

EUROPE WITH A VIEW: HOW COMMUNICATION STUDENTS AND AN ANALYST OF MEDIA DISCOURSE UNDERSTAND AND NARRATE (ANOTHER?) UNION

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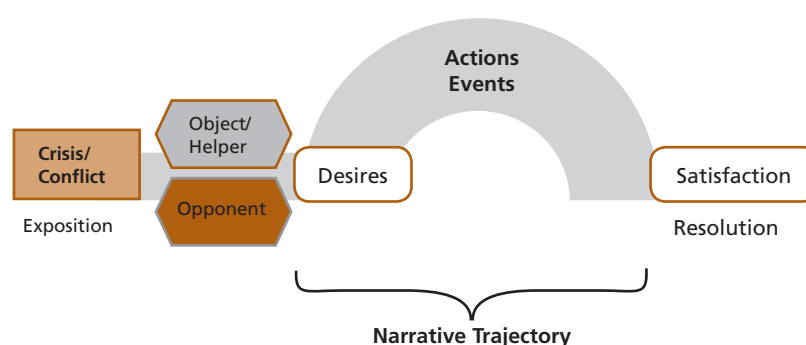
Introduction

Throughout this paper I will frequently refer to the notion of ‘narrative’. Several definitions are available, but the following one, from a document that will be soon part of NATO’s Strategic Communication Doctrine, is suitable for our purposes:

“a coherent system of stories that creates a cause and effect relationship between an originating desire or conflict, and an actual or desired or implied resolution. In so doing, NARRATIVE has the capacity to express identity, values, moral basis, legitimacy and vision around [which] entities (organisations or activities) can unite”.

Graphically, the same concept can be represented like this:

Figure 1. Narrative Trajectory



Source: Own elaboration.

Isabel Verdet (cf. in this monograph) thoroughly reports on the contributions made by the thirteen students present at the seminar. My goal is to integrate what the contributors to the monograph have expressed and add a point of view that is the one of the analyst of Media Discourse supplemented by Linguistics. In this way it will be possible to profile what

Europe is to these communication students and the role they can take in shaping public opinion's perception of the Union.

The first observation is on the criteria participants used to select their news story. During the preselection, made by the scientific committee, and the two-day discussion, a common attitude emerged. The participants, will-be journalists, showed their preference for articles that were not just 'news', but rather pieces of a larger narrative on Europe that was notable for the content, but not for the way the information was passed onto the reader. In other words, they appreciated the narrative that could be potentially expressed by the article, although they did not always subscribe to the journalist's 'treatment' or delivery of the news. In this sense, they all acted according to the principle that "news is what an authoritative source tells the journalist" (Bell, 1991: 191-192). They behaved as journalists who receive information from a reliable source (newspaper article or essay) and treat it accordingly, to develop part of a larger narrative trajectory. What is surprising, to the eye of the analyst, is that each of them built up a piece of the trajectory through smaller narratives that fitted in the final collective one, thus demonstrating that the idea of 'morphogenetic resonance' is part of our reality (Sheldrake *et al.*, 1997). Furthermore, they generated a kind of metalinguistic reflection on the discourse(s) of Europe, as instantiated by their will-be colleagues, which is quite informative on the way young Europeans perceive the Union they live in.

A prototypical case is the one of Dániel. He discusses an article by the former Hungarian Prime Minister who elaborates on the United States of Europe. After a brief introduction, Dániel veers the discussion on topics that are paramount for the Union, but not properly addressed in the article. The latter becomes the opportunity to express some personal concerns and flaws of the current European narrative. First of all he defines himself as an Eastern European, although he is immediately scolded by the Polish participant, who adds: "we are post-communist Eastern Europeans". The regional element is the opportunity to define the first asymmetry of the EU narrative, the economic one. "We are represented as the ones who steal jobs from Western Europeans. Conversely, we see you as the ones who earn more money for the same job, so it is normal that we try to come here and earn more, too". From this issue Dániel spawns a dense reasoning on the use of fear by politicians and the press, correlating it with nationalism. He thus shows an intuitive, but rather informed, approach to the complex principles of spin-doctoring.

