The First World War in the Mirror of European Media Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The increasing role of political movements and parties as the main force changing society causes increased attention of scientists to political texts. Politics, as a sphere of public life, determines person’s behavioral reactions and governs public consciousness.

At the same time, not only the information itself is of particular importance, but also the formation of an assessment of social phenomena as a means of influencing public opinion. The purpose of this research is to analyze linguistic event media texts in Russian, German and French, thematically related to the reinterpretation of the results of the First World War, and to determine the role of these texts in shaping public opinion as related to the anniversary of the end of the First World War.

Presumably, if political discourse is controlled by the main ideologies, then the choice of language means should be treated as a mechanism for launching an evaluative attitude in structuring the space of “reality”. Therefore, comparative, descriptive, and statistical methods have been chosen as the leading methods for conducting this study, which allows us to present the formation of public assessment of the stated events, and also the main ideas lying behind the text in the most illustrative way.

The research material is taken from some political media texts in the European media discourse (articles written in Russian, German and French) dedicated to the centenary of the end of the First World War. We analyzed the publications that received the highest number of views according to open data from the Internet.

The most important linguistic component of political discourse is the politically oriented vocabulary, its semantic features and cross-cultural differences. Lexical units in these texts are inextricably linked to the associative field represented in a foreign language environment. The subjectivity of the concept involves the use of different language tools to describe the same fragment of reality according to the scheme “friend – foe”. Conceptual ideas and their transformations in the political space were identified based on the use of evaluation components of political texts and depending on the initial position and ideological prerogatives.

Stylistic transformation of evaluation units is created both by multiple repetition and by explicit or implicit emphasis on the positive characteristics of their supporters, and also on pejorative characteristics of ideological opponents. In the end, the usage of such units leads to the transformation of ideological attitudes and the general perception of the actual material.

Keywords: international relations, political linguistics, the First World War, political discourse, text analysis.
Introduction

The interest to political discourse as a special field of activity is determined by the growing influence of political trends and parties on public life. The political discourse reflected in the texts of political orientation has a direct impact on the people’s minds and has some material expression.

Therefore, the investigation of political discourse is of interest to interdisciplinary and cross-cultural studies. Approaches to the analyses of the content of political texts, their schemes and methods should be determined by the purpose why the text was written in this or that way [Tushev, Bushkanets; Il’ikova].

From a linguistic point of view, all texts are a collection of various linguistic components used by the authors to implement their ideas. The effectiveness of using various types of tools therefore brings the researchers to the assessment of the quality of the published text.

From the ideological point of view, the choice of words and expressions is an important tool in forming the ideological content of the text. While the content is determined by the main known ideologies that underlie the individual’s social positions, as well as his or her personal experiences about specific events and situations. The actual information is perceived as corresponding to reality only in case when the addressee emotionally gets in tune with the author’s paradigm.

The social purpose of political discourse is to encourage members of the human community to perform certain purposeful actions or to make assessments of what is happening in a positive key – showing a kind of approval [Bayley 1985: 104]. Therefore, political discourse is viewed as the object of linguistic studies as a secondary language subsystem with certain functions, terminology and communicative impact [Gavrilo娃 2002].

According to domestic and foreign researchers, the feature of political discourse is its functional and effective character (E.I.Sheigal, A.P.Chudinov, C. De Landsheer, O.Feldman). Some researchers consider political discourse as the language of the public sphere. In the study "Politically speaking: a worldwide examination of language used in the public sphere" [O.Feldman, C. De Landsheer, 1998], scientists put forward the proposition that the political function is characteristic of almost all public statements. In this case, political discourse acts as the use of language in the socio-political sphere of communication, that is, the main focus is placed on the features of the functioning of language in the public sphere of communication. Whether a text belongs to a political sphere is determined both by its subject matter and its place in the system of political communication.

Political discourse as the language and genres of political sphere is studied in the works of researchers of Lancaster University (N.Fairclough) - "Language, ideology and power", of Austrian Research Center "Discourse. Politics. Identity" (R.Wodak), University of Amsterdam (T.van Dijk), and it is also studied in Spain and Latin America.

Developing cognitive theories of political discourse, Russian researchers are also engaged in deeper studies of a number of issues: describing semantic parameters of the basic concepts of the Russian-language political discourse, modeling the political situation, as well as reconstructing the cognitive scheme (A.A.Kazantsev, V.M.Sergeev, K.V.Sergeev, A.N.Baranov, D.O.Dobrovolsky, Yu.N.Karaulov, A.P.Chudinov, Yu.B.Fedeneva, E.I.Sheigal, R.M.Blakar).

