Olga V. Aleksandrova
Moscow State Lomonosov University

Cognitive and Pragmatic Features of Mass Media Discourse

The suggested subject may seem to be too broad for just one short article, but we shall view it more as a problem still to be solved than just a statement, especially since the present stage in linguistic developments deserves special attention.

The situation in linguistics has changed greatly in the last two decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. New linguistic developments are based on the data from different fields of human knowledge and different disciplines, and it is now possible to speak about the new trend in linguistics – media linguistics – the branch that deals with the language of mass media. This branch is closely connected with the new tendencies in modern linguistic studies, and it seems to be connected directly with cognitive processes, which are manifested in the language.

The term "Media Linguistics" was first introduced by Dobrosclonskaja (2000), and it seems to reflect exactly those tendencies that take place in different branches of research on the subject and that show the range of problems connected with this area of language. Dobrosclonskaja suggests the concept of media text as a multi-level phenomenon, which is realised on the basis of the dialectical unity of linguistic and media distinctive features. She also emphasises the prior role of syntagmatic analyses when all the main peculiarities of mass media texts are most fully realised.

It is a well established fact that grammatical research goes far beyond the limits of separate sentences. Sentences are very subjective units of written speech, and it is very difficult to give an exact definition of the term. While discussing oral speech in the recently published "Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English" (Biber 1999), borderlines between sentences are not marked. This grammar book is based upon the corpus data of the modern English language where the process of the division into sentences is treated very cautiously. A group of British and American linguists worked on this grammar; it is most often referred to as the "Biber Grammar", after

the name of the team leader who represents American linguistics, but well known British linguists also took part in the creation of this book.

The role of understanding the communicative and functional value of the utterance within a text may be possible only in view of the broader context of discourse. Discourse studies are based on texts, but sometimes it is difficult to single out some generalising features of the discourse, which may be characteristic of different texts belonging to different functional styles. Of course, different attitudes to the term "discourse" exist. Some linguists treat it from the point of view of ideology, thus bringing together different texts, which reflect views of some political or social trends; others prefer to use this term to denote texts which belong to some particular sphere of the human activity (e.g., theatre discourse). Other treatments of the term may be mentioned here. We prefer to use this term to denote the dynamic character of the texts under investigation, which is of special importance for the mass media texts.

As already mentioned above, there were considerable changes in linguistics at the end of the 20th century: The general turn to functionalism; attempts to understand language as a powerful means of categorisation of the world; understanding of language as an important means of reflection and expression of the human cognitive activities. Also, a very important role in recent linguistic developments belongs to corpus linguistic studies, which are directly connected with the study of discourse. This trend in modern linguistics has already proven to be very fruitful: It provides an opportunity to study units of different linguistic levels with the help of computer processing of linguistic data and their use in actual speech in its different styles and registers. This kind of research affords the possibility to understand common and special features of different texts, which belong to different registers and functional styles.

There are several reasons why discourse has not been studied from the point of view of corpus linguistics in the past. The difficulty of defining discourse is one: Its complexity made it rather complicated to use corpus methods of material study automatically. Nevertheless, the possibility of the corpus study of discourse really exists, and the cooperation of corpus methods and

cognitive linguistic approach may result in many new observations for the understanding of how and why speech is constructed in some particular way.

Texts of mass media should be treated as discourse: They are always dynamic and current; they are appreciated by the participants of communication within the context of the surrounding events. It is a well established fact that materials which belong to mass media accumulate features of different registers of speech; the function of impact in the media texts is equally important as the function message. To achieve the necessary effect, these texts employ all kinds of possible means, which a language possesses. That is why mass media materials present a great interest from the point of view of some general points of their organisation, on the one hand, and more specific peculiarities used by some particular sources, on the other. It is also important to understand the position of mass media texts within the system of functional styles: Not so long ago, linguists argued the special status of mass media as a separate functional style.

The contrastive study of different discourses within mass media texts and their communicative and functional features in different languages seems to be very promising for future discourse analysis within this register of speech. It will help to penetrate deeper into the cognitive picture of the world and to see its different reflection and understanding in the various speech communities.

The language of mass media, as already mentioned, provides very special material for the study of its discourse features, because it contains the distinctive features of different functional styles. It has been noted in some linguistic works that the language of journalism is the most prominent marker of the language of the community (Molochkova 2001). It must be very expressive; it should produce a very strong function of impact; it should be close in many respects to oral conversational speech. It is an obvious fact that any publication is dependant upon some political or economical force, thus fulfilling its social order and reflecting certain kinds of views of a particular part of the society. From this point of view, political discourse in the mass media texts deserves special interest. Equally important for this type of discourse as well as for many others seem to be the categories of time and

space – the most important philosophical categories, which exist objectively but are categorised differently in different linguistic communities.

Even the two main variants of English – British and American – though having the same origins, differ considerably from each other as far as media discourse organisation is concerned. While treating the peculiarities of this kind of discourse construction, it is important to take into consideration some concrete publications, which have their own means of presenting materials to the reading audience. Thus, the contrastive study of the British and American mass media texts shows that they may present differently the same events that happen in the world or domestically (Maliuga 2001). As research in the field demonstrates, the language used by the American mass media is closer to spoken speech, less limited, the function of impact prevails there. It has been noted, for example, that the American mass media texts use more questions than the British ones. Questions may occupy the final position within a paragraph, which also supports the realisation of the function of impact. The use of the negative as well as evaluative constructions is characteristic of the German mass media discourse.

