Manipulation of Meaning in Political Discourse

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the devices used in generating manipulation of meaning in political discourse. The study will investigate the devices used by politicians to manipulate the truth and achieve political aims. First, it will shed light on the theoretical ground on which this phenomenon is based. Then, it will investigate the linguistic devices used to create this manipulation. The study will be limited to the lexical- semantic devices used in this type of discourse. Also, it will pay more attention to the term "*democracy*" in its investigation since it is the most used in political communities, yet the most questionable one in its use among politicians.

1. Introduction

This study is concerned with an important feature of political discourse, i.e., manipulation of meaning. This feature has become the most prominent feature of this type of discourse due to the nature of politics itself. Referring to the basic theme found in the traditional study of politics, Chilton and Schaffner (2002:5) define politics as " a struggle for power, between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it".

This theme draws its shadow on the linguistic construction of such type of discourse. Consequently, politicians use language as a means of conveying political agendas that are, at most, far from the truth. This can be observed in Chilton's (2008:226) definition of political discourse as "the use of language to do the business of politics and includes persuasive rhetoric, the use of implied meanings, the use of euphemisms, the exclusion of references to undesirable reality, the use of language to arouse political emotions and the like". Orwell (1969), who was the first in drawing attention to the manipulative feature of political discourse states that: "political speech and writing are largely the defense of indefensible"

(p.225). Politicians try to avoid straightforward presentation of facts. Instead, there is a persuasive representation to the truth. Neaman and Silver (1990: 121) clarify that politicians have a general reputation for the construction of what the Americans call "fog" or the British " political gobbledygook".

2. Identifying Political Discourse

The study of political discourse covers a wide range of subject matters. The first matter should be identifying political discourse from other types of discourse which seems to be a problematic issue. According to Van Dijk (1993); Chilton and Shaffer (1997) political discourse concentrates on the issues of power, control, domination, and conflict (Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton, 2001:398).

This seems to be a confusing situation since any of these notions can be represented in any form of discourse. For example, Diamond (1995) refers to the discourse of staff meetings as "political" since issues of power and control are being exchanged (p.15). The term 'political discourse' can be far more ambiguous if it was applied on small social networks like family discussions of political events (Liebes and Ribak, 1991: 207).

As a solution to this problem, scholars like Graber (1981:198) have limited the study to be concerned with formal / informal political contexts and actors like politicians, political institutions, governments, political media, and political supporters. This limitation will focus on certain type of texts and contexts and avoid the problem of over generalizing the concept of political discourse.

3.Theoretical Basis

The issue of politicians' manipulation of meaning should not be viewed as merely deceiving the public by twisted words or concepts. This phenomenon is based on

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one of the essential roles for which language is used, i.e., understanding the world around us.

Aitchison (1992: 91) believes that when human beings try to understand the world around them, they try to build "mental models". Those mental models are the primes upon which human beings depend in making sense of the abstract things in this world like the concept of week consisting of seven days . Nothing in the outer world forces this view point. These are only subconsciously inherited models.

