, as well as readers' interpretation of texts on various topics, including political ones. Thus, both texts in the field of professional political communication and in the field of ordinary or naive linguistics are studied. However, despite the relevance of this direction, there are very few works that deal with texts aimed at discrediting the authorities.

At the same time, the mass media are an important link in the broadcasting of certain information, including of a political nature. In the modern world, they significantly influence the formation of social values, which allows us to speak about the mediatization of consciousness (Issers, 2019, p. 179). By all means, the media emphasize that they are objective in the presentation of information and do not give an assessment, but it is not possible to talk about a neutral presentation of data without the use of manipulative strategies and tactics. This is due to the fact that the text presentation is influenced by many factors: personal attitudes of the journalist, editor-in-chief, the media company owner, the political situation in the country, the presence of censorship, etc.

There is a great number of works devoted to the study of the phenomenon of manipulation in modern linguistics. For example, manipulation is considered from the psychological angle by Dotsenko (1997), Kara-Murza (2000). The above mentioned researchers investigate the mechanisms of manipulation, how our consciousness reacts to it, how to protect ourselves from its influence, etc. The study of linguistic manipulation is carried out by Issers (2011), Kopnina (2012), Skovorodnikov et al. (2019), Koshkarova and Ruzhentseva (2016), Sentenberg and Karasik (1993).

The advent of the Internet has given the media the opportunity to reach a large audience, which makes it possible to talk about the manipulation of mass consciousness. In addition, the Network has made it easier to leave a response to a news item or an article. Now readers can leave a comment that presents their opinions and images directly on the site or on a page in social networks, where the text was posted and read. In addition, they have the ability to find interesting information much faster. In this regard, linguists also have an interest in a new type of text – Internet comment as a result of the speech activity of a virtual language personality (Saveleva, 2019). Currently, comments are the material for many works performed in the field of linguopersonology, linguoconflictology, political linguistics, linguoculturology, etc.

This article is devoted to presenting the results of the study of strategies and tactics of political manipulation in the media in a linguopersonological aspect, while attention is directed both to the addressant who has created the original text, and to the addressees (Internet commentators and respondents) who interpret the news item. It is significant to note that commentators and respondents react differently to a text regardless of the fact that the manipulative techniques implemented remain the same.

2. Problem Statement

The main attention in the works that study political manipulation in the media is focused on the choice of strategies and tactics aimed at retaining power by representatives of the ruling elite. In this regard, there is a need to manipulate the mass consciousness of the average native speaker. The distinctive feature of our research is that it is aimed at identifying manipulative strategies and tactics chosen by a journalist in order to discredit the authorities, and the peculiarities of their perception by ordinary native speakers. Thus, the problem of the study is the correlation between the use of certain strategies and tactics with different potential for manipulative influence, and the types of reaction of commentators. Therefore, the basis for the hypothesis to be put forward is that there are speech manipulation techniques, the use of which allows the journalist to create media texts that effectively affect the recipients, who, in turn, react differently to them.

3. Research Questions

Regarding the foregoing, the questions raised and resolved in this article are as follows:

3.1. Linguostylistic analysis of the text of the news item. Identification of the strategies and tactics that have been implemented.

3.2. Analysis of the effectiveness of strategies and tactics based on the material of Internet comments on the news item.

3.3. Experimental study of the effectiveness of applied strategies and tactics based on the material of recipients' comments on the original and transformed texts.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to identify strategies and tactics of political linguistic manipulation, as well as to evaluate their effectiveness, identified by analyzing the comments of readers and participants of the experiment. In order to do this, it is necessary to:

- Highlight manipulation strategies and tactics in the text of the news item, which is available at Lenta.ru website;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the identified strategies and tactics regarding the comments on the original news and the transformed text obtained during the experiment.

5. Research Methods

The factual base of the study was made up of one domestic political news from the website of an online publication Lenta.ru, 416 comments on it, as well as 60 questionnaires devoted to the interpretation of the text of the original news item and the transformed one for the experiment.

