

A Case Analysis of Political Discourse Ambivalence: Between the Truth and Falsity

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Abstract

Many false statements in connection with COVID-19 have fueled a number of rumors and conspiracy theories in the world. Politicians tend to use complicated technical systems and information technologies in order to influence people's consciousness, feelings and social behavior. Under the guise of taking care of people's wellbeing they pursue their own objectives. The political leaders have challenged the world with their claims and political statements which hypocritically announced their striving to serve for the sake of the nations, but in fact demonstrating their strong will to benefit from the situation. However, their actions are not treated by people as aggression and don't lead to open confrontation and aggravation of military and political relations. They paradoxically manage to balance between the truth and falsity, demonstrating ambivalence of what they state in their speeches and appeals to the nations. The basic methods of political discourse ambivalence analysis, used in the article, are: (a) fact-checking method, (b) scientific analysis of the evidence, (c) peer-reviewed studies and the others. There has been also used a method of logical comparison of three options of political discourse: Political Statement → Fact → Consequence. The analysis of mass media articles, devoted to Covid-19, has helped the author to systematize the elements of political discourse processing (the politicians' statements for the good of the people) and political cognition (the actual meaning of those actions, which can potentially lead to confrontation between nations). The author is trying to find out the actual reasons of the growing gap between the governments and ordinary people, between nations in the world.

Keywords: political discourse, large-scale transformative policies, ambivalent political statements, elements of political discourse processing.

1. Introduction

According to Teun A. van Dijk's assumption, most researchers interested in political discourse disregard its cognitive foundations (Van Dijk, 2002: 203). Nevertheless, the study of political cognition is based on understanding of the ways how the discourse is processed and accomplished, and what pragmatic meanings can be transferred through ambivalent political statements. Many false claims have been made on social media. COVID-19 has fueled more than 2,000 rumors and conspiracy theories. Under the guise of the threat of Covid-19 pandemic, the politicians have challenged the world with their claims and political statements. They hypocritically announced their striving to serve for the sake of the nations, but in fact demonstrating their strong will to benefit from the situation. Scholars are arguing now "which way

Covid-19 will push the political pendulum,” on the reason, that large-scale transformative policies have overwhelmed the world political arena, revealing ambivalence of what they state in their speeches and appeals to the nations.

The objective of the research is to study the phenomenon of political discourse under the influence of extreme situation in the world caused by pandemics Covid-19 and to discover its newly appeared specific characteristics. The hypothesis of the research is as follows: the reality situation of political communication specifically shapes the process of communicative interaction between the politician and the audience, and the pattern of this interaction differs from the ordinary standard model of verbal communication due to the situation’s extreme character.

2. Methods

The case analysis of political discourse at the period of pandemics was carried out with the help of: (a) Sperber’s “logico-rhetorical” module; (b) fact-checking method, (c) scientific analysis of the evidence, (d) descriptions of samples, (e) modeling investigations, (f) logical reasoning, etc.

The Sperber’s “logico-rhetorical” module applied to political communication samples helps to understand correlation of major assessment characteristics of political discourse, such as TRUTH and FALSITY, interrelation of strategic and tactical features and their influence on the overall processes of discourse structure transformation.

The fact-checking method was used for conducting research, structuring of articles, selecting topics of political discourse and evaluating received empirical data. The scientific analysis of the evidence helped to verify the hypothesis by logical analysis and experimental modelling. The descriptions of political discourse samples comprise the main body of the article and helps to clarify inductive inference and findings.

3. Results

The carried-on analysis confirmed the hypothesis and proved that:

1. Emotion-charged communication tends to transform a standard pattern of political discourse and leads to transformation of the basic topical assessment characteristics in the opposition TRUTHFULNESS – FALSITY.
2. The extremeness of the reality situation influences both: the choice of the politicians’ communicative strategies (making them more aggressive) and facilitation of the process of political goals pursuing.
3. The political discourse is associated rather with the characteristics of RELEVANCE than TRUTHFULNESS or FALSITY. Relevance is an obligatory characteristic feature of any successful communication and it doesn’t come down in any emergency situation like pandemics.
4. The situation of pandemics has conditioned the evolution of a specific type of lie in political discourse, which I’ve notionally named *a masking lie*. The essence of it is to present desirable facts as real ones in order to conceal hard reality and to stay quiet about completely different objectives. This lie is often accompanied by the use of the strategy of threatening and social restrictions.
5. The topic of virus has become the most powerful instrument in the international and domestic policies of the countries. Strategically, it has facilitated solving complicated problems, which need overall discussion, explanation and public support, in a simple way of restrictions and prohibition.