In this study, we are investigating the formation of a full-scale picture of the military actions in the public consciousness and common European ideas about the consequences of the First World War taking place a century ago.

Methods

Linguistic studies of political discourse are based on two theses: the system and the text. The linguistic study of political discourse is carried out using critical, cognitive, descriptive and quantitative methods.

The research material is represented by the texts of German and French political Internet discourse related to a number of events dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War (2018). Therefore, the comparative and linguistic methods of content analysis were chosen as the leading methods for conducting this research. In addition, the so-called methods of informal text analysis were used in France and Germany to recreate public reaction.

The analysis of the tools and techniques used by the authors of the paper was carried out on a common scheme including a description of the rhetorical, stylistic and graphic tools used in the text. This description was preceded by an analysis of the views of the authors, recipients, opponents and allies. And then an overview of the Internet comments left after the text was presented to assess the impact.

The analysis of the tools and techniques used by the authors of the paper was carried out according to a common scheme including a description of the rhetorical, stylistic and graphic tools used in the text.

The study covers 2018-2019 years of publications on the Internet, as well as materials from 2014, since there was a significant number of publications on the topic of the First World War in the Russian-language discourse particularly in 2014.
Results and Discussion

At the time of publication of the research results, the following requests on the Internet were processed: 1) the First World War; 2) the end of the First World War; 3) the celebration of the centenary of the First World War; 4) celebrate the end of the First world war. The requests were formulated in Russian, French and German, respectively. The queries were carried out in search engines like Yandex.ru and Google.ru. Among the quantitative indicators, there are both full-fledged 1) scientific research on a given topic, and 2) responses to open sources on the Internet, 3) the opinions of individual authors, as well as 4) user comments on published material in 2019.

To compare data processing, we present numerical indicators of the Google search engine in Russian by the number of published data and articles. The total number of results (publications), according to the above-mentioned queries, is: 1) approximately 10,300,000; 2) approximately 3,500,000; 3) approximately 1,550,000; 4) approximately 2,900,000.

It is obvious that these two search engines display data differently in the native language of the given language group and in a foreign language.

Taking into account the difference in search results in Yandex and Google for Russian-language texts, let’s consider the indicators for texts in Russian, German and French obtained in Google. The difference in indicators between these operating systems is presumably related to the parameters of the language markup embedded in the systems and can be explained within the framework of computational linguistics, which is the subject of a separate scientific study.

The digital expression of the importance of events related to the First World War confirms the existence of similar topics and opinions, regardless of the language of publication. For the objectivity of the analysis, we will consider the language expression of the ideological content and the techniques used in the texts to achieve the expected effect.

The role of the First World War for the modern European community is difficult to overestimate, since the military events of that time determined the balance of forces on the political map of Europe and subsequently became a motivating mechanism for the emergence of hotbeds of tension and misunderstanding at the state level, which contributed significantly to the development of the economic and political crisis. This crisis predetermined the deployment of new military operations and eventually led to the Second World War.

The idea formed in the public consciousness is positively perceived by the addressee only if the ideological attitudes and preferences on both sides - the narrator and the recipient – coincide [Mikhaleva, Dem'yankov, Il'yn]. From the textual point of view, this fact is reflected in the degree of expressiveness of the text and the use of appropriate evaluation vocabulary. The combination of informativeness and expressiveness is the main condition for making an impact on people’s minds [Kon'kov]. Let’s consider informative parameters of published texts in relation to their emotional component and techniques used to persuade recipients.

Before considering the style and ideological content of the most frequently requested Russian-language articles on the Internet, it should be noted that the perception of these events in Russia is inextricably linked with the peculiarities of socio-political organization of power structures, from the revolutionary events of 1917 (the Great October Revolution) to the present day. The authors of the article “Milestones of Return of “Forgotten War”: Main Trends and Stages in the Development of Domestic Historiography of the First World War” note that with the emergence of new approaches the study of the First World War acquires a more diverse character [Bylye Gody, 2014, p.296]. Therefore, it is interesting to consider the emotional context of publicistic style articles.