The news item "Putin signed the law on free collection of dead wood" was published on the Lenta.ru website on April 18, 2018. Here is the text of the news item:

Putin signed the law on free collection of dead wood

The President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin signed a law that allows Russians to freely collect dead wood in the forest for their own needs. The corresponding document is published on the official portal of legal information.

The law adopted by the State Duma on April 3, 2018, will come into force in 2019. Amendments were made to the Forest Code. They make it possible to harvest and collect fallen tree trunks or parts of them, twigs and branches for your own needs. According to the document, dead wood is classified as non-timber forest resources.

The first Deputy Head of the United Russia faction, Andrey Isaev, commenting on the initiative to allow free collection of dead wood, said that "his heart just rejoices". The adoption of the bill pleased many Netizens. According to them, the State Duma finally allows something, not prohibits it. "Only 10 years have passed, and the population has already been allowed to collect dead wood!" - said the user Mikhail Svetlov. "Dead wood – a national treasure! Dreams come true! "- he said in the Twitter account "Dead wood belongs to us at last!" (Putin podpisal zakon o svobodnom sbore valezhnika, 2018).

The transformed text that was implemented at the third stage of the study during the experiment is given below:

The law on forest resource signed

The law on one of the forest resources was signed and published on the legal information portal.
This law was adopted in April 2018 and entered into force in 2019. Amendments were made to the Forest Code. Now people can harvest wood for their own needs.

When performing the research, the method of scientific description, which is implemented by means of particular methods of analysis, synthesis, systematization, classification and comparison, was used. In addition, methods of contextual analysis and experiment, which imply a goal, methodology and participants, were applied.

6. Findings

6.1. The results of stage 1

As a result of linguistic and stylistic analysis of the news item, it was revealed that the standard method of presenting information based on the principle of an inverted pyramid was applied. The essence of this method is that you can identify the most and least significant parts of the text. The news item begins with a headline that contains the main idea, the concise message. It is also important that the reader can

finally comprehend it only after reading the entire text in full. The so-called lead - a more detailed part compared to the headline, but also providing new information in a concise form comes after that. The lead must answer the questions: what? (The law signed), where? (In Russia), when? (The news was posted on April 18, 2018), who? (Vladimir Putin), how? (This question is irrelevant in this news), why? (To legally allow citizens to collect dead wood). It is followed by the main part, or "body of the news" – the information takes a narrower, specialized character, and the data announced in the headline and lead is clarified. It is worth noting that the closer to the end of the news, the less valuable information is given. Generally known data or opinions of some persons on this issue may be provided (as in the case of a news item chosen as the material for this study), and a reminder of the event associated with it may also appear at the end of the text. This is especially true for news where data is clarified.

It should be noted that manipulative information is introduced implicitly in the analyzed text. **The strategy of discrediting the authorities** can be identified in the news item under study: it manifests itself through the tactics of ***personification***, ***"grey world", overthrow and concealment*** (a more detailed analysis of the article is presented in our previous publication: (Golyanskaya & Melnik, 2019).

The personification tactic is already evident in the headline of the news item: "Putin signed the law on free collection of dead wood." Note that the name of the President of Russia is used in the active voice and occupies the strongest position of the text, which gives him special responsibility for the adopted law.

The "grey world" tactic is used by the journalist, including when choosing the "Russians" lexeme. Thus, the distance between political figures and ordinary citizens is emphasized. In addition, there is an emphasis on the existence of "non-Russians", that is, residents of other countries.

The concealment tactic is actively manifested when the author of the news item quotes the people who speak out on the topic of the adopted law. He chooses a contradictory reaction of the politician, which can be interpreted in two ways and also a sarcastic opinion of the Network user. Thus, the journalist avoids expressing a personal opinion about the document.

The use of ***the overthrow tactic*** can be found in the description of dead wood and at the end of the text (strong position) when changing case texts. Thus, the bill is presented in a humiliating light for the Russians. It is also important to inform readers about the presence of a Twitter entry "Dead wood belongs to us at last!" This highlights how resonant the document was.