4. Discussion

4.1 *Theoretical background*

I think it's reasonable to start my case analysis with the description of logico-rhetoric module in order to explain ambiguity within the topical structure of political discourse¹. According to the definition, this module is a mental entity, one of the "evolved abilities of human beings to examine critically what someone is saying, for example, to detect inconsistency or inadequate evidence in an argument" (O'Halloran, 2011). Chilton argues that this approach "checks for consistency and for deceptive manipulation in communication" (Chilton, 2004). In other words, the process of verification of the utterances for true or false representation of the information is a people's inborn activity and we always practice it while interacting with each other. Logically, it should become not an easy matter to deceive each other while communicating, because people are supposed to be inborn experts in this type of activity. However, deception and falsity remain an integral part of people's communication in general, and in political discourse in particular. And, along with this, it doesn't lead to the failure communication, people continue interacting with each other with little hesitation and tension. Thus, on the face of it, we encounter a certain discrepancy in theorizing and practice.

Anyway, the profound analysis of the communicative situations discloses another scenario, according to which people easily put up with deception. As Machiavelli observed, even if people didn't like to be lied to, there could be found enough individuals who would allow themselves to be deceived. The psychologists argue that the public doesn't want to hear the whole truth in order to avoid frustration and disillusionment. Illusions sometimes become more preferable than the truth. Thus, there is no contradiction in logico-rhetoric module approach and political discourse theory. Though we need to find a reasonable explanation of the mechanism how this phenomenon works.

Consequently, lies and falsity have become an effective strategical tool in political rhetoric, but politicians tend to act indirectly, deliberately blurring their real goals and acting in ways meant to deceive others (Hart, 1991). Thus, by tacit agreement, politicians tend to lie in order to comfort their audience, the people tend to believe everything they are being told due to their perceptual psychology peculiarity. This is a kind of unspoken agreement, which allows this communicative pattern to exist.

As the matter stands, falsity in political discourse is a specific type of a lie, which is focused not only on mystifying people, but also on helping the process of manipulating their consciousness. The ambivalence of political rhetoric is imbedded into the topical assessment structure of political discourse.

¹ The political discourse structure (PDS) can be analyzed in different patterns due to the complexity of the notion it represents. For instance, when described within a Communicative Pattern perspective, the elements of the political discourse structure are supposed to contain its basic characteristics such as status-role relationship system, genre, national cultural specificity, context, situation, context thematizing, etc. This case analysis is expected to discover the correspondence of the topical assessment specificity of the PDS (TRUE or FALSE) with the choice of basic communicative strategies for this purpose. It's also aimed at detecting of the consequences of the politicians' actions and their correlation with the promises or statements in addresses to the public.

