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PRAGMATIC IDENTITY AND ALTERITY IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes a sample of political discourse, namely the speech entitled “We Want Our Country Back”, delivered by the British nationalist, MEP, Ashley Mote. In the communication situation, the audience is made up of conservative, right-wing politicians or supporters, mainly readers of the nationalist “Right Now” magazine. The politician utterer interacts both with the interlocutors present, considered to share the speaker’s national and religious identity and with potential interlocutors that may embody a rejected alterity.

The article quotes Mote’s words in order to demonstrate how the politician’s identity is negotiated in discourse through the interplay of hypostases of identity and alterity. Their linguistic manifestations are occurrences of personal deixis and the pragmatic roles that the utterer attributes to himself and to his interlocutors.

In political discourse, there is a deep-going opposition between “I/”We” and “They”. In fact, the relationship is more complex, but it can be reduced to the politician’s acceptance of his allies’ alterity and rejection of his opponents’ alterity.

As to the pragmatic roles assigned by the utterer, they make up a ‘drama’ in discourse and the latter becomes the battlefield for power: the persuasive power that relies on the illocutionary forces released by the macro-speech act which a political speech stands for.

Keywords: identity, alterity, pragmatic roles, nationalism, speech acts

1. Introduction

The present paper aims at revealing the way identity and alterity interact through a movement of attraction and refutation, in a sample of nationalist political discourse. In nationalist discourse, the politician glorifies the national component of his identity shared with most of his interlocutors and rejects the others on the ground of their nationality. Marc Augé (*apud* Charaudeau 2005: 41):

“L’intervention politique [...] ouvre une attente et escompte des résultats; elle traite une altérité (celle du public en général et des adversaires politiques en particulier) et tente d’établir [...] un <consensus> ou une majorité, c’est-à-dire l’affirmation d’une identité relative à une question particulière ou à la conduite des affaires de l’Etat” :

Ashley Mote, a British independent nationalist politician, an MEP belonging to the political group **Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty** (ITS), set up according to charter, on 9 January 2007, uttered an allocution on 21 October 2006, at a one-day conference organized by Right Now magazine, on “The Making and Meaning of Britishness”. He is building up his identity through a network of pragmatic relations and hierarchies that he conducts discriminatorily in discourse, through a per-locutionary macro-act in which he

assumes the pragmatic role of spokesman for British majority. The proof is the prevailing occurrence of the personal deictic plural form “we”, as against the few uses of “I”.

Teun van Dijk (2000) explains that the persuasive function of political discourse is aimed at obtaining “persuasive power”. Persuasion and manipulation are related to positive politeness strategies, as in the case of the pronoun ‘we’, of inclusive value, through which the utterer grants the audience the status of a participant in the communication situation. ‘We’ emphasizes the common territory, a strategy that the author compares to ‘relational work’.

2. Identity against Alterity in Deixis

There is a double identity of the utterer, that of a Brit, which is thematically outlined, at the level of proposition content and that of an independent politician, an MEP, essentially and dialectically relying on the former, but also emerging from the use of personal deixis and illocutionary force. It is a discourse multi-faceted identity of an active player, lucid analyst, visionary politician, defender of national values, mentor, instigator, etc.

His identity is negotiated against the co-substantial alterity manifest in the reality of the text. There is the deictic “you”, the accepted alterity of the public present at the conference and that of the extended audience: either the accepted alterity of the British, part and parcel of his national identity or the rejected alterity of the immigration and of the British/ European politicians that legitimize the immigration phenomenon.

The utterer assigns the referents of ‘you’ and ‘they’ complementary roles to those he plays. When he plays the role: ‘I’= well-informed analyst of political issues, complementarily, his interlocutors become ‘you’= less-informed people; when ‘I’= active and visionary politician, ‘you’= obeying listeners.