6.2.   The results of stage 2

The next step is to see how effective the manipulative tactics used are. For this purpose, it is necessary to refer to the comments on the news "Putin signed the law on the free collection of dead wood." The number of the comments on the Lenta.ru website – 416. Comments on the text illustrate that the strategy and tactics of the author of the news are successful, that is, they affect the readers. This is evidenced by the presence of mostly negative and sarcastic comments, as well as reactions that are directed at the government, and not the topic of collecting dead wood. Readers expressed their opinions using vulgar and obscene words. At the same time, the main attention was paid to Vladimir Putin, which is caused by ***the personification tactic***. In addition, Internet users reacted to ***the "grey world" tactic***, comparing the authorities with the people and Russia with other countries, such as the United States, Ukraine and China.

In the opinion of commentators, the ruling elite prefers to send useful resources abroad, thereby depriving the Russians. Netizens consider the people oppressed and unable to resist the government.

The tactic of overthrow and concealment did not go unnoticed by commentators either. They shared the sarcastic tone of Mikhail Svetlov's statement and excerpts from the account "Dead wood belongs to us at last!". In addition, readers drew attention to the humiliating nature of the document. Netizens have proposed their own laws, which, in their opinion, are similar to collecting dead wood and at the same time absurd (allowing you to breathe).

6.3. The results of stage 3

During the experiment, it was found that readers' reactions to the text using manipulative strategies and tactics and to the transformed text differ. At the same time, the stage where the comments of Network users and respondents to the news from the Lenta.ru website were studied and compared, allows us to conclude that the difference in reactions is due not to the difference in audiences, but to the text itself:

1) respondents, unlike Network users, do not personify the authorities. If there is no mentioning of any representative of the political elite in the news, the participants of the experiment rely on their knowledge and attitudes on this issue. Thus, in the comments on the transformed text, respondents did not mention Vladimir Putin, while Netizens in 24% of cases used the name of the President of Russia. In addition, the reactions of the participants in the experiment included a wider range of representatives of the authorities – the State Duma, the United Russia party, Vladimir Putin and others;

2) despite the absence of "grey world" tactic in the news, respondents also touched upon the topic of the people, but the focus shifted. In the comments of the experiment participants, people do not seem to be oppressed, on the contrary, such qualities as greed, the desire to circumvent the law, etc. are highlighted. At the same time, such characteristics, according to respondents, are inherent in both the people and the authorities, which unites them. In the comments on the text posted online, readers distinguish between the political elite and other Russians;

3) the comments on the transformed text present more diverse views on the bill. It can be explained by the lack of manipulative strategies and tactics in the proposed news: due to the lack of imposed opinions, respondents had to develop their own, so the respondents mainly relied on their own pre-text attitudes when commenting;

4) generally speaking, the main attention in the comments on the transformed text was paid directly to the topic of the news item - the adoption of the law on collecting dead wood; while Netizens, additionally to the news, expressed their opinions on the government and the political situation in Russia.

7. Conclusion

The research revealed a manipulative strategy in the original text - the strategy of discrediting. It was implemented through the tactics of personification, "grey world", overthrow and concealment. The analysis of transformed texts - that is Internet comments – helped to evaluate the effectiveness of the techniques applied by the journalist Thus, Netizens responded to all manipulation tactics.

Participants of the experiment were also asked to comment on the news item posted on the Lenta.ru website. Generally, it can be said that they were exposed to manipulation, but they have responded to the tactic of personification to a lesser extent. The reaction of respondents to the transformed text differed from the comments on the original news item. Thus, the comments received during the experiment were more diverse. This is due to the fact that in the absence of manipulative techniques, respondents had to develop their own reaction, based on pre-text attitudes and facts obtained from the news. It is possible to use the obtained data when writing agitation, propaganda and other political texts aimed at discrediting or, conversely, retaining power. Additionally, the findings of the research make it possible to develop protective mechanisms against manipulation in the Internet environment.

Acknowledgments

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