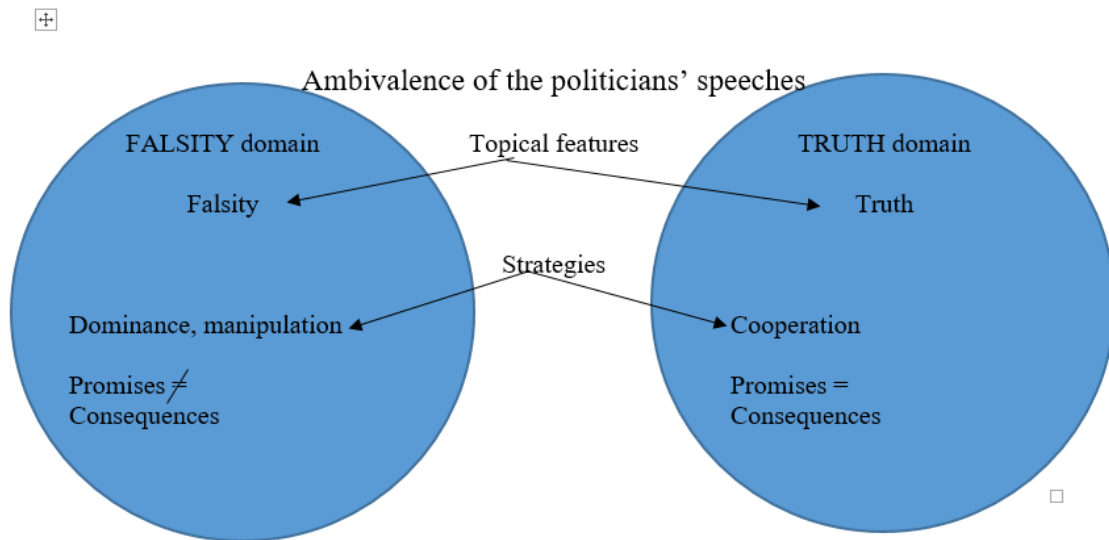


Figure 1. The topical assessment structure of political discourse

If we have a look at the graph, we'll see two domains: the Falsity domain and the Truth domain, which demonstrate correlation of the political discourse basic structural components (its topical assessment perspective). The politicians presenting false information usually tend to use the strategies of dominance and the audience consciousness manipulation. All their promises are false and they don't align with the actual facts, the consequences of the politicians' actions. On the contrary, the Truth domain presents the cooperation strategy and the politicians' promises are compliant with their actions consequences. They don't contradict each other. All these features don't intersect and never enter the neighboring domain. The politicians tend to alternately switch to both domains (preferring to remain in the falsity domain). This is the sketch of how the political discourse ambivalence works.

4.2 Reasons and causes of the lie: A communicative perspective classification

In dependence to reasons and causes, LIE can be classified as follows: (1) *political expediency lie* (ranging from undesirable facts covering-up to their complete distortion); (2) *compromising lie* as the means of political opponents discrediting; and (3) *paranoic lie* (e.g., Masonic and other conspiracy theories, etc.) (Vinogradov, 1996: 302).

My case analysis has disclosed the existence of additional type of lie (I notionally named it a *masking lie*), which is characterized by presenting **desirable facts** as real ones in order to conceal hard reality and to stay quiet about **completely different objectives**. This type of lie is often used by politicians who impose restrictions on many social activities under the guise of pandemics. The real objectives of such restrictions are usually kept out of the public eye. Focusing on dangerous and threatening things, the politicians isolate people from each other in order to defeat popular discontent in the society. The strategy of the masses of people containment helps the politicians to quickly achieve unpopular goals, being unopposed.

Let's analyze several cases to illustrate this phenomenon in political discourse.

4.3 Cases of falsity domain prevailing

4.3.1 Case 1. Covid-19 as a weapon of political propaganda

The Fact (Situation 1)

On 11 March 2020 the president of the USA Donald Trump delivered an address about the Wuhan flu, also known as scientific 'COVID-19'.

The speech outlined a number of practical steps that the administration has taken, and would be taking, to slow the spread of the disease and rescue the market from the panic that has surrounded this malady.

*His political opposition blamed Trump for the "Wuhan Virus", using the coronavirus outbreak **to beat up on the president because impeachment didn't work.***

*Blaming Trump for the 'Wuhan Virus' Jim Acosta, an American journalist and the chief White House correspondent for CNN, complained about Trump calling the virus 'foreign' and his identifying the source of the virus as China. As he said, "that was **'smacking of xenophobia'**". Anyway, nobody feels the same about calling **German measles** 'German measles', worries that Ebola is named after a river in Africa, its source, or Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever named after the Rocky Mountains. Is that racist about all those names? – Of course, not.*

Logical reasoning analysis (short commentary). The political opponent of D. Trump used an absolutely unfaithful reason to blame him in inappropriate speech. He mentioned "**smacking of xenophobia**", but the actual reason of his attack was unsuccessful impeachment procedure of the President. The topic of Covid-19 became the jive excuse for his tirade against D. Trump.