Mote pinpoints his allies and his opponents; he quotes their statements, accepting them as significant participants in the pragmatic context. It is he who selects their opposing and polarized stands. “They” highlight his discourse identity. While for himself and his allies, the utterer uses legitimizing strategies, for his adversaries, he uses delegitimizing ones.

Teun A. van Dijk (2005) points out that the fundamental opposition between *we* and *they* is a classic example of pronominal codification to express contrast, social conflict, as well as ethnocentrism.

3. Pragmatic Identity and Speech Acts

It is worth mentioning that some of the following pragmatic roles are often played simultaneously:

3.1. I = We =Victims

The very title of Ashley Mote’s allocution, “*We Want Our Country Back*” announces the strategy of identification of the politician with the British in order to find

legitimacy for his ideology. The directive speech act increases his power position. The possessive adjective emphasizes the right of the British to own their territory, an essential attribute of the nation, a hypostasis of alterity perceived as part of Mote's identity.

3.2. **I = We = Victims (of both immigration and incompetence of the governance) versus We = people + Government)**

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have been invaded – and we have let it happen".

Both expressive speech acts present the speaker's political attitude of commitment and activism, singled out by the passivity and the confusing stand of the government, perceived as noxious alterity:

"Since Blair came to power, more than one million foreigners have come to live in the UK, despite applications for asylum going down".

Ruth Kelly, Jack Straw, in fact, all the members of a *"dyslexic, dysfunctional, disorganized, disgraceful, nauseating cabinet"* are made responsible for the country being:

"in such a mess over immigration – multiculturalism – tolerance – national identity and supposed integration..."

"I want to look at its impact (the link between Islam and terrorism) on the UK. Mr. Blair and his wimps won't face it. David Cameron has been distinctly quiet on it – surprise, surprise! So it's up to us, ordinary people who care about preserving all that it's best in Britain, to grasp the nettle".

"Everywhere you look you see hopelessly inadequate response by officialdom to real problems".

3.3. **I = Best Informed, Lucid and Responsible Analyst**, dominating the 'others' (both allies and opponents) through information and interpretation:

"Just look at their record: Since the turn of the century they have murdered some 3000 innocent people in New York...200 innocent tourists in Bali...333 children and their teachers in Beslan..."

"...what are we to make of the present estimates of over half a million Bulgarians and Romanians planning to come here next year?"

"I don't recall being asked if I approve of all this".

*"You don't need me to dwell on the consequences. In recent years:
-We have been importing crime, disease and poverty... We endure... - Severe overcrowding in our towns and cities, in our schools and hospitals..."*

“My focus today is on the recent devastating problem to emerge from this flood tide of immigration – the link between Islam and terrorism”.

3.4. I = Intolerant Defender of Britishness (religious alterity refutation)

*“I am not going to generalise about Muslims...within **their** midst – there is a hard core of revolutionaries... **They** have mounted a war against **our** country. Enemy guerrillas are operating within **our** gates”.*

*“And **we** are not facing a war against terror. This is a war of religion. **We** are back to the dark ages. **We** are being obliged to defend ourselves against alien beliefs and ideas that **others** want to impose on **us**. **They** claim a God-given right to enforce **their** beliefs on **us** by mass murder”.*

“Such claims are utterly absurd to a rational western mind”.

Ashley Mote identifies inimical alterity in the persons of the Muslim officials: Muhamed Abdul Bari, Abu Bashir, Colonel Gaddafi, whose declarations he quotes and comments, and allied alterity, with Trevor Phillips and Lord Ahmed, on the issue of the immigrants’ acceptance of British secular way of life or leaving Britain.

The politician utters directive speech acts, linguistically supported by normative modal verbs or the imperative mood, to emphasize intolerance:

*“**We** have to say it out loud: Islam is the problem. **We** have to ask if there can ever be such a person as a British Muslim?”*

*“So **we** had better say it now – if **you** wish to establish Islamic law in the UK, **our** answer is – No **you** cannot. Furthermore, **you** have no place here. **You** are not welcome. Go and live where **your** life-style and religious beliefs are accepted”.*

To legitimize his position, Mote quotes authorities such as Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, on the evil embodied by Islamist fanatics. These are accepted alterities on this topic.

