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SECTION II. COMPARATIVE LINGUISTICS

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Lyudmila Yu.  
Korolyova®

**Comparative analysis of triggers in Russian and American  
political discourse**

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Tambov State Technical University  
106 Sovetskaya St., Tambov, 392000, Russia  
E-mail: lyu-korolyova@yandex.ru  
ORCID iD: 0000-0003-0682-2657

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**Abstract.** Political discourse is considered from the point of view of the theory of political cognition which unites individual uniqueness, types of political discourse and representatives of political groups and institutions being basic parts of different levels forming the political domain. Semantic and pragmatic categories of political discourse taking into account the theory of mental and context models are analyzed. Triggers as a technique used by politicians to convey information and influence the target audience are studied. Ways to interpret triggers as well as the classification of their types proposed by Russian and foreign linguists are considered. Triggers used by the president of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin and the ex-president of the USA D. Trump in interviews to TV channels and news agencies are analyzed. Types of triggers, their mental and context models, the target audience and functions of triggers in political discourse are identified and compared. The conclusion is made that four of five context models which were identified are similar but the frequency of their use by political leaders is not the same. Different variants of the fifth context model in the examined fragments of political discourse can be explained with the help of one of semantic and pragmatic categories, namely the image of the Russian president and the ex-president of the USA affected by their personal traits of character.

**Keywords:** Context model; Interview; Political discourse; Semantic and pragmatic category; Trigger

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... .106, ... , 392000,  
E-mail: lyu-korolyava@yandex.ru  
ORCID iD: 0000-0003-0682-2657

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**Introduction**

A study of political discourse is a research area which is closely connected with peculiarities of political structures, processes and politicians that are the subject of many scientific works (Reyes, Ross, 2021; Katsara, 2016; Koteyko, 2006; Tsoumou, 2020;

Gialabouki, Pavlidou, 2019; Albalat-Mascarell, Carrio-Pastor, 2019). It is argued that the former is usually examined with the help of the micro-political analysis whereas the latter require the analysis at the macro-level. This problem can be solved with a theory of political cognition as it might unite

individual uniqueness, type of political discourse and representatives of political groups and institutions (van Dijk, 2002). It is stated that in general, the political domain consists of different levels: the basic one includes political actors with their ideas, beliefs and interactions stipulated by political situations; the next level involves political groups and institutions and their discourse; the top level is comprised of political systems, various types of discourse and processes which relate to policy, culture and history (ibid.). It should be noted that these levels are interconnected as a political actor can give a speech expressing his own ideas but at the same time he/she represents some political party which is part of the political system of the country as well. It is believed that the micro-level behaviours are in fact types of linguistic action (discourse) and macro-level institutions are kinds of discourse with peculiar characteristics (Chilton, 2004). To facilitate the interaction and communication of these levels a variety of techniques is used such as arguments, persuasion, manipulation, threats etc. (Jones, 1994).

It is interesting to note that some linguists associate communication within any political process only with two things, i.e. persuasion and bargaining (Miller, 1991). It is also pointed out that decisions made with the help of the latter become authoritative implying force or the threat of force (Hague et al., 1998).

K. Kenzhekanova distinguished the most common features of political discourse which relate to its semantic and pragmatic categories:

1) *the author's image* (the influence of the author's personal characteristics on the communication process he/she is involved in as well as the use of personal and professional experience which effects the choice of language means). In this regard T. van Dijk claims that the experience of the participants of political discourse is represented in mental models which have several categories depending on actions and people's roles. These models are considered to be "the

personal interpretation (knowledge and opinion)" of different events, forming the "cognitive basis of all individual discourse and interaction" and uniting personal and social information (van Dijk, 2002: 209);

2) *addressee / recipient ability* (all participants of political discourse can be divided into those who create a discourse, i.e. speakers, and those who receive it and try to understand it, i.e. recipients; mental and communicative abilities of both are quite important; it should be noted that speakers have some priority in this case although much depends on the situation);

3) *informational content* (it depends on the goals of a discourse; it is essential that political discourse is aimed at the suggestion of proper political actions on the part of recipients);