Attention is drawn to the fact that publications about the First World War in the modern Russian-language press of the analyzed period have a generically neutral or analytical character. The growth of publications on this topic begins in 2014. A separate topic of publications is the reflection of events related to the revision of the attitude to the First World War in the post-Soviet era. The very attitude to the revision is also very ambiguous. For example, in the “Address of the Head of the Russian Imperial House in connection with the 100th anniversary of the beginning of World War I, 1914-1918 (Statement from the Head of Russian Imperial House on the 100th Anniversary of the Beginning of the First World War)” it is said: “the 100th anniversary of the First World War reminds all mankind how dangerous double standards are in international politics, as well as thoughtless saberrattling, the desire for absolute domination and the attitude to their own and other peoples as a mass and material for inhuman experiments” [Bylye Gody, 2014, p.295]. In this passage, the danger of events is associated with double standards (that is, with the possibility of a dual attitude to the same events), thoughtless rattling of weapons (rattling sober – a figurative meaning, threatening with weapons, high-flown [Ozhegov 2004, p.61]), treating people as material for inhuman experiments, a certain faceless mass (mass - a physical quantity; a lot, a large number of something, someone, [Ozhegov, 2004, p.344]). Through the expression of negative subjective modality, the First World War appears in the consciousness of the Russian-speaking recipient as a dangerous, ambiguous, depersonalizing event that determines the fate of peoples.

The rhetoric of a more neutral nature is defined in articles of an encyclopaedic character that have a high rating on Russian-language sites, for example, on the portal “World War I” of the TASS News Agency
or individual publications, such as the RIA Novosti article “World War I (1914-1918)” [https://ria.ru/20190628/1555928824.html from 28.06.2019]. The main function of these publications is to inform readers about events that can be evaluated independently. Russia’s withdrawal from the war in 1917 is mentioned as one of the events that determined the outcome of the war: “the Second major change in the confrontation of forces was caused by Russia’s withdrawal from the war.” This event is associated with the change of power in the country. Reflections on changes in the internal political structure of Russia and their impact on the outcome of the First World War and subsequent events are one of the key ideas of publications devoted to this period.

On the TASS portal “World War I” there is a whole selection of articles written in a publicistic style. There is a periodization of events presented in articles that contain a lot of factual material and have additional links to the facts mentioned in the articles [more on TASS: https://tass.ru/wwi/chronicle/1340305]. Elements of subjective modality make it possible to assess the situation on an emotional level: so, the expression secret protocols imply a collusive agreement and the availability of information only to a narrow circle of people, actually meant strengthens this effect. The title of the article “1914-1918. First World War. How Europe rushed headlong into the First World War” [https://patalogistlist.livejournal.com/807568.html] emphasizes the catastrophic nature of the events by the usage of the Russian phraseologism “headlong – very quickly, hastily, without thinking” [Wiktionary https://ru.wiktionary.org/wiki/сломя_голову]. When covering military events, a large number of dates, surnames, and facts are noticed in the articles, which are designed to increase the objectivity of information.

Key ideas of the Russian language texts are first of all to define the attitude to the First World War (the lack of coverage of particular moments, belittling the sacrifice and heroism of the people because of causal relations with tsarist Russia and the ideological preset in the Soviet and post-Soviet period) and the scale of hostilities in the global arena; to create an objective picture of military operations; to define the role of the First World War and the actual result of the armistice. Moreover, the idea of the importance of the end of the First World War prevails over other ideas.

Coverage of the theme of celebrating the end of World War I in the Western European press (Germany, France), along with the similarity of the emotional background, has a number of ideological features.

For example, the portal of the People’s Union (Volkstumb) in the relevant German-language articles also assesses the First World War as a terrible, catastrophic event [https://www.100-jahre-erster-weltkrieg.eu/home.html]. The war is called “the original catastrophe of the 20th century” (Urkatastrophe des 20. Jahrhunderts), “murderous bloody battles” (mörderischen “Ausblutungsschlachten”) which turned entire areas into deserts (ganze Landstriche wurden verwüstet), blowing everything up with grenades and poisoning with poisons (von Granaten zerklüftet, durch Giftgas versucht). This unprecedented mass murder (beispielloses Massensterben) was praised and heroized by contemporary propaganda (vom “Heldentod” hohnlacht) [ibid.].

An interesting fact is that the articles do not make distinctions in whose land the fighting was conducted (such geographical names as Verdun, Ypern, Tannenberg are listed in the articles). Special attention in German-language articles is paid to the careful treatment of human remains without distinction on national grounds. [https://www.volksbund.de/meldungen/aktuelles-artikel/news/das-pompeji-des-ersten-weltkrieges.html] 25.01.2019; https://www.bpb.de/mediathek/187778/freundschaft-ueber-graeben).

