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LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST: RHETORIC IN GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICTS OR RHETORIC MAKING CONFLICTS?

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The paper focuses on the issue of interdependence of ideology and language when representing historical past in political discourse. The past is regarded as an object to be constructed. Linguistic devices are of interest as they construct an evaluative image of the past. We presume that narratives about national history are powerful tools influencing historical understanding and national identity construction. In this study a contribution is made by analyzing specific national historical discourse in the situation of ongoing geopolitical conflict, namely the conflict in the Caucasian region between Armenia and Azerbaijan with regard to the dispute on historical right on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. The discourse analytic approach allows to consider texts as parts of social practice. It is applied to a value-based construction of the historical past in texts produced by public figures, including heads of states. The study stresses that through the language of appraisal the past can be presented in a value-based way. Linguistic analysis focuses on evaluative description of the historical past in the frame of certain political interests for the public who are not experts in history.

Keywords: geopolitical conflict, discourse analysis, historical narrative, persuasion, linguistic choice.

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ЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКОЕ КОНСТРУИРОВАНИЕ ПРОШЛОГО: РИТОРИКА В ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКОМ КОНФЛИКТЕ ИЛИ РИТОРИКА, СОЗДАЮЩАЯ КОНФЛИКТ?

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Проведен анализ лингвистических приёмов и средств оценочного конструирования исторического прошлого в условиях геополитического конфликта. «Политическое присвоение истории» рассмотрено применительно к многолетнему геополитическому конфликту между Арменией и Азербайджаном о территориальной принадлежности Нагорного Карабаха. Показано, что вариативность исторической интерпретации может становиться инструментом конструирования так называемой «национальной истории»: интерпретацией исторического прошлого в связи с государственной политикой. Столкновение различных политических проектов порождает столкновение исторических нарративов и образов прошлого. Представление фактов исто-

рического прошлого неотделимо от оценочного отношения к ним. В статье лингвистическая интерпретация прошлого рассматривается как дополнительный инструмент, не подменяющий специальные методы историографии, но позволяющий квалифицировать текст о прошлом как субъективно-оценочное, политически мотивированное высказывание. Отмечено, что в лингвистическом конструировании прошлого опасно безальтернативное представление позиций для широкой общественности, не обладающей специальными историческими знаниями.

Ключевые слова: геополитический конфликт, дискурсивный анализ, исторический нарратив, речевое воздействие, лингвистические средства, речевое воздействие.

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Introduction

The research raises the issue of interdependence of ideology and language when representing historical past in the course of political communication. The object of research is value-based construction of the historical past in the political discourse. Thus the present study has two central notions – history and politics.

Politics is normally considered as an institutional discourse, as a type of collective activity in the field of power relations for (re)distribution of the influence in the context of historic opportunities. In the context of the present paper political discourse is understood as a set of all texts topically related with the social field of politics. Political discourse is regarded as a verbal correlate, or that is to say, discourse dimension of the social field of politics in a very broad sense. Diverse visions of the world clash rival in political discourse.

The historical past is a vital resource. Historical past acts as an identity resource for human communities since it requires a value based positioning of “us” and “them”. History is always partial. In this framework we presume that the past does not exist per se, it relies upon memory, witnesses, texts. These sources can be destroyed, counterfeited, manipulated. History is not a mere recording of the past, but rather a dissemination of diverse and often conflicting “stories about the past”. Societies have traumatic events in their history – wars, war crimes, mass killing, rape. Often such events are surrounded with taboos. To make decisions in the present and to make plans for the future, a community must rely on agreement on the interpretation of one’s own past. Official historical narratives are reproduced through films, schoolbooks, political speeches. Various social groups in the society compete for the one and only image of the past.

In this context historical past is beyond the scope of investigation in historiography and becomes a research object in discourse studies, cultural studies, for more detail see [1–6].