This is why my paper will 'map' the narrative trajectories participants highlighted during the seminar. Given space constraints and the other contributions in the monograph, verbatim of single statements by students will be limited, while cross-referencing will be used to complement some key points.

Narratives of Europe and International Relations

To better frame the narrative of Europe created by the students through their selected articles, it is important to correlate their process, which is essentially a linguistic one, with the reality of International Relations, a field that affects the activities of the Union.

Campbell (2013: 223-246), in his poststructuralist approach to International Relations, maintains that:

“Every understanding of international politics depends upon abstraction, representation and interpretation...Only critical perspectives on IR demand that we understand the importance of interpretation, inquire about the relationship between power and knowledge, and reflect on the politics of identity in the production and understanding of global affairs”.

Later (ibid.: 236-237), in the section ‘the discourses of world politics’, he points out:

“Meaning is created by discourse. Discourse refers to a specific series of representations and practices through which meanings are produced, identities constituted, social relations established, and political and ethical outcomes made more or less possible. For example, states are made possible by a wide range of discursive practices that include...military strategies, cultural debates...political speeches and economic investments”.

Participants showed their awareness of these poststructuralist principles in their search for a ‘missing element’ that is imperceptible in the narrative that journalists instantiate in the daily (mis)representation of Europe. Nonetheless, this is under the surface. It is an element that, if clearly identified, would make the interpretation of all the components of the grand narrative meaningful and coherent. They are thus forced to produce messages under uncertainty (Berger, 2013: 221-244) and to fill the gaps of the narrative with elements that cannot be evident to the insider or the practitioner (cf. Colomina in this monograph). This is where the analyst of media discourse can act as a sort of ‘unifier’ of the partial, incomplete narrative.

The missing ‘actor’ that was constantly present in the debate was the United States of America and their role in the current situation of Europe. The effects that the economic crisis, generated by the credit crunch, have on the Union at political and economic level were considered, too. A possible explanation can be found in a stance that stems from a classic neoconservative attack on what are considered “the ‘womanly’ programs of continental Europe, an unacceptably ‘feminine-materialistic conception of the welfare state’” (Kristol, 2011). This crystallises in fears of an imminent “Europeanization of America” (Du Pont, 2008). Thus, divergent strategic visions, especially at political level, are more frequent on the two shores of the Atlantic and affect the Union master-narrative, with the nation-states and the journalists trying to cope with these inconsistencies.

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How Europe is narrated: main themes

From an analytical perspective, one can observe the existence of several narratives that are part of a trajectory that instantiates the neoconservative views of Europe.

The first theme is the one of asymmetry. This splits into:

- a) economic;
- b) values;
- c) visions / methodology to solve problems.

As per a) the discussion focused not only on the mere economic crisis but on the asymmetric distribution of wealth in Europe, as previously mentioned. Several participants pointed out that the Union should generate better conditions for all its citizens. This would imply an idea of improvement towards higher standards and not vice versa. It is worth noting that here the image is that of a levelling machine, as if Europe were, in this particular historical moment, a stone cruncher that destroys its founding values and its characteristic welfare state in the name of competitiveness. Setting aside the traditional – and now accepted as a matter of fact – North-South divide, some participants also mentioned another kind of asymmetry that the economic one can generate, i.e. new members vs. old members. They expressed their concern for the economies of new members once the benefits granted to them will cease thus generating further economic asymmetry.

Members of the scientific committee were present at the tables and acted as stimulators of the discussion. Although on several occasions I ‘trolled’ the conversation on purpose, trying to get the (provocative) issue of a hegemonic Germany to be raised, this was always dropped by participants. Actually, they claimed that their personal experience is that Germans are strongly in favour of the EU. This directly correlates with the asymmetry of values. During the discussion the latter emerged in a clear way, especially along the North-South axis. Hanne, a Norwegian, plainly and honestly stated that she is aware of having prejudices that are linked to the way certain values are interpreted throughout the Union. She frequently referred to the issue of corruption, the rule of law and tax evasion. Her attitude was so intellectually honest that not only did she not generate negative emotional reactions from other participants, but rather a kind of solidarity, expressed in the form of comparisons between Nordic and Mediterranean countries, was recorded. Other asymmetrical values that emerged are linked to the role of the family, friends and the way political partisanship should be interpreted.