A particular interest arises the theme of German and French relations before and after the First World War. The largest number of queries, articles, and comments was recorded for French-language texts. And in this case, we are talking not too much about the end of the First World War or events dedicated to its end, but about the very situation in which France found itself during the deployment of the military campaign.

The most discussed topics covered by the French media in connection with the Centenary of the end of World War I are: the description of the ceremony itself; the significance of the French soldier and their fateful contribution to the future of France; comments of Donald Trump on the Tweet, as well as the relations between presidents E.Macron and D.Trump; the role of General Philippe Petain in the First World War.


French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe proposed to pay tribute to poilu. Poilu – “scruffy” (the nickname of French soldiers during the First World War according to French linguist Albert Dauzat). These soldiers were mostly farmers, since France in 1914 was prevailingly an agrarian country. The First World War came as a confrontation of these peaceful peasant soldiers against an unprecedented scale and intensity of cruelty (à une violence inédite par son ampleur et son intensité), which was associated with industrial ruthlessness. They were just tools and victims of the theory of offensive warfare and were defeated in the long and dirty reality of trenches [https://www.gouvernement.fr/sites/default/files/document/document/2018/10/discours_de_m_edouard_philipp e_premin_ministre_-_commemorations_du_centenaire_de_la Premiere_ guerre_mondiale_-_mende-]
Therefore, the ceremony of celebrating the First World War in France is a ceremony honoring the main hero of the war, an ordinary poilu, who won that war.

From the analyzed material, it follows that the value of events is directly or indirectly determined by the assessment that modern media form in the addressees.

**Summary**

In the mid-90’s a group of scientists from the Institute of Russian Language of the RAS conducted a linguistic and statistical analysis of the variable “national idea” on the material of newspaper texts for 1996-1997 [Baranov, Dobrovolsky, Mikhailov 1997a; Baranov, Dobrovolsky, Mikhailov 1997b]. Such a “national idea” is built with consideration to the cultural and political features of the development of a particular society. The political text, as well as the political discourse itself, is always based on the moral normativity accepted in this collective and, thus, is based on the dichotomy of “positive-negative”, i.e. it contains an assessment of what is happening. A publicistic political text based on evaluation encourages recipients to perform certain actions that members of this community perceive as corresponding to the evaluation expressed in the text. So, James Ball in his “Posttruth. How bullshit conquered the word” writes: “…we find information more credible if it aligns with our current worldviews, and that most of us find anecdotes more convincing than statistics” [Ball J., 2017, p.179].

Evaluativeness can be expressed explicitly or implicitly and gives the political text a polemic, which might be seen, for example, in the choice of words [J. Garcia Santos 1987: 91]. Polemic in its extreme manifestation is aimed at inculcating a negative attitude towards the speaker’s political opponents, at inculcating (as the most positive and natural) their values and assessments. Therefore, terms evaluated positively by the supporters of some views are perceived negatively by the supporters of others [Van Dejk, Mikhailova]. It seems possible to identify assessments that are explicitly or implicitly presented in political discourse by the assessment of particular groups of statements (cf. [Schrotta, Visotschnig 1982: 126]).

Any discourse, not only political in nature, aimed at some instillation of thought, takes into account the system of views of the potential interpreter in order to modify the intentions, opinions and motivations of the audience. The success of instillation depends, at least, on the attitude towards the proponent, the message in speech as such, and the reference object [Morik 1982, p. 44].

These features can be clearly seen in the history of the analysis of the events of the First World War in Russia, which went through the stages from silencing the scale and denying certain facts to recognizing the significance and further impact of the consequences of the First World War on the geopolitical arena of a pan-European scale.

Based on the results of quantitative and linguistic analysis, it can be argued that even 100 years after its end, the First World War has a significant impact on the political balance of power and is one of the most discussed events of the twentieth century.

**Conclusion**

Thus, interpreting political discourse in its entirety, one cannot limit oneself to purely linguistic moments, otherwise the essence and purpose of political discourse will go unnoticed.

The most important linguistic component of political discourse is the politically oriented vocabulary, its semantic features and cross-cultural differences that determine the features of a particular political text or document. Lexical units in these texts that form the conceptual fields of the source language are inextricably linked to the associative field represented in the foreign language and predetermined by the moral choice of a particular person.

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**References**