The role of politicians comes when they try to deliberately insert mental models across human conceptualization of the life like the concept of democracy. This process is called "representation". Wilson (2001:401) defines representation as "the issue of how language is employed in different ways to represent what we can know, believe, and perhaps think".
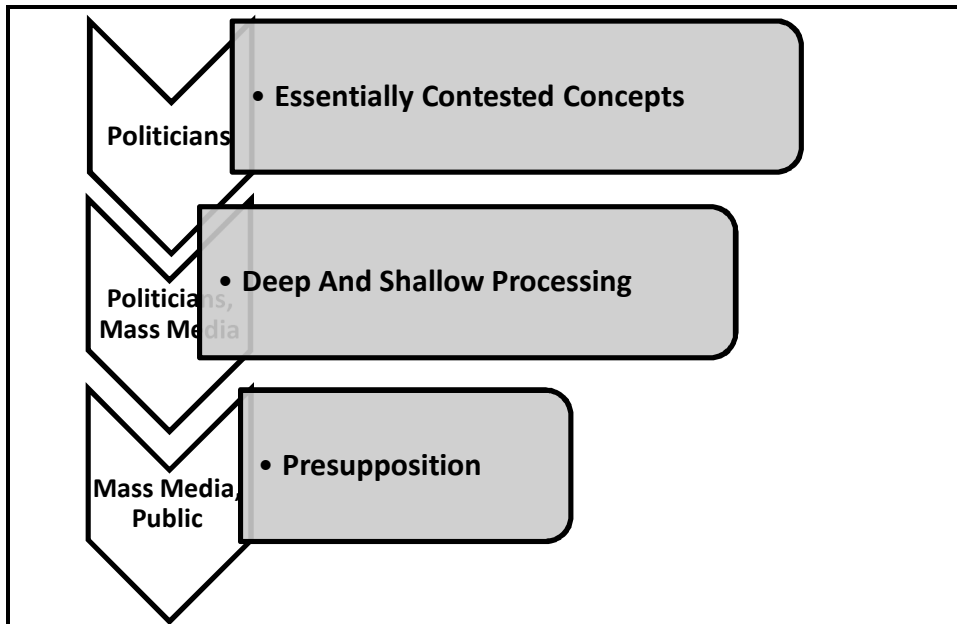
4. Devices of Meaning Manipulation

Through any short survey of the devices used by political bodies to manipulate meaning, it can be concluded that they fall into two types: Lexical-semantic and rhetorical devices. This study is concerned with the first type. It also proposes a model used in investigating this phenomenon.

Table (1)Devices of Manipulation of Meaning

Devices of Manipulation of Meaning	
Lexical-semantic	**Rhetorical**
1. **Essentially contested concepts** 2. **Deep and shallow processing** 3. **presupposition**	**Euphemisms** **Metaphor** **…etc.**

The figure below represents the proposed model. It supposes that the process of meaning manipulation can not only be generated by politicians. The role of mass media and the public is also distinctive in the process. It also goes through three phases: a political term is created under certain circumstances; then, it is used in different levels of political lobbies; finally, it is used by the public according to the presupposed orientation of the mass media.

Figure(1) The Proposed Model of Investigating Meaning Manipulation

4.1 Essentially Contested concepts

Political language is often characterized by having terms that are essentially contested. The notion of "essentially contested concepts" was proposed by the philosopher and political scientist W.B. Gallie. Gallie sought to establish a set of concepts that are logically distinct from other types of concepts in that they are always open to contest (Chilton, 2008:227). He contrasts such concepts with other kinds of concepts for which, he assumes, rational argument or evidence can establish definite criteria for proper use. Essentially contested

concepts can never be defined in this way, he claims. Such concepts can endlessly be both supported and contested by rational arguments of different kinds, all of which are valid (Gallie, 1956: 169).

Gallie claims that the category of essentially contested concepts relates in particular to "a number of organized or semi-organized human activities" (ibid), including the concept "democracy". He provides a list of criteria that define the category (ibid: 171–180). In brief, the necessary conditions of an essentially contested concept are the following:

1. It is "appraisive", i.e. it implies a valued achievement.
2. It shows internal complexity.
3. Its internal components can be ranked in different ways by competing speakers.
4. The attributed achievement is "open", i.e. it can be modified over time
5. Users of some concept recognize that others use it differently, i.e. that the concept is contested, which means that it is used both aggressively and defensively.
6. The true essentially contested concept is derived from an "exemplar", some kind of schematic concept perhaps, that all contestants accept as validly underlying the concept they are contesting.
7. That the continuous contestation regarding the exemplar implies its maintenance and development over time "in optimum fashion".