These asymmetries correlate with the last set, i.e., visions / methodology to solve problems. It seems that participants rather pragmatically accept the idea that Europe is an ongoing experiment and that it is normal to have different approaches to problem solving. Apparently, they miss the distinction between task-oriented cultures vs. people-oriented ones, another way the North-South polarisation manifests itself and could offer possible explanations. Nonetheless, during the two-day seminar, most part of them was able to ‘negotiate’ different views and ways of addressing problems with peculiar characteristics with their peers. The way they interacted is evidence of a generation of citizens that perceives EU nationalities as a kind of ‘regional marker’. It shows differences, of course, but they are ascribable to the variety human beings express. The same can be said for the gender perspective.

How Europe is narrated: the economic crisis

Another cluster of narratives that emerged from the discussion relates to the effects of the economic crisis. Again, participants were able to spot a

form of 'hidden agenda' of mainstream media that are unable to explain the core reasons of this particular situation and its origins. They thus prefer to concentrate on its effects, given that, as it frequently emerged from the discussion, "bad news sells better than good news". This apparent 'inability' of the journalists to properly report on the crisis was confirmed by Carme Colomina (cf. her contribution in this monograph) during the final conference "The role of communication in facing Europe's challenges" when we both discussed the outcomes of the seminar and tried to frame it in a wider communicative context.

The identified narratives of the crisis were correlated to the rise of two particular sentiments:

- a) egoism;
- b) nationalism.

Egoism has been identified as a 'corroborative' cognitive support for fears spread by the narratives of the crisis. Participants identified the correlation between these two topics and the forms egoism can take in the narrative of Europe. Typical cases indicated were the gaps generated by the national economic differences. These develop 'fear of the other' at continental and extra-EU level. The case of immigrants and asylum-seekers was frequently evoked as an example of the European Union's inability to offer a specific answer to the problem. All the cases reported during the seminar were deemed responsible of generating either anti-European sentiments or nationalistic ones, whether in the form of anti-Euro movements or xenophobic parties. According to participants "being a European citizen" is a political issue. Given that "economic decline is here", the Union is considered not proactive enough in times of crisis. In this way public opinion perceives only the negative aspects of the bureaucratic machine. Simone, an Italian, pointed out that Europe is always portrayed as a kind of stern teacher who reprimands bad pupils and delivers reports. Rather, the group summarised, Europe should be narrated as the watchdog that invigilates nations in the interest of the whole Union.

Participants maintain that although 'diversity' is one of the most important assets of the European reality, Brussels is perceived as a killer of European diversity and, consequently, an unintentional supporter of nationalistic movements. "Kill diversity and you will kill Europe" was a frequent sound bite. One of the best results of the interactions was that, although aware of the difficulties of reporting on such a complex topic, all the students brought idealistic instances to the seminar. They tried to outline possible solutions that could help the process of integration while bypassing national interests that are perceived as detrimental to the process itself. During the discussion several participants raised the issue of European elections. They wished that soon we could vote for a candidate who does not necessarily belong to our country, but who is in favour of a vision that really supports European citizens. A solution, per se, that shows how future-oriented and fully European these students are.

Flaws in the European narrative

One of the major concerns of the participants was how to improve and realise a better communication of Europe and its core values.

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In fact, participants established that Europe is not a popular topic, especially when politics is concerned. Besides the issues already discussed, another key element identified by them was the lengthy process of approving laws and directives. This is considered not only difficult to report, but a real obstacle to the communication of a dynamic image of Europe. Given that EU politics sections do not sell well, journalists tend to focus on negative aspects, as these are considered to have a certain news value. The immediate consequence is that anti-EU/Eurosceptic parties, present within the EU Parliament, use this kind of news as a sounding board for their political agenda. This attitude combines with a tendency of right-wing parties to look for an 'outer' enemy that is easily identified with Europe, thus fostering nationalistic sentiments mainly based on fear. Hence, the latter dominates the discourse of/on the EU.