Past is an object of construction. In this regard language is discussed as a tool of shaping the idea about reality. The key premises are as follows. Facts, processes and phenomena of reality obtain social meanings only in text structures. Linguistic structures are analyzed as dependent on sociocultural, ethnic, psychological, religious, i.e. in a broader sense on historical factors [7–10]. Discourse approach allows to consider texts as parts of social practice and social events.

The situation of ongoing interstate conflict provides a specific focus in studying of political appropriation of the historical past [11, 12]. As an illustration of such conflict in the 20th century we take the situation in the Caucasian region in relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Politically unresolved interstate relations, controversial political issues and latent conflicts between the states of the Caucasian region, active part of the Russian Federation and the USA as subjects of political influence make the situation most illustrative.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of research is to reveal linguistic means which act as a tool of constructing knowledge about the past. The focus is on how language is an ingredient of power processes. Politics deliberately generates discursive practices in which historical past performs political functions. Within this framework linguistic means become an instrument of persuading the addressee to shape, change his values in favour of the addresser rather than a tool of describing reality. Rhetorical devices are of interest as an object of analysis as they construct an evaluative image of the past.

What the present study adds to the existing discussions is a specific angle of a problem. We focus on evaluative “ready-made” description of the past in political discourse for the mass information consumers who are not experts in history. We analyze linguistic means in regard to the question that they are able to intensify and to extend the conflict, to construct the impression about a conflict as about an inevitable one. In this regard this paper aims to answer the following broad question: What methodological problems are centered around “history understanding”? When analyzing the historical description, methodological focus is placed both on value-based and cognitive grounds and on construction of social reality.

Research Methods and Corpus

The present paper presents conclusions of the studies which were started in 2013s in the framework of the research project about construction of the so-called “national historical discourse” in the situation of ongoing geopolitical conflict, namely the conflict in the Caucasian region between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The conflict is also about unresolved dispute on the nationality of the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. It is based on two polar views on the historical past – Armenian and Azerbaijani. There are two completely different descriptions of the past and present. Though changing over decades, they still remain conflicting.

We study texts produced by public figures, including heads of states. These reflect geopolitical situation in the post-Soviet period in the Caucasian region in relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan with regard to the dispute on historical right on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. The corpus of investigation includes public speech texts, interviews with the state leaders, key politicians of Armenia and Azerbaijan between 2010 and 2019 posted on the official websites of the head of the countries. Topically these texts are completely or partially address the Nagorno-Karabakh territorial conflict. The study corpus consists of 29 texts by Azerbaijan politicians and 21 of those produced by Armenian political figures.

The methodological framework is found within a discursive and constructivist approaches [13–17]. Analysis was conducted as a pragma-semantic study based on a number of linguistics tools, namely nominations used to denote groups of subjects in terms of ‘us’ – ‘them’ were considered with their evaluative semantics in mind. Linguistic means are regarded as part of communicative strategies unfolding in the text.

Discussion

Past and present as an object of interdisciplinary analyses. The past seems to be one of the vital resources. The past can be seen as a tool of maintaining both national and personal identity. The past acts as an ideological resource. The past is regarded as an object to be constructed. Narratives on national history have been recognized as powerful cultural tools influencing historical understanding and national identity construction. It is studied in terms of collective memory and social representations [13], but also in the extensive studies on history understanding and on the so called “public use of history”, see for example [14, 15, 17]. Historical narratives are reproduced in many public spheres through films, documentaries, textbooks, political speeches and by historians. This means that they are produced and propagated for particular (political, educational, cultural) purposes, and that they are consumed by public. Historical consciousness has a strong impact on the discursive construction of national identities. Historical narratives are discursively constructed and reconstructed, changing and shifting. There is not one historical past. Textual representations cannot be separated from value-based interests.

This means that language is not only and merely used to express meanings. It serves to construct reality and shape understanding of reality. One of the major outcomes of understanding of the linguistic turn in historiography has been a discursive focus in historical texts analysis. The key presumption is that history is a mode of knowing the reality due to the objective facts and its active interpretation.