4) *intentionality* (the speaker's intentions guide his/her choice of linguistic means to convey the information to recipients);

5) *estimation* (the speaker selects the appropriate verbal behaviour in order to encourage recipients to act in the way he/she wishes);

6) *conventionality* (the ability to express ideas in such a way that they can be understood and interpreted properly; speakers can use cliches or specific terminology);

7) *emotiveness/expressivity* (the use of emotional expressions that can help achieve the goals set by the speaker);

8) *modality* (it is connected with the speaker's attitude to reality, the possibility or probability, desirability or obligatory conditions of some political events and actions);

9) *inter-textuality* (various types of information or texts can be included into one universal text thus showing their relationship and the ability to serve the speaker's aim);

10) *socio-cultural context* (the use of recipients' knowledge of socio-cultural contexts to effect the former);

11) *form of communication* ;

12) *means of communication* (the choice of verbal or non-verbal

communication, oral or written etc.) (Kenzhekanova, 2015).

It is evident that speakers producing political discourse refer to different tools to succeed in their activities and reach set objectives. Turning to the theory of mental models we must highlight the fact that linguists suppose that speakers begin with “their personal mental model of an event or situation” which effects a speaker’s beliefs and ideas about this situation (van Dijk, 2002: 211). Then some parts of these models are expressed in discourse with the help of linguistic and discursive strategies although the former represent small pieces of information which is important for the discourse produced. Thus, other participants of the discourse can agree with the speaker and accept his models or disagree and create their own models based on their personal knowledge (ibid.).

Besides mental models context models must be focused on. They deal with the information contained in these models and underline pragmatic relevance, i.e. structures of communicative situations used by participants of political discourse (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). Constructing these models speakers and recipients of political discourse can have different emotions that will stipulate the choice of various communicative strategies and language means. Therefore, emotion or emotiveness as K. Kenzhekanova calls it is an essential element in context models (Roseman et al., 1986).

T. van Dijk claims that mental models form the core part of the discourse while context models regulate both what is being expressed and how it is done. Thus, cognitive processes which are included into production and use of mental and context models are considered to be strategic and can vary at different levels at the same time in such a way that it is sometimes necessary to correct them, especially when recipients misunderstand some situation or interpret it in the wrong way (van Dijk, 2002). One of the main roles in this case is played by language itself, i.e the

appropriate use of language means as they allow people to share their ideas and beliefs. If they are alike it is possible to encourage people to do any acts whether they are positive or negative from the political point of view.

S. Levinson described the following stages of any communication situation:

“1) the utterer makes an assertion about a future event *e* of which (s)he is the agent;

2) the utterer sincerely intends to execute *e*;

3) the utterer believes (s)he is capable of executing *e*;

4) *e* is not believed to be likely to happen as a matter of course;

5) the receiver of the promise desires *e*;

6) the utterer intends to put (her) himself under an obligation to execute *e*” (Levinson, 1983: 238).

It should be added that speakers producing political discourse can follow these stages if they participate in some political debate or make a speech before the audience and in this case they intend to do something themselves in order to make their recipients believe them and vote for them or elect them. But there are a lot of communication situations when speakers’ goal is to make others execute something and shoulder responsibility for this. In all the situations the key part is ‘credibility’ that the speaker has or doesn’t have (Fetzer, 2002).

So politicians can apply various tools including language means to convey the information they want. The success of their communication act(s) will depend on those factors that are mentioned above. Paying attention to the fact that political discourse involves different techniques we would like to focus on one of them, the so-called triggers, identify their types and analyze the use of triggers in American and Russian political discourse.

#### **The interpretation of ‘trigger’ in political discourse. Types of triggers**

The definition of the term ‘trigger’ is connected mostly with psychology although it is used in many scientific areas nowadays.

From the point of view of psychologists, «a trigger is a stimulus such as a smell, sound or sight that triggers feelings of trauma” (goodtherapy.org). So it can remind a person of some trauma in the past and cause feelings of sadness, anxiety or panic (ibid.). Cambridge dictionary gives the following interpretations of the term: 1) “an event or situation, etc. that causes something to start” and 2) “something that causes someone to feel upset and frightened because they are made to remember something bad that has happened in the past” (Cambridge dictionary). Thus, it can be said that on the one hand, the meaning of the word ‘trigger’ is associated with negative emotions and on the other hand, it may be something that simply launches further acts and behaviours.