The worst effect of this negative trajectory, which neglects all the principles listed by Westen (2008) by which to develop a compelling narrative, is the lack of a long-term vision. This is sacrificed in the name of national interests that supersede Europe. Thus, fear is the dominating emotion and the Union is transformed into a perfect scapegoat.

EU-rope, Fortress Europe or Digital Europe?

As we have seen, the selection of articles made by the students outlines a narrative that is offering two images. The first is that of a bureaucratic institution 'suffocating' citizens' aspirations, an EU-rope. The other one is that of a fortress under siege from different internal and external 'enemies'.

Fortunately, these young Europeans seem to be partially affected by these images that are over-imposed by the media narrative of our continent. A mature and well-balanced optimism was the signature of the two days and all the participants interacted as a collective body. They are perfectly aware that in the future they will have to face complex challenges at professional level in order to properly narrate a 'different' Europe. Most of them consider these difficulties normal and part of a 'lengthy' integration process. They are surprised that positive elements and achievements are not considered valuable news. When asked to list what are some of the most important advantages of a united Europe they answered, unanimously:

- the ability to travel freely without visa issues;
- the monetary union;
- food safety;
- a common set of democratic values to build upon.

Participants were proactive during the discussion and they outlined possible solutions to avoid the miscommunication of Europe. Firstly, they attach a great importance to the freedom to travel combined with the digital revolution that "has changed everything". The combination of the two allows for "a better direct communication and the opportunity to share". According to them, this should favour a process of transforming local identities into multiple identities. It is worth noting that this idea overlaps with the linguistic concept of speech community and discourse community (Swales, 1990: 21-32). In this case, we are learning how to

use a new language for a specific purpose, the European Union, while adding to, not subtracting from, our own national experiences. Of course, this is possible only if Brussels will be able to create equality with brave political decisions instead of bureaucratic ones. The Europe of welfare, the one so disliked by the American neocons, is the tool to fight Europhobia. Practically, participants were able to see the flaws of this vision, too.

First of all the limit of social media is that they help you to keep in touch with people who are like you. The 'quantum leap' of the spread of quality information is thus a serious concern (Conoscenti, in press-a). This correlates with the 'local' dimension of European information. During the sessions it was observed that nationalistic movements are gaining consensus because they are able to address 'local' issues. These are well received by public opinion and audiences (cf. Amparo Huertas in this monograph) because the idea of 'national' is a familiar one and easier to handle, either from a news point of view or cognitively. As a consequence, this activates another asymmetry that was identified, i.e. the different perception of European issues according to the level of education and social class. Last but not least, it was pointed out how journalists are unable to report certain EU-related issues. Some participants blamed journalists for being "lazy and ineffective because [they are] simply concerned by the local dimension of news and unwilling to cope with the complexities of the European scenario". While one could be inclined to agree with this harsh criticism, during the final conference Colomina (cf. her contribution in this monograph) pointed out that journalists, unfortunately, especially when the issue is Brussels, are subject to an amount of external pressure that is well beyond the boundaries of their profession. In the next section we will see where this situation generates from.

Certain international institutions adopt some strategies to influence the way information is received, interpreted and relayed by journalists; this is achieved by a number of spinning techniques that I named Language Engineering.

How Europe is linguistically engineered and framed

In Conoscenti (2004) I discuss the strategies adopted by certain international institutions to influence the way information is received, interpreted and relayed by journalists. This is achieved by a number of spinning techniques that I named Language Engineering, since spin doctors not only work on the narrative, but also on the wording itself, in order to obtain sound bites and catchphrases that are 'palatable' to the journalist who will adopt/adapt them and make them popularly used. Typical examples are expressions like: "humanitarian war", "collateral damage", "coalition of the willing" and so on. The same is happening with Europe and the way the narrative of the crisis is framed. It must be remembered that most of the flow of economic information is generated by specialised news networks that are based in the USA and that the latter have several interests in the way the European situation is represented and evolves. The immediate consequence of language engineering is that it creates a 'mediated' reality, a media reality, to an extent that is not yet fully understood by lay people. In 2002 Karl Rove, George W. Bush's senior advisor and chief political strategist clarified the concept in an interview with Suskind (2004):

"The aide said that [journalists are] 'in what we call the reality-based community', which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality'. I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles

and empiricism. He cut me off. 'That's not the way the world really works anymore', he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do'".