In historical discourse manifoldness and variety of meanings and instances of appraisal is established at two levels. Firstly, verbalized reality does not seem to be equal to reality itself as a sequence of facts, events, phenomena. The past as an object of cognition does not exist in reality. This is why historical cognition is regarded as reconstruction of new historical knowledge from prior knowledge. Historical past contains only some material, and lays the groundwork for the solution of the problem. Debates on history and its methods continue. However, the boundaries of history, namely of the historical past, historical present and predicted future, is still very much an open topic both in methodology of science and in social practice.

Beliefs about the trustworthiness of past create ‘the image of reality’ or ‘reality effect’ acting as intermediaries between participants of communication and real facts. A certain view of ‘how things happened’ created by linguistic means foregrounds the concept of ‘history regarded as the present’, returns the past in current practice. That is, the communicating past experiences is not driven by the mere transmission of narratives of the past, but also by a situated reconstruction of those experiences in the present, depending on social group goals and pragmatic needs, e.g. the construction of a positive in-group self-representation.

The emphasis on national identity facilitates other constructions than the emphasis on investigating the national past in historical narrative. The identity of nation and national sameness implies that in national terms past and present are the same. We presume that historiography aims at staying clear from reductionist and determinist explanations of connecting past and present. Historical past and present should not be reduced to one another, the past cannot be understood through present frameworks only. Past and present cannot be absolutely differentiated, nor can there be a simple identification between them. This relation should be constructed carefully by letting present questions interact with different alternative sources from the past.

Manifoldness of instances of appraisal and various, alternative images of the past can be built by the author of the text and depend on his religious, ethnic and ideological beliefs. This very aspect is the focus of our analysis.

Constant dynamism of “real/false” concepts, typical of historical narrative is further loaded with persuasion strategies which play a dominant role in politics. It is common practice when a situation for constructing of a specific “political reality” is established in politics. This means that perception of some segment of reality implies value-related attitude to it. Political discourse builds up a specific situation of “political appropriation of history”. Politically charged history cannot be reduced to deliberate distortion of facts. This should be regarded as a multi-level phenomenon which demonstrates that facts derive from their description and appraisal. And description itself is based on ideological intentions of the author. Ideological division into ‘us’ and ‘them’ is of crucial importance for politics that forms the ground for numerous interpretations of reality.

The key statement to be proposed here is as follows: politics deliberately generates and maintains discursive practices in which national, ethnical, cultural or professional issues begin to perform political functions, namely participate in authority matters. Politics refreshes the historical past by transforming history in ideology which in its turn is meant to serve different political projects.

Geopolitical conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan: Background. The Republic of Armenia is a country in the South Caucasus region, founded in the 4th–2nd centuries BC. It is located in the north of Western Asia, and is landlocked. The country borders with Azerbaijan in the east, Turkey in the west (not having any diplomatic relations), Iran in the south and Georgia in the north. The population of Armenia is approximately 3 million people. About 95 % of Armenians practise Christianity. In 1918 the First Republic of Armenia was declared. In 1920 Armenia was incorporated into the Soviet Union and Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic was established. In 1990 Armenia officially declared its independence.

Nagorno-Karabakh is the region in the eastern part of the Armenian Highland. In fact most of its territory is governed by unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. The region is equated with the administrative borders of Azerbaijan Republic.