3.5. I = Defender of Territory – a national attribute, essential to the EP nationalist group

“Self-preservation is the most fundamental of human instincts. That, and a deep-seated desire to live in a group with common values, and a willingness to fight for its protection. Conflict over territory is nothing new. History suggests it is the norm”.

*“That is why this current battle to preserve **our** country and **our** identity is crucial. **Our** only claim to the British Isles is that **we** are here. **Our** forebears settled and developed it. **We** now control it – at least for the moment – and **we** must defend it or lose it”.*

*“What **I** am saying is that the nation is a natural unit for stability, and must be defended with courage and at all costs – whatever they may be”.*

3.6. I = Racist

“Self-preservation is the most fundamental of human instincts. That, and a deep-seated desire to live in a group with common values, and a willingness to fight for its protection. Conflict over territory is nothing new. History suggests it is the norm”.

“you’ll find there is also good genetic justification for the parallel existence of distinct groups – protection of the species, survival of the fittest, hybrid vigour. Particularly in the case of humans, we can also add the development of the intellect. As a racial type, for instance, we know that the Chinese are cleverer than Africans – indeed cleverer than most of us...”

“We are not impartial beings. We have strong natural tendencies to protect what is ours. Eventually instincts of survival overcome almost all challenges, however powerful and however apparently lawful”.

3.7. I = Visionary

*“If things go on as they are, eventually, **we** will face what effectively will be civil war...”*

Sometimes, Mote’s vision turns dramatic on conspiracy theory:

*“At present **we** have left-wing busy-bodies [...that] have other, unspoken objectives – a dilution of national identities and the beginnings of a world super-state which the bureaucrats will dominate...”*

Or even apocalyptic, in expressive speech acts:

“The words Nero, Rome and burning spring to mind”.

3.8. I = Lonely fighter

*“**I** am never going to lead a great political party – but **I** have a few ideas about how **we** need to change things...Out. And out now...”*

3.9. I = Solution Finder to economic disadvantages, population growth, unemployment, etc.

More directive and expressive speech acts refute alterities that enhance immigration consequences:

“But not any more. The EU has seen to that”.

“The BBC needs stop giving air time to Muslim fanatics...”

“Some 12 per cent of children in British primary schools not speaking English as their mother tongue”.

*“What happened to teaching the difference between right and wrong, **I** ask?”*

*“Nor are **we** alone. [The French, Dutch, Danes, Swedes, Germans] ...feel much the same about the invasion of their country”.*

*“The Swiss control their borders, so do the Japanese, the Australians...So should **we**”.*

“Such a policy is ...realism”.

There is symmetry between the conclusion and the title of the article: the British national territory is the inalienable part of British identity:

*“The British are an outward-looking people...happy to welcome visitors from all parts of the globe. [...] But **we** are British...and that’s the way it should remain. That means being masters in **our own house**”.*

4. Conclusions

In nationalist political discourse, such as Ashley Mote’s, the anthropological aspiration to the totality of alterity and identity is denied. Through a mechanistic clear-cut distinction, the politician refutes constitutive alterity. He exacerbates the fear of the other. National identity is interwoven with religious and racial identities.

Mote exalts the modern concept of nation and two of its main attributes: the national territory and the national economy. He rejects the totality of the EU multi-national project, but praises West European values; he preaches the return to traditions: he accepts the citizens of the Commonwealth.

In Geert Hofstede’s terms, the values that underlie nationalist discourse are proper to a masculine cultural model, characterized by ethnocentrism and intolerance.

As to the pragmatic approach, most discourse analysts reveal the theatrical character of political discourse, due to the variety of roles and interrelations, conceived and enacted by the almighty politician utterer. But real power is not his, it belongs to discourse.

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Etc.