The cognitive approach to the mass media discourse presupposes the problem of different world views, which denote the language use in different types of discourses, in our case the discourse peculiarities of the mass media texts. Frequently, language is characterised as the mirror of culture, in which not only the real world or the real conditions which surround a human being are reflected, but also the mentality of the representatives of the given national community, national character, the way of life, traditions, moral and evaluative principles, and feelings connected with the outer world, the world view, etc. (Ter-Minasova 2000).

Different approaches to the conceptualisation of the world are reflected in the political discourse, and, in this respect, the views and opinions of Lakoff (1996) seem to be interesting. He insists that the process of political struggle in the USA shows that liberals and conservatives base their discourses on different moral systems, which is clearly reflected in their political discourses.

A very important notion for American society is that of the family. Conservatives support the idea of "strict father"; for them, a family is a traditional unit with strict rules of life. The father is the most respectable member of the family, the head of it, and he earns food and money for the family. Grown-up children must live their own lives and be fully responsible for all their deeds. Liberals prefer the softer modes of behaviour. For them, the leading notion is that of a mother, who looks after the members of the family, loves them, and cares for them. Children gain their independence with the help of their parents; they are respected in the family; this makes it easier for them to adapt to life.

More and more papers appear nowadays in which linguists prove that a word cannot be treated without the context where it is used. Words may be defined on the basis of the conceptual system; it is only possible to understand them having cognitive knowledge about the concrete conceptual system. Thus, when discussing income tax, the republican congressman says: "Why should the best people be punished". To understand this question one must know why rich people are the best people and why the law about income tax is a punishment for them. In some conservative debates, this tax is even called a robbery.

According to Lakoff, the following words may be singled out as characteristic of the conservative discourse: *character, virtue, discipline, get tough, strong, individual responsibility, standards, authority, heritage, hard work, freedom, common sense, lifestyle,* etc. All of these words reflect the world view of the conservatives.

The same may be said about words and word-combinations, which are used by the liberals and which reflect their world view: *social responsibility, free expression, human rights, equal rights, care, help, health, nutrition, oppression, ecology, biodiversity,* etc.

Representatives of the American cognitive linguistics prove that family and morality are the central notions in the American picture of the world. This is reflected in the political discourse, which one can find in the corresponding mass media, oral and written.

Oral discourse deserves special attention. It is possible to use a very wide range of different means of impact in the oral discourse; here not only the variation in the constructions within the utterances may take place but also the use of a certain kind of phrasing (the division of the utterance into certain minimal meaningful units) and prosody. Prosodic construction of speech, the use of such elements of tembre supersyntactics as pausation (syntactic and rhetorical), slowing down or increasing the tempo, loudness, and the resulting rhythm of speech – all these phenomena belong to the sphere of rhetoric; however, of course, they are always present in the general cognitive picture of the world which is presented in speech. All these factors are very important for the understanding of the cognitive adherence of a particular speech-event.

Some words should be said in connection with the problem of phrasing. This is one of the key problems in the current functional approach to language study. Phrasing fully reflects the functioning of the syntactic bonds within a sentence – but not only that. The process of phrasing is very complicated: Besides the reflection of syntactic processes, it also takes into consideration stylistic features of discourse, the notional features which it possesses. The study of phrasing, which accumulates many aspects, may become one of the key problems in the study of discourse, in general, and mass media discourse, in particular.

The cooperation of the traditionally existing methods of discourse studies and new trends in its investigation, which is very important for mass media discourse, may help to treat the communicative-pragmatic peculiarities of speech from a wider point of view, to penetrate deeper into the essence of different linguistic phenomena, taking into consideration the data of various branches of human knowledge.

References

Biber, Douglas (ed.) (1999): Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English. Harlow.

Dobrosclonskaja, Tatiana G. (2000): Theory and Methods of Media Linguistics (on the Materials of English Language). Moscow. [Доброслонская, Т. Г. (2000): Теория и методы медиа лингвистики (на материале английского языка). Москва.]

Lakoff, George (1996): Moral Politics. Chicago.

Maliuga, Elena N. (2001): Approaches to the Study of Interrogative Sentences in the English/American Press. Moscow. [Малюга, Елена Н. (2001): Подходы к изучению вопросительных предложений в англо-американской прессе. Москва].

Molochkova, Liudmila V. (2001): Linguistic Peculiarities of the American Journalism on the Example of the Thematic Mass Media Field. // Space and Time in Language. Samara. [Молочкова, Людмила В. (2001): Особенности языка американской журналистики на примере тематического поля средств массовой информации. // Пространство и время в языке. Самара.]

Ter-Minasova, Svetlana G. (2000): Language and the Intercultural Communication. Moscow. [Тер-Минасова, Светлана Г. (2000): Язык и межкультурная коммуникация. Moscow.]