Within the framework of political discourse, a trigger is defined by N. Ruzhentseva et al. as any oral or written utterance of a politician which causes a negative reaction of the public (Ruzhentseva et al., 2020). The pragmatic framework of a trigger corresponds to some extent to pragmatic and semantic categories of political discourse mentioned above and can be represented as follows:

- *addressee* (a representative of political authorities, e.g. a politician, a deputy etc.);
- *recipient* (any person or a group that receives information);
- *intention* (the expression of personal opinions, ideas, beliefs concerning some political problem etc.);
- *the target of the trigger* (a person, various social groups or even fields of activity);
- *reaction* (the communicative behaviour of authorities, politicians, public etc.) (ibid.)

In our opinion, it is dubious that triggers are applied only to cause negative emotions as N. Ruzhentseva et al. claim. Therefore, a detailed study is needed to clarify the problem. But some progress has already been made regarding language means which can be used as triggers (Kotwica, 2020; Ardila, 2019; Coesemans, De Cock, 2017; Elder, Jaszczolt, 2016).

As for the classification of triggers it is also based on the sphere these triggers are used in. T. Roeper states there are four types of triggers depending on the mechanism of their interpretation: “1) a deductive trigger; 2) a hardwired trigger; 3) a cognitive trigger; 4) a neurological trigger” (Roeper, 1987).

Taking into account the intentional basis N. Ruzhentseva et al. focus on such types of triggers as: 1) triggers-opinions of politicians, deputies; 2) triggers-propositions of power representatives; 3) triggers-reactions to the expressed opinions and propositions (Ruzhentseva et al., 2020).

This classification is relevant to our study so it is necessary to characterize each group of triggers. The first type is closely connected with the meaning of the term ‘opinion’. According to Cambridge dictionary opinion is: 1) “a thought or belief about something or someone”; 2) “the thoughts or beliefs that a group of people have”; 3) “a judgment about someone or something” (Cambridge dictionary). From the philosophical point of view an opinion is a very complicated term as it relates to the problem of interpreting the notion ‘truth’. If a person expresses his/her opinion, he/she thinks that it is true. But there can be a great difference between what people consider to be true and what is really true (Pritchard, 2006). Still this is a man’s opinion and if he thinks that it is true he will use all means to prove it. Besides, the opinion served as a trigger may lead to predictable or unpredictable actions on the part of recipients who will accept or reject the expressed point of view.

It should be added that triggers-opinions also differ in accordance with their target, which can be a state, a particular group of people or fields of activity (Ruzhentseva et al., 2002).

The second type of triggers is based on the term ‘proposition’ and its interpretation. It is defined as: 1) “a statement or problem that must be solved or proved to be true or not true”; 2) “a suggestion or statement for consideration” (Cambridge dictionary). It is



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(The interview to the TV channel “Russia” of 27.08.2020, 2020).

The highlighted utterance is the president’s point of view on the work of Russian authorities of all levels. The mental model is created with the help of the information about the behaviour of Russian authorities in extreme conditions. V. Putin evaluates the activity of the latter very positively triggering their future actions in the same direction with the same progress. Thus, the trigger-opinion is aimed at Russian authorities and expresses the president’s emotions as well. The context model contains simple sentences and the modal word < > usually used in colloquial speech instead of the more formal word < >.

One more fragment of the interview:

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” (The interview to the TV channel “Russia” of 27.08.2020, 2020).

The highlighted sentence presents the president’s proposition. It is clearly addressed to citizens of the Russian Federation. The mental model includes the knowledge of the fact that people can feel relaxed and stop following doctors’ requirements concerning means of individual protection that can result

in the exacerbation of the epidemic situation. So the trigger-proposition even contains some threat and V. Putin uses repetition < - >, < > to warn recipients and prevent them from doing wrong things.