Methodologically, we can describe the elements of political discourse (topical assessment structure) as follows: (1) it's a masking lie; (2) the **strategy** is public consciousness manipulation; (3) the **expected impact** of the statement is to disfigure political image and career of the opponent; (4) the **masking objective** (the explicated objective with some opposite background and goals) was to restore political discourse conventions (the use of polite and non-aggressive lexicon); and (5) the **consequence** is attracting negativity towards the US President's personality including the negative reaction from the part of foreign opposing side.

4.3.2 Case 2. Wuhan virus is a formidable bioweapon

The Fact (Situation 2)

*According to social media, Wuhan Virus is "the perfect weapon" and it **has been manufactured** in China for special purpose. Nobody could definitely say whether it's true or false. But the truth is that it has become a formidable bioweapon, not because of its lethality, which is modest, but because of "its power as a propaganda weapon in the hands of power-hungry politicians and bureaucrats who deploy it to feed their own authoritarian impulses" (by Roger Kimball) (Alessia Grunberger "Patch Staff").*

Logical reasoning analysis (short commentary). Covid-19 is presented in the mass media as a bioweapon, and despite the author's explication of the idea what he has meant, the reader remains aware that it's true. What is more, the situation is explained by the author in a way that the politicians make use of this pandemics as a powerful propaganda tool. It means that any situation, needed people consciousness manipulation, can be used under the guise of Covid-19 aggressively: the public can be restricted, threatened, forbidden to do something, deprive of some rights and freedoms, rejected etc. Nowadays, it's become sufficient to claim national security

matter in order to forbid your people to go on their holidays abroad, refuse to sign the treaty on international trade with a certain country or to close the borders for undesirable aliens (immigrants) (See the analysis of the next case), etc.

Methodologically, it is: (1) medium form of lie between **paranoic lie** and **masking lie**; (2) strategically it's a powerful weapon in solving problems without having consent from the public or the international community. It's a manipulative strategy; (3) the **masking objective** is to explicate warning of the world community about disaster (to spread rumors about worldwide existential threat). The implied and unspoken objective is to justify any restriction in society, even inhuman and rigorous; (4) the **expected impact** of the statement is deterioration of the international situation; and (5) the **consequence** is getting extra power in decision making concerning domestic and international policy (feeding authoritarian impulses by politicians).

4.3.3 Case 3. Closing the border between Mexico and the United States

The Fact (Situation 3)

Donald Trump: "Border security is health security"

Under the guise of the domestic security policy concern D. Trump has closed the borders between Mexico and the USA. It has been done extremely violent, namely:

- 1. Upwards of 50,000 migrants and asylum seekers attempting to enter the United States have been incarcerated.*
- 2. The border between Mexico and the United States has been completely closed to nonessential traffic and anyone trying to claim asylum.*

The consequences of the action:

- Until the coronavirus pandemic hit, the immigration courts had increasingly been blocking some of Trump's policies or putting them on hold. The US judges, lawyers, and legal organizations have urged that immigration **courts be closed until the pandemic lifts**.*
- the administration has **doubled down** on an existing policy of **denying medical services** to detained immigrants;*
- doctors **were prevented from delivering flu vaccines** to those in immigration detention camps;*
- now, with more than 37,000 men, women, and children confined, the risk that the virus will spread among them is obvious and inevitable.*

Logical reasoning analysis (short commentary). Under the guise of Covid-19 D. Trump managed to force through unpopular policy decisions. Finally, he benefited from those measures by closing immigration courts who had never supported his policy and while economizing on the emigrants' medical services he revenged emigrants for disloyalty.

Methodologically, it is: (1) medium form between a **political expediency lie** and **masking lie**; (2) strategically it's just the same a powerful weapon in solving problems without having consent from the public, a manipulative strategy; (3) the **masking objective** is to explicate the concern about the health security of the nation, while having an unspoken objective to get rid of disloyal adversary and to benefit from cutting down the budget spending on emigrants; (4) the **expected impact** of the statement is D. Trump's increasing popularity among the taxpayers (he is concerned about public health security and national budget); and (5) the **consequence** is that numerous problems dealing with immigration have been solved by unpopular inhuman measures.