Territorial dispute between two neighbouring countries of Azerbaijan and Armenia has two dimensions: on the one hand, the issue of legal status of the region of Nagorno-Karabakh affects norms of sovereignty and unviolability of state borders; on the other hand, it deals with the right of the people for self-determination. To resolve the ethnic and political conflict has been quite hard due to the complexity of the dispute itself, its historical roots and hard positions of the parties involved. The ethnic and political conflict has roots dating back well over a century. Due to specific geographical, geostrategic position and resulting in ethnic shifts going back centuries, the region of Nagorno-Karabakh has been the centre of numerous disputes and contradictions between nations and states. Already in the late 7th – early 6th centuries BC lowland and highland parts of the region of Nagorno-Karabakh became the territory of severe political and ethnic changes, force regroupings. In the periods of 1905–1907 and 1918–1920 the region of Nagorno-Karabakh became the arena of bloody Armenian-Azeri conflict twice. During the Soviet rule in 1918 lowland part of the region of Nagorno-Karabakh formed part of Azerbaijan, and it was first the arena of conflicts and later violent armed clashes between the Azeri and Armenians. In 1921 the region of Nagorno-Karabakh became part of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan, and in 1923 autonomous region of the Nagorno-Karabakh was first established which later in 1937 was changed into the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region (NKAR).

The period when the region of Nagorno-Karabakh was part of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan cannot be regarded as the time of well-being for the prevailing Armenian population. Its isolation from the titular ‘continent’, constant reduction of ethnic Armenians during the period of the USSR break-up/collapse had serious implications. As a result, a number of political and other factors turned the region into the conflict area which later flared into armed clash in 1992–1994s. The territory of Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh is a breakaway republic.

Mediated by the Russian Federation, Kirghizia and CIS Interstate Parliamentary Assembly, a protocol was signed by Azerbaijan, the Nagorno-Karabakh region and Armenia. According to this protocol, which became known as Bishkek protocol, a ceasefire agreement was reached. In 1992 the Minsk group was established, back then by the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), aimed at settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict led by the USA, the Russian Federation and France.

International and legal aspect of this dispute is coupled with clashing geopolitical interests of different countries in this region.

The authorities of the Republic of Armenia claim on the problem of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement that key points to be considered are to provide security of the Armenian population in the region and to recognize the territory in the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Yerevan believes that Armenian population of the Nagorno-Karabakh region exercised the right of self-determination as one of the principles of international law.

The stance of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic is as follows. To try to persuade international community that the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic was established resulting from age-old persistent and hard struggle of the Armenian population of the region of Nagorno-Karabakh for its ethnic and cultural identity and from exercising its right on self-determination. The authorities of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic claim that democratic states are to respect the right of the people of the republic on free and democratic choice of their independent future based on the independence referendum which was held on December 10th 1991 in accordance with international law and legislation of the USSR and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic constitution referendum of 2006.

The conflict is escalated not only as bilateral between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also as a sphere of clashing interests of three countries: the Russian Federation, the USA and Turkey which to a greater extent rely on their pragmatic goals when trying to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, see for more details [16, 17].

Involvement into other conflicts on the post-Soviet arena, economical, political and ideological interests of conflicting parties and countries fighting for the control over the Caucasus prevent from peaceful settling of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. In September-November 2020 large-scale military operations between Armenia and Azerbaijan resumed and the conflict entered a new phase. As a result Azerbaijan regained control of a larger part of the Nagorno-Karabakh territory¹.

Ethnic and political roots of the conflict are mainly revealed as various political ideologemes. There are polar descriptions of the issue. Being different in various political periods, they appear to remain mutually exclusive. Alternative non coincident images of the past are established. At least two versions of reality descriptions are contrasted: “those events that really took place” and “those events that are thought to have occurred”. In situation like this the role of rhetorical devices, which are used to construct this or that image of the past reality, increases manifold. This problem seems multi-dimensional and multi-level, for more details [17].

Linguistic strategy and devices. By ‘strategy’ we generally mean “a more or less accurate and more or less intentional plan of practices (including discursive practices) adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic aim. As far as the discursive strategies are concerned, that is to say, systematic ways of using language, we locate them at different levels of linguistic organization and complexity” [19, p. 139].

We can point out typical regular uses of means of value-based constructing of the past as for the situation of the geopolitical conflict.

The macro-strategy used can be called construction of the value-based relation between the past and the present.

This strategy is further developed through the main tactics:

- victimization,
- glorification of us,
- demonization of them,
- phantom menacing.