Let us consider one more fragment of the interview to the Russian news agency TASS:

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?” (The interview to TASS of 11.03.2020, 2020).

In this part of the political discourse the Russian president employs the interrogative sentence < , ?> to express his incomprehension of the situation described in this part of political discourse. It can even be considered to be a rhetorical question. The question presents a reaction to the behaviour of western partners regarding their reasons to introduce sanctions against the construction of “Nord Stream-2” and it serves as a trigger to make western politicians explain their actions and take responsibility for them. It is interesting to note that the question is constructed in an informal way with the help of the pronoun < > typical for informal language instead of the more formal variant < > to add emotiveness to the implied connotation.

This is V Putin’s reply to the journalist’s question about Nagorno-Karabach in one more interview:

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” (The interview to the TV channel “Russia” of 07.10.2020, 2020).

This is the case of using several triggers in one part of political discourse. The highlighted sentences at the beginning of the president’s answer is a trigger-opinion. The mental model is based on the information about the situation regarding Nagorno-Karabach and an armed conflict of two countries Armenia and Azerbaijan there. V. Putin expresses his opinion and states that it is a tragedy. The context model is comprised of the repetition to underline the president’s emotions: < — >, < , >. The trigger is aimed at authorities of Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as local citizens that must do something to stop the war. In the second part of this reply a trigger-proposition is used. The president clearly points out that Russia calls for ceasefire which is the responsibility of two countries. The context model is based on the repetition again to draw recipients’ attention to the given message: <

>, < , >.

The same context model can be seen in one more fragment of the same interview:

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” (The interview to the TV channel —Russia” of 07.10.2020, 2020).

V. Putin employs the technique of repeating phrases to convey the information he wants: < \_\_\_\_\_ , >

< \_\_\_\_\_ , > , >

< \_\_\_\_\_ , \_\_\_\_\_ >.

The mental model in this fragment of political discourse is different. It involves the information about the situation in Kyrgyzstan but the trigger-proposition is the same as in the previous fragment of the discourse. The Russian president calls for the stabilization of the situation in the country.

One more fragment of political discourse from the interview to the Russian news agency Tass:

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” (The interview to TASS of 17.03.2020, 2020).

The highlighted sentence is the trigger-proposition. The mental model presented in this fragment of the discourse is based on the information about leading political parties of the country and the privileges its members have, for example, luxury cars in contrast to other parties and their members who do not have such opportunities. The Russian president expresses his point of view on this problem and claims that everyone must have equal conditions. The target of the trigger is the political elite and its representatives who must understand that their rights do not differ from the ones of other political actors. The context model is comprised of the intensifying pronominal particle < !> and the modal verb < >.

In another interview to the Russian news agency TASS Putin V. said:

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” (The interview to TASS of 02.03.2020, 2020).

The given fragment of political discourse is a trigger-reaction. The mental model is based on the information about Russia and its so-called aggressive behaviour towards European countries and the USA. Therefore, the trigger is a reaction to this



information which is aimed at the countries mentioned above. The Russian president wants to make these countries, especially their political leaders, understand that Russia is not going to make a war with the former but to arrange everything in such a way that none could think of any war conflicts with it. The context model contains antithesis: < >, < >. It helps to intensify the meaning of the expressed point of view.

Let us consider one more fragment of the same interview:

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Table 1. Context models of triggers in Russian political discourse 1.

No	Context model	Percentage of usage
1.	Rhetorical questions	30%
2.	Repetitions	40%
3.	Intensifying pronominal particles	5%
4.	Modal verbs or words	15%
5.	Antithesis	10%

**The analysis of triggers in American political discourse**

In the interview to Fox News Sunday D. Trump said:

—Chris, *that's because we have great testing, because we have the best testing in the world. If we didn't test, you wouldn't be able to show that chart. If we tested half as much, those numbers would be down*" (Fox News Sunday' interview with president Trump of July 19, 2020).

The highlighted fragment is a trigger-opinion. The mental model is based on the information about the volume of testing for COVID-19 in the USA. The ex-president of the USA wanted to encourage American

? " (The interview to TASS of 02.03.2020, 2020).