4.3.4 Case 4. Rigged elections

The Fact (Situation 4) and the Logical reasoning analysis (short commentary)

The future of the November 2020 presidential election was uncertain owing to Covid-19. The social distancing necessary to halt the spread of the virus called into question the logistics of normal voting in November. The primaries had been already delayed, and expectations of turnout had diminished. Solutions like balloting by mail were proposed, but the ability of Trump and others to challenge the results undeniably grew in the wake of the virus's spread across the nation.

Methodologically, it is: (1) a masking lie; (2) he used the strategy of social consciousness manipulation; (3) the **masking objective** was explicated as to provide safe conditions for balloting, the **actual objective** was to isolate people from each other, to deescalate social tension; (4) the **expected impact** of the statement was Trump's successful election to Presidency; and (5) the consequences were unpredictable: Trump failed in the elections finally.

4.3.5 Case 5. More authority and more power to low administrative positions

The Fact (Situation 5)

Muriel Bowser, an American politician and member of the Democratic Party currently serving as the eighth Mayor of the District of Columbia.

Typical is Washington mayor Muriel Bowser who said that the just-declared state of emergency in DC gave her "more authority to implement and fund the measures that we need to monitor and respond to COVID-19 in our community". The key phrase is "more authority", i.e., more power. Something similar is happening in New York and elsewhere around the country.

Logical reasoning analysis (short commentary). This situation demonstrates the political leader's power increase due to pandemics. She has gained more authority and money and a wider range of decision-making power. Covid-19 has accelerated the process of the politician's career progress, which would have never taken place in some other situation.

Methodologically, it is: (1) consolidation of power, ascribed to the highest positions, and even if it cannot be called lying, it's a falsity, which is almost equal to lying due to its effect; (2) strategically it's public consciousness manipulation; (3) the masking objective is to take care of people, the actual objective is to gain more power, including decision making power, and money; and (4) the expected impact coincides with the consequences and actual objectives: the politician has got much power, authority and wealth.

4.3.6 Case analysis summary

I have found several dozens of samples with the description of people's consciousness manipulation by politicians who lied in their statements, promises, declarations, claims in order to deceive the audience and to gain power, money, authority and more from it. I've picked up those ones, which were made under the guise of pandemic Covid-19.

To sum up, the range of analyzed political discourse elements remained fixed in order to discover common trends and to build a code-dependent system of political discourse structure (its topical assessment perspective).

Here are some examples, discussed in mass media, illustrating ambivalence of politicians' speeches and actions who have managed to benefit from Covid-19. They prove our initial hypothesis that "the reality situation of political communication specifically shapes the

process of communicative interaction between the politician and the audience, and the pattern of this interaction differs from the ordinary standard model of verbal communication due to the situation's extreme character"² (The material has been taken from articles and websites from Internet).

Verbal situational components	Consequences under the guise of Covid-19
<i>The US president D. Trump labeled Covid-19 the "Chinese virus".</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - using of that label to escalate tensions with China; - provoking a xenophobic backlash in the USA; - imposing high tariffs on China's products; - levying sanctions on \$ 370 billion worth of Chinese imports.
<i>Trump ordered to withdraw Americans from military bases in Iraq explaining it as a planned action because of the pandemic.</i>	- launching of military attacks in Iraq without consent of the Congress.
<i>Donald Trump had been impeached twice, but he denied all the allegations.</i>	- putting on hold investigations of Trump's personal and professional dealings.
<i>Some governmental leaders had been involved in judicial investigation for corruption and other crimes.</i>	- escaping imprisonment due to Covid-19; putting the investigations on hold.
<i>Some governmental leaders put new laws giving them extraordinary power in the country. Some leaders managed to change Constitution, which led to decline in public at large.</i>	<i>It became possible because of pandemic panic in the countries. People didn't respond properly to the negative changes in domestic policies. They were not allowed to leave their homes at that time.</i>
<i>Germany's Alternative fur Deutschland, declared support of "remigration": namely, forcing immigrants to leave the country and to go back to their homes.</i>	<i>Quick spreading of the coronavirus in Germany was used as the excuse to improve the occasion.</i>
<i>D. Trump announced reducing of the State Department's operating budget by one-third because of economic crisis and pandemics.</i>	<i>However, he added 179 more loyal foreign service officers to the diplomatic corps.</i>

There can be many samples illustrating situations in which the governmental leaders announced their political decisions while expecting some other (and not that positive for people) consequences of their actions. All of them prove the discrepancy and ambiguity of the politicians' speeches.