Instrumentalization of these tactics is based on value-based ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ opposition. The rhetoric of value-based alternative constructing of the past is connected to instrumentalization of the function of the ‘other’.

The role of values is seen as a building block of conflict field and in terms of domination of the axiological position of the author and those supporting him towards that field. All other possible value-based positions, including that of the opposed group, are ignored.

To present the past in a value-related way, frequent use of negative evaluative means can be noticed. These means of appreciation are used for identifying the other’s past, the image of the past not coinciding with officially-recognized narrative.

Let us illustrate the difference in discourse practices of the Armenian-Azeri conflict description by the most representative text exemplars, revealing Armenian (4-5) or Azeri (1-3) viewpoint on the history of the conflict respectively. The texts were derived from official websites of the President of Armenia and the President of Azerbaijan.

*1. Nagorno-Karabakh is **our historical** land... We must bring and are bringing the **historical truth** to the world. No-one doubts that Nagorno-Karabakh has **historically belonged to the Azerbaijani** people. From a legal point of view, Nagorno-Karabakh is an **inalienable part of Azerbaijan**. No country recognizes and I am sure never will recognize the criminal and self-proclaimed regime existing in Nagorno-Karabakh. These factors, **historical facts** and the norms of international law, the decisions and resolutions of international organizations not only strengthen our position... This is suggested by **historical realities**, the legal framework...*

***Armenia has occupied our lands**².*

¹ <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/09/11/2020/5f7067be9a794753f86fb7b5>

² President Aliyev attended iftar ceremony on the occasion of holy month of Ramadan. 06.06.2018.

2. *The occupation of Azerbaijani lands continues. As a result of this occupation, more than a million Azerbaijanis became internally displaced and refugees on their own land. Our cities have been destroyed and people driven out. We were subjected to ethnic cleansing. All this has been proven by facts and materials....*³

3. *Nagorno-Karabakh is our historical and native land, an integral part of Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani people have lived, created and built on these lands for centuries. Our historical monuments, place names of cities and villages show that these lands belong to the Azerbaijani people. Unfortunately, the aggressor state has destroyed our historical and religious monuments on the occupied lands. ... In 1992, the Armenians perpetrated the Khojaly genocide. As a result of this heinous war crime, more than 600 innocent civilians, including more than 60 children, were brutally murdered. The Khojaly tragedy is officially recognized as an act of genocide by more than 10 countries of the world. During this genocide, more than a thousand people went missing and nothing is known about their fate.*

The Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict must be resolved on the basis of the norms and principles of international law. Azerbaijan will never come to terms with this occupation and the territorial integrity of our country must be restored.

*Despite this humanitarian catastrophe, I believe that Azerbaijan managed to achieve very successful development in the years of independence*⁴.

4. *The truth is that Karabakh was never a part of independent Azerbaijan. It was forced into Azerbaijan by a decision of the Soviet Union party authority...I would like to reiterate that Mountainous Karabakh was never a part of independent Azerbaijan: it was annexed to Azerbaijan by a decision of the Soviet Union party body... The people of Karabakh never put up with this decision, and upon the first opportunity, seceded from the Soviet Union fully in line with the laws of the Soviet Union and the applicable international law.*

*The irony is that Azeri propaganda, spending hundreds of millions of dollars, does not miss any opportunity to label Karabakh as an aggressor, despite the fact that the people of Karabakh had to take on arms literally to avoid extermination... The alternative to this settlement is the forcing of the Karabakh people back into Azerbaijan, which will inevitably lead to attempts of new ethnic cleansing of Armenians in Karabakh*⁵.

5. *Azerbaijan's pretensions to Nagorno-Karabakh lack any historical, legal, political and moral grounds. Nagorno-Karabakh has never been a part of independent Azerbaijan*⁶.

So, if we rely on the analysis of the texts undertaken within the framework of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it can be noted the following. Both for Azerbaijan and Armenia description of the conflict in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh and attitude to it are based on constructing the image of us as a victim.