This is an example of a trigger-opinion. The context model is comprised of simple sentences and a rhetorical question <

?>. The target is western politicians who must think about their acts before doing them.

Having analyzed 20 fragments of political discourse we identified typical context models used in triggers by the president of the Russian Federation and underlined those language techniques which are peculiar to them except simple sentences. The results are presented in Table 1.

citizens to be optimistic about the epidemic situation in the country as well as the whole world that must be sure that the USA has the best testing for this virus. The context model contains repetition: <we have great testing>, <we have the best testing> and conditional sentences of the second type: <If we didn't test, you wouldn't be able to show that chart>, <If we tested half as much, those numbers would be down>.

In the same interview there is the following part:

—But I don't say -I say flames, we'll put out the flames. And we'll put out in some cases just burning embers. We also have burning embers. We have embers and we do

*have flames. Florida became more flame like, but it's — it's going to be under control'* (Fox News Sunday' interview with president Trump of July 19, 2020).

The presented part of political discourse is a trigger-opinion. The target is the same as in the previous fragment - American citizens and all countries of the world. The mental model is based on the information about the epidemic situation in different states of the USA. D. Trump's aim was to reassure his people that they would have an upper hand over the virus. The context model includes repetition: *<we'll put out the flames>*, *<we'll put out in some cases just burning embers>*; *<We have embers>*, *<We also have burning embers>*. This technique helps to underline some facts.

Let us consider one more part of the interview:

*—But you take a look, why don't they talk about Mexico? Which is not helping us. And all I can say is thank God I built most of the wall, because if I didn't have the wall up we would have a much bigger problem with Mexico"* (Fox News Sunday' interview with president Trump of July 19, 2020).

The fragment presents a trigger-opinion again. The knowledge of the epidemic situation in Mexico comprises the mental model. The trigger is targeted at the same recipients. The context model contains simple sentences, a rhetoric question: *<why don't they talk about Mexico?>* and the conditional sentence of the second type: *<if I didn't have the wall up we would have a much bigger problem with Mexico>*.

In the interview to CNBC the American president stated:

*-There's a lot of room. And we love global, but we love home. We have to take care of our home"* (The interview to CNBC of January 26, 2018).

This part of political discourse is a trigger-opinion. The mental model is based on the information about the relations of the USA and other countries and the attitude of Americans to ideas and things typical for the world in general and the USA in particular.

The trigger is aimed at American citizens whom the ex-president called for the careful approach to their native country. The context model includes repetition *<but we love home>*, *<We have to take care of our home>*; antithesis *<And we love global, but we love home>* and the modal verb *<We have to take care of our home>*.

One more fragment of the same interview:

*-I'll give you a big story. I would do TPP if we made a much better deal than we had. We had a horrible deal. The deal was a horrible deal. NAFTA's a horrible deal, we're renegotiating it. I may terminate NAFTA, I may not"* (The interview to CNBC of January 26, 2018).

This is again a trigger-opinion. It is aimed at the same recipients as in the previous fragment. The objective was to make Americans believe in the strength and wisdom of their political leader. The mental model is centered around the facts regarding relationships with other countries. The context model contains repetition *<we made a much better deal>*, *<We had a horrible deal>*, *<The deal was a horrible deal>*, *<NAFTA's a horrible deal>*, antithesis *<I may terminate NAFTA, I may not>* and the conditional sentence of the second type *<I would do TPP if we made a much better deal than we had>*.

In another part of the interview

D. Trump said:

*-What we need is we need the wall, we need security, we need security at the border. We have to stop the drugs from coming in. We need safety and we need a strong military"* (The interview to CNBC of January 26, 2018).

This is a trigger-proposition. The ex-president wanted to encourage his people to take actions and ensure security, safety etc. in the country. The information about problems with security and safety caused by citizens of Mexico comprises the mental model. The context model includes repetition *<What we need is we need the wall>*, *<we need /security/>*, *<we need /security/ at the border>*, *<We need safety>*, *<we need a*

*strong military*> and modal verbs <*need*>, <*have to*>.