Nonetheless, Gallie's discussion of "democracy" as an essentially contested concept draws attention to important characteristics. By criterion (1), the term "democracy" is clearly appraisive: it has developed as a term that can be used to express approval of a certain polity or procedure. With reference to (2) and (3), the term democracy can be said to denote a variety of states of affairs that can be ordered in different ways. Gallie

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notes that the term covers at least the following aspects: (a) It can mean the power of citizens to choose and remove their government; (b) it means that all citizens, irrespective of their backgrounds, can attain political positions; and (c) it can mean self-government or the continuous active participation of citizens in government. Gallie then points out that (a) is not necessarily more fundamental, in practice, than the other two aspects, which enables him to say that the three aspects (a), (b) and (c) can be varied in number and ranking by different contesting groups of utterers. With reference to (4) and (5), the meaning of the term "democracy" is modified over time and is used aggressively and defensively by different groups. Finally, invoking condition (6), Gallie (1956: 186) argues that users of the term "democracy" lay claim in "the authority of an exemplar, i.e. of a long tradition of demands, aspirations, revolts and reforms of a common anti-*in* egalitarian character".

4.2 Deep and Shallow Processing

The considerations above have led to the conclusion that political terminology is variable in its content and that it may also be different in different individuals or groups of individuals, with political communities, for example, having a greater amount of conceptual information linked to a particular lexical item. However, there is a further possibility. It is plausible to think that even an individual who links a particular lexical item (say, the term "democracy") with a large amount of conceptual structure may not always, in all circumstances, draw on all of this encyclopedic background knowledge. Chilton (2008:227) used the term "Deep and Shallow Processing" and points out that one might say that it is not indeed relevant to draw on all the linked background conceptual structure on all the occasions when the term is uttered or understood. Van

Dijk (2008:13) refers to the same phenomenon as "Precision of Description". He states that descriptions of actors and their actions, as well as of political and social events, may vary in many semantic ways. Quite relevant are variations of level or detail with which knowledge is thus communicated, as well as the precision or vagueness of the descriptions. "Dispreferred knowledge", for instance, will typically be left very general, little specific and vague — as is the case about racism in dominant European discourse genres (political and media discourse).

This approach to the question of political terminology carries interesting implications, not merely for an understanding of the nature of political terms, but also for an understanding of how political terms can be exploited or manipulated during the course of political communication. Allott (2005: 150), for example, outlines a theory to explain how the term *"democracy"* and other similar terms such as "*communist, extremist, terrorist*" – are, as Allott would put it, misused. The notion of "misuse" of a term is not a prime concern here. Suffice it to say that the word "misuse" seems to presuppose the existence of a proper or correct use of a term. What is clear is that terms such as "democracy" and "terrorism" have variable meanings for different individuals of a speech community, and conceivably at different times for the same individual. It is even possible that in some sense a speaker can use such terms in different senses on the same occasion. Allott (2005:150) claims that the manipulative uses of political terms should be expected to be implicit in human pragmatic capacities, and to be potentially universal, although perhaps particularly well developed in western democracies from the beginning perhaps of the twentieth century.

An appropriate cognitive pragmatic theory is "Relevance Theory" (Sperber and Wilson 1995, Wilson

and Sperber 2004). Relevance Theory, at the most general level, is a theory about human cognition, More particularly it is a theory about the use and understanding of utterances. According to Relevance Theory, in deriving mental representations on the basis of utterance input the human brain seeks to maximize relevance. What is relevance? In this theory relevance is a ratio between positive cognitive effects and processing effects. Positive cognitive effects are those that matter to an individual, because they make a "worthwhile difference to the individuals representation of the world", e.g. by improving that person's information on a certain topic (Wilson and Sperber 2004: 608).

There are two further crucial ingredients (ibid). One is the assumption that lexical expressions are associated with "mental addresses" that consist of

    a.   phonetic and syntactic information,

    b. logical inferences based on meaning postulates or "core meaning", and

    c. a variable amount of encyclopedic information. The other is the claim that processing utterances for relevant representations involves "ad hoc concepts".

Such concepts arise in the process of getting relevant meaning from the literal or "encoded" meaning of linguistic expressions in relation to their context, and can involve "narrowing" or "loosening" of the conventional core meaning. People processing utterances in certain contexts for certain purposes might find they achieve relevance by "narrowing" or "loosening" the core meaning of a certain linguistic expression. Such processing has been termed "shallow" processing.