4.4 The role of pandemics in the process of balancing between falsity and truthfulness in the politicians' speeches. The idea of relevance in political discourse

According to the latest scientific researches, the interaction between the governmental leaders and society during pandemics is based on two polar strategies, such as cooperation and confrontation (Semina & Tertyshny, 2020: 13). They prove the idea that the extreme situation of pandemics leads to that kind of political decisions in legislative, economic and social spheres that

² Though the situational components don't represent the elements of communication patterns in the form of direct words, the politicians' statements are implied in their description. The political discourse is specified by verbal actions which are supported by political activity. When some actions are taken in politics, it means that they have already been or are going to be announced. Thus, political activity can be equated to verbal actions almost in every situation.

makes it urgent to examine the situation and to find appropriate tools of controlling and improving it in order to avoid further deterioration of social and political environment in the country.

The idea of solidarity strategy means such a state of collective consciousness which is based on perception of interconnection between different communities. It tends to lead to the formation of the sense of “togetherness” and readiness to take joint actions. This strategy becomes popular especially in periods of crises when conditions of agreement and consensus between the government and the people help to achieve stability in the society. Understanding of society’s goals, social means development and concurrence in real accomplishments are considered to be necessary conditions of successful social interaction, cooperation and consolidation (Ivanov, 2010: 190). According to Weber, actions focused on certain behavior expectations of the other people empirically have a chance to satisfy those expectations (Weber, 1981). The scientists argue that the major part of governmental leaders’ actions and different social groups’ behavior in the situation of pandemics are in a state of the pattern of agreement and solidarity (Semina & Tertyshny, 2020: 13).

The same idea becomes popular when the situation concerns human communication in general, and political discourse in particular. Thus, the recent sociological research justifies my case study findings. The politicians balancing between FALSITY and TRUTHFULNESS in their speeches fall back upon that form of lies (as I have found it to be a preferable domain), which sounds as their striving to the good of the nation. This is the so-called state of RELEVANCE which brings certain stability in the relations between the power holders and ordinary people.

5. Conclusion

Politicians use complicated technical systems and information technologies in order to influence people’s consciousness, feelings and human behavior. Under the guise of taking care of people’s wellbeing they pursue their own objectives. However, their actions are not treated as aggression and don’t lead to open confrontation and deterioration of military and political relations due to the forms of the political statements presentation. They are usually presented as the politicians’ hot desire and their striving to increase the society well-being. This indirect approach strategy is usually used by politicians when they consider potential threat and possibility of direct confrontation. They deliberately obscure their real goals and actions deceiving the audience.

The pandemic situation in the world has deteriorated the process of communication between governmental officials of the world and between countries leaders and their people. The topic of virus has become a powerful manipulative instrument which has helped the representatives of backstairs politics to achieve their personal goals. Under the guise of Covid-19, politicians have managed to facilitate solving complicated problems, and having avoided discussion and explanation of their intentions which are usually expected from governmental leaders in such cases, they preferred to use restrictions and prohibitions instead.

Linguistically, the situation of pandemics has forwarded the process of transformation political discourse patterns, namely, a pattern of topical assessment of political discourse (in terms of truthfulness or falsity of the politicians’ speeches), where a new type of lie (a masking lie) tends to become a top performer. Except of its essence specificity, it is the same specific in its functioning: it is usually accompanied by the use of threatening and restrictions. The extreme character of the communicative situations has left its own stamp on communicative interaction between the politician and the audience, having become more aggressive and less explanatory.

The reaction of the society is the same non-standard. Instead of aggressive attack, the people choose a peaceful strategy of cooperation and solidarity.

The political discourse in the situation of pandemics seems to be unstable, balancing between truthful and false speeches, between people's loyalty and predictable aggression as a respond to political statements and actions. It exists on the terms of relevance, while the public prefers to live by their illusions avoiding frustration. But it can change at any time and people can switch to another possible for such unstable situation strategy of confrontation. But this is going to be some other scenario and the subject matter of another research.

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