Let us consider one more part of political discourse:

*“I wouldn’t say that. I can’t say that at all. It would be inappropriate. But they would be making a big mistake if they enriched”* (Donald Trump’s interview with Time on 2020 of June 20, 2019).

The highlighted sentences represent a trigger-reaction. D. Trump expressed his point of view on the problem of enriching uranium by Iran. It is a threat in some way which is addressed to Iran and its political authorities. The context model is made up of the conditional sentences of the second type <*But they would be making a big mistake if they enriched*>, <*I wouldn’t say that*>, <*It would be inappropriate*>.

One more fragment of this interview:

*—No, I don’t think we have any problems. I have a good group of people now. I have people that I want. And we have some terrific people, and no, that’s not a problem. But what is a problem is that the United States takes care of the world, and the world doesn’t take care of the world”* (Donald Trump’s interview with Time on 2020 of June 20, 2019).

This is a trigger-opinion based on the ex-president’s belief in his team and the knowledge of the facts that prove it. The

trigger is targeted at Americans in order to make them believe in the superiority of the USA. The context model contains repetition <*I have a good group of people*>, <*I have people*>, <*we have some terrific people*>, antithesis <*the United States takes care of the world, and the world doesn’t take care of the world*>.

In another part of the interview D. Trump claimed:

*“I think I’m good. I think they’re vulnerable. No, I think the Democrats are totally vulnerable. I think we’re doing a great job on immigration”* (Donald Trump’s interview with Time on 2020 of June 20, 2019).

This fragment is a trigger-opinion. The ex-president’s aim was to address American people and make them praise his actions. The mental model is based on the information about immigration policy and advantages in this sphere. The context model includes repetition <*I think they’re vulnerable*>, <*I think the Democrats are totally vulnerable*>, <*I think we’re doing a great job*>.

We examined 20 examples of American political discourse in total and identified context models and language techniques peculiar to triggers used by the ex-president of the USA. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.  
Context models of triggers in American political discourse

2.

No	Context model	Percentage of usage
1.	Rhetorical questions	5%
2.	Repetitions	40%
3.	Conditional sentences of the second type	20%
4.	Modal verbs	15%
5.	Antithesis	20%

Results and discussion

The analysis made shows that all three types of triggers are used by the Russian president V. Putin and the ex-president of the

USA D. Trump in political discourse, namely, triggers-opinions, triggers-propositions and triggers-reactions, but in American political discourse triggers-opinions prevail.

Furthermore, we identified four similar types of context models typical for presidents' interviews: rhetorical questions, repetitions, modal verbs and antithesis, although the percentage of their use is different. The Russian president applied rhetorical questions more often than the ex-president of the USA while D. Trump employed antithesis more frequently than V. Putin. At the same time both presidents used a lot of repetition. It should be noted that the use of intensifying pronominal particles was typical for V. Putin whereas D. Trump preferred conditional sentences of the second type.

As for targets of triggers they are rather similar in the presidents' interviews. These are citizens of their own countries and people of the world. However, V. Putin addressed the latter more often than D. Trump who tried to encourage actions on the part of Americans in most cases. The functions of triggers are stipulated by their types. Thus, the Russian president addressed recipients to make them do something or even warned them not to do something while D. Trump's aim was to convince people of his right actions and the superiority of his country.

### Conclusions

The received results can be explained with the help of pragmatic categories peculiar to political discourse mentioned above and the author's image exactly. V. Putin and D. Trump are outstanding political leaders who have strong personal characteristics which influence their choice of types of triggers and language means. The presidents often use repetition, antithesis to underline some facts or show their controversy. The Russian president employs rhetorical questions to make recipients start thinking about their actions or behaviour or simply express his opinion in such a way. The intensifying pronominal particles are appropriate in case the president wanted to show his strong reaction or attitude to something. As for the ex-president of the USA he used conditional sentences of the second type to highlight unreal possibility of something that is typical for his character. So, political leaders are key

players in political discourse and their traits of character stipulate what they say and how they do it.

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**Korolyova Lyudmila Yurievna**, Cand. Sc. in Philology, Associate Professor, Department of Modern Languages and Professional Communication, Tambov State Technical University.