Rove thus elaborates a working definition of master narrative (Danner, 2007) that combines, and exploits, the use of language engineering as a form of media manipulation. Some commentators have gone as far as to suggest that there is an overarching conflict between the reality-based community and the 'faith-based community', the one implied by Rove, in society as a whole. The role of political and economic framing, the use of spinning techniques and reframing (Conoscenti, 2011), the cognitive countermeasure to these processes, is paramount. As previously discussed, participants noted how the spread of social media is affecting international institutions' communicative capabilities by the introduction of alternative narratives. Nonetheless, the struggle to influence older audiences and non-digital-native ones is still part of the problem.

In Conoscenti (in press-b), I discuss a particular technique used by the US Department of State (DoS) in the years 1996-2001 in its press conferences. I defined it a 'pre-emptive narrative'. The Afghan war can be interpreted as a *diagnostic conflict*, suitable for the American Administration to 'test' its foreign policy and how reliable its internal and external supporters in such an *undefined* situation were. This conceptual and strategic spiral generated, in the nineties, a narrative that, through the concepts of *terrorism* and *asymmetrical war*, made void the differences between civil and military representational space, determining the perceptual shift from the concept of *war as exceptional event* to that of a *perpetual routine* (Oliver, 2007: 67-108). The strategic goal was to enforce a new general tenet: a daily life outside the temporal and spatial dimension of war cannot exist. This translates, at sociological, psychological and linguistic levels, into a shift from the old *us vs. them* dichotomy of the cold war into a post-communist collective stereotyping of danger, promoted by public diplomacy that can be summarised as an omni-comprehensive *us vs. threat*. The same has happened from 2008 in the discourse of the economic crisis. Colomina reported during the final conference on the 'informative vacuum', a typical spinning technique used since the Falklands/Malvinas war, that the whole issue is based upon. The crisis is present and thoroughly reported, but the agents are removed, leaving, at the centre of the informative focus, only its effects. The definition of narrative that we adopted perfectly fits this trajectory.

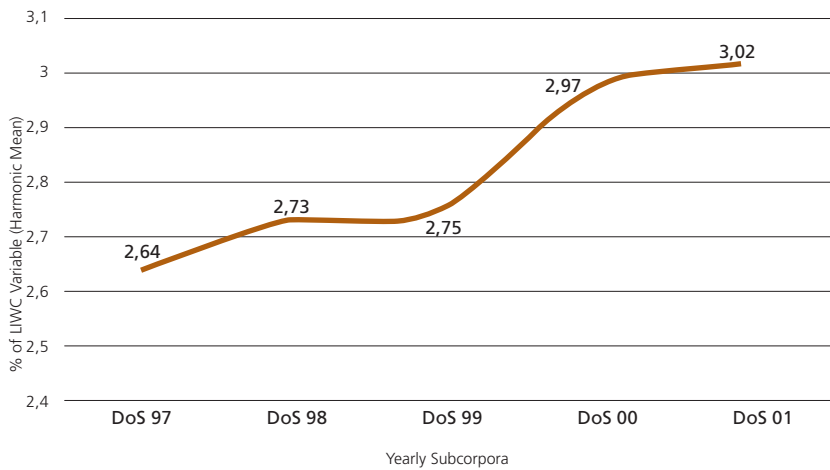
Thus, the new concept is extremely powerful because it is generic and impalpable and functional to the Psychological Operations carried out in times of crisis by the establishment (Steele, 2010: 28-32). Summarising, the DoS blends the use of *past*, *present* and *future* Semantic Areas (SA) to achieve a narration that is grounded in the *past*. This finding partially challenges a common assumption that a strategic foreign policy focuses to some extent on the ability to predict/control the future by means of an analysis based on past elements ordered in the present – this is the trait of strategic analysis: systemic causation and complex reasoning. The

same technique has been used with Europe and the economic crisis with the involuntary (?) help of the Commission and the Troika.