Now Allott's (2005:150) argument in relation to democracy is precisely that in many contexts this and other political terms undergo "shallow processing", which Allott thinks might be typical of public discourse because

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of the low expectations hearers have for the relevance of such discourse. Assuming that there is an agreed common core meaning of democracy "and this is a big assumption", then what would happen in shallow processing might be that individuals only access part of the core meaning if they reach relevance in the context. For example, suppose the core meaning includes something like "political system with popular influence over decisions" (as Allott 2005: 152). This core might be known to the hearer, but not accessed; merely elements such as "good political system" might be accessed. While this account provides an interesting hypothesis as to the mechanisms of "shallow processing" and an interesting explanation of the "slippage" in the use of political terms, it remains problematic that one "correct" core meaning appears to be assumed by the theory. Core meanings vary between groups of individuals and over time through contestation.

4.3 Presupposition

The last phase of meaning manipulation is presupposition in which political media plays a great role to spread shared knowledge among the public. Van Dijk (2008:27) states that one of the most important properties of discourse is what is not said, but remains implicit, as is the case for presuppositions. Kadmon (2001:22) states that Most shared knowledge is presupposed in discourse, and hence not asserted and even not expressed but left implicit as parts of mental models. This means that knowledge may also be "obliquely" asserted "accommodated" as if it were generally known and shared. Similarly, obvious implications of knowledge that are inconsistent with dominant interests may be left implicit in official discourse. So, the public can merely process some terms used by politicians as good or bad.

Therefore, the term "*democracy*" reaches its lowest level of processing by the public as a "good way to run the country" ,i.e., they presupposed a judgment on this term. This will leave the public to assume the existence of such a use of this term in such a way. Consequently, any simple social survey to the use of such terms as "*democracy, extremism, terrorism*" can show that ordinary people have presupposed these concepts according to what they have heard from politicians and the media.

5. Conclusions

Throughout this study, it is concluded that the process of manipulation in meaning is scientific- based and methodological. It relies heavily on the theories of human perception of the world like truth-conditional theory and relevance theory. The industry of politics takes advantage of these conceptual findings to rearrange the public's awareness of facts, beliefs, and ideologies to its own objectives.

Since this study is concerned with tracing this phenomena on the level of lexical semantics, it can be concluded that the model proposed has assumed the following findings:

1. Meaning manipulation on lexical semantic level starts by choosing and using words with large conceptual meaning enduring argument. Words such as "democracy, liberalism, extremism etc. are called "essentially contested concepts". This type of lexical. Items can be used by politicians in different contexts to serve different political agendas.

2. The second level of meaning manipulation is undertaken by political media in which the light will be shed on small amount of the conceptual content of these lexical items leaving the other

denotations that are irrelevant to their political objectives. This process is called " deep and shallow processing".

3. The last level of manipulation is left to the public. Because of the orientation of politicians and the media, ordinary people can take the use of such political terms for granted assuming that this is the only possible way to use them. This process is called "presupposition".

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التلاعب بالمعنى في الخطاب السياسي

بحث قدمه
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المستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى التحقق من الوسائل اللغوية التي تستخدم في انشاء التلاعب بالمعنى في الخطاب السياسي. و ستحقق هذه الدراسة في الوسائل التي يوظفها السياسيون لغرض التلاعب بالحقائق لتحقيق اهداف سياسية. بادئا، سيسلط الضوء على الاساس النظري الذي تستند عليه هذه الظاهرة، من ثم سيحقق في الوسائل اللغوية التي تستخدم لإنشاء هذا التلاعب. وستكون هذه الدراسة مقتصرة على الوسائل المعجمية – الدلالية المستخدمة في هذا النوع من الخطاب. كذلك سيصب الاهتمام على مصطلح "Democracy" (الديمقراطية) في ذلك التحقيق وذلك لكثرة استخدامها في الاوساط السياسية وكذلك لكونها من اكثر المصطلحات التي يعد استخدامها من قبل السياسيين مثيرا للتساؤل.