In the Azerbaijan social discourse Armenians are regarded as alien and hostile. They have become the image of 'other' nation around which the Azerbaijan people should unite. And vice versa. The "other/wrong" picture of the historical past is negatively assessed. Tokens of negative appreciation are nominations of a group/circle of aliens like *aggressor, the aggressor state*; focusing menace which comes from them expressed by nomination of 'our' country as a victim, the subject of invasion by the 'others' – *ethnic cleansing, genocide*; mutual declaring of illegitimate status of the 'other' nationhood: regularly used linguistic means are *occupation; lack any historical, legal, political grounds, was annexed*.

Axiological aspect plays a major role in conflict description and is assumed as a key premise in linguistic analysis. Thus linguistic choices in history description are determined by axiological evaluation. This implies orientation towards a specific set of national, political, ideological and religious values. Assuming

³ I. Aliyev interviewed by First Deputy Director General of Russian news agency TASS Mikhail Gusman. 05.04. 2018. Available: <https://ru.president.az/>

⁴ Ilham Aliyev attended the opening of the 6th Baku International Humanitarian Forum. Available: <https://en.president.az/articles/30430> 25 October 2018.

⁵ Speech by President S. Sargsyan in the Chatham House British Royal Institute of International Affairs, 10.02.2010. Available: <http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2010/02/10/news-57/>

⁶ President Serzh Sargsyan takes part in opening of 3rd International Forum of MSIIR Alumni 23.10.2015. Available: <http://www.president.am/ru/press-release/item/2015/10/23/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-takes-part-in-Moscow-Internatioan-relation-Institute-third-forum-opening-ceremony/>

that these values are multiple, we can presuppose the conflict of these values, which leads to the conflict of historical reality descriptions. This can be clearly illustrated by the texts provided as typical representatives of a certain discourse practice both in the Armenian and Azeri descriptions of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute.

Conclusion and Implications

To sum it up, what can linguistic dimension of historical discourse provide us with?

It is able to facilitate understanding and as a result, resolving a number of methodological issues. This kind of analysis is by no means able to substitute analysis undertaken by historians and for historians. This was not our aim to restrict all operations, including manipulation with historical reality only to linguistic ones. However, linguistic analysis can provide a specific perspective of a problem, namely pose a fundamental question on to what extent reality is substituted with its description.

Clash of conflicting narratives itself does not seem to be either the reason for a political dispute or to be reduced to it. A key research question of the present study is as follows: is the conflict of the parties endless or explication of this dispute as a linguistic clash of conflicting axiologies is a matter of concern? Put the question in another way, what makes the conflict continuing and unresolved – unreconciled interests, which should be accepted as a fact of life in the context of neighbouring Christians and Muslims, of great powers? Or is it due to the provocative communicative and speech practice which constantly casts the neighbouring nations in the state of confrontation? What cannot be actually resolved: the conflict itself or the conflict in the dispute description?

The rhetoric of the conflict can be escalated. Linguistic means are able to make and intensify the impression about a conflict as about an ever-lasting and inevitable one. They can also extend the period of conflict. Contrasting historical interpretations cannot lead to distortion of the historical record. Since only historians can judge whether historical facts are distorted. Whereas linguistic analysis is about focusing and making distinct of a different angle – evaluative absolute description of the historical past for the public who are not experts in history. It is the mass information consumer that acts as an addressee to be persuaded. The conflict may remain unresolved when discussions about values and reasons of this conflict are not given. Then the only one, ready-made value-based interpretation of historical events is to replace historical events themselves. Language packing of historical facts is able to manipulate the mass reader's perception. This results in xenophobia, intolerance to everything that is alien. Negative interpretation of the image of the 'other' can generate military conflicts, and this is seen as an extreme form of opposition of national histories.

The research into the rhetoric of the conflict provides important prerequisites for further investigation in peace linguistics [20–22] in its peace-building efforts in the field of rhetoric tools and linguistic choices.

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