In fact, data point to a conclusion that has been validated by several corpora I use for research purposes and that cover 18 years: the creation of a temporal cognitive and informative ‘vacuum’ can be observed. Institutions set the narrative in a space where the unfolding timeline and its related events are compressed in the *past*. Thus, the receiver’s ability to pursue a coherent construction of a spatio-temporal representation of the narrated events is affected. A *time deficiency/compression* is observed.

Within a time-span of five years (1997-2001) the use of terms referring to the *Past* SA increases by 14.4%, indicating a ‘compression’ of the narrative towards this temporal area with a meaningful acceleration in 2000–2001.

Figure 2. Trend of ‘Past’ Semantic Area in the corpus (1997–2001)*



Source: Conoscenti, in press-b.

*The size of this corpus is 4,990,496 tokens and 29,426 types. It is divided into five yearly sub-corpora covering all the DoS Press Conferences from 02.01.1997 to 11.09.2001.

The same has been observed in the information regarding Europe in the last six years. This peculiar narrative subscribes to the need of a new world order as a ‘tentative’ solution, as envisaged by the DoS and neocon think tanks. Europe, consequently, must fit in this scheme. This is why this trajectory has been systematically offered to the public since 1996 and that explains its effectiveness.

One could ask what psychological effects can be achieved by such a narrative. Since the brain works by means of neural networks and frames which attempt to establish coherent isotopies for the interpretation of events, when a fundamental element is missing, or not confirmed, in this case the spatio-temporal dimension, the incoherence of expected products predicted by the isotopy generates emotional reactions such as fear, which is the preferred emotion of most spin-doctored narratives, as was readily identified by participants in their reports.

The first step is to place the problem in a temporal dimension which the listener can identify, determine and cognitively appropriate as his/her own, but surrounded by a halo of vagueness. The second step is to link the temporal dimension to the newly established framework for the problem: past years, past decades – generic reference – and past events, past crises – still a generic reference. The third step is to offer a concrete and possible solution anchored to the present, thus constructing an NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) swish pattern¹ that will lead to a 9-step conflicting beliefs integration pattern. Thus, data explain how spin-doctors' language engineered the perception of this particular narrative and its 'resolution'.

Conclusion

Although the seminar and its complex theme were compressed into a two-day interaction, participants achieved, as I have shown, a good perspective on what are the issues at stake in the (mis)communication of Europe and how the narratives and the language used to define and portray it play a relevant role. As I already reported, the approach of these communication students pragmatically blends reality and idealism. As one of them said: "It is a difficult task for journalists to fight lies with the truth, but we have to give it a try". These young Europeans are a real blessing for all of us EU citizens. They are the future and they reject the narratives of the past because they can bypass asymmetries and are concerned by the 'here, now and tomorrow' of the Union. At one point, when I suggested they could try to found a European e-magazine, given that they were representing an excellent potential network, either at professional or national level, Sofia, a sharp thinker who cannot tell, because of her life experiences, her precise nationality, told us: "All you (teachers, adults etc.) always suggest to start a new project or initiative. But you forget that we have to study, to work, to pay for our university fees. And then, EU-funds are not for us and it is complicated, anyway, to fill in the bidding forms". A perfect example of a European citizen who is aware of the future but with a sound anchoring to the present. This is why I feel privileged to have worked with this selection of future European journalists. They are better because they are pointing towards the future, setting aside asymmetries, the past and old schemes. They are light in a period of 'perceived' darkness. They can be compared to a little boy of the Kabbalistic tradition who took part in a camp where people of different religions and nationalities gathered together to get to know each other. At the end of the session he said: "You know what? I think we are all like clouds, rain, and rainbows. Sometimes when there's fighting going on, the clouds burst together, but after the storm is over, it is possible for a rainbow to come out".

The rainbow that this child was talking about is the idea of creating a place where we can go beyond the hatred that exists in the world and bring ourselves to the beauty of love and respect and human dignity. According to the participants in our seminar, Europe could be that place. That could be a compelling narrative.

1. Technically, in NLP the swish pattern works on a specific behaviour you would rather be without and "changes a problem state or behaviour by going in a new direction. It does not simply replace the behaviour, it produces a generative change" (O'Connor, 2001: 103–104). For a detailed discussion cf. Conoscenti (2011: 174–178).

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