TEACHING CONFLICTUAL COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES OF AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

One of the main difficulties, which arise in the process of training future diplomats, journalists and specialists in cross-cultural communication, is to teach EFL learners the specifics of particular kinds of English discourse. Modern political discourse is especially challenging due to the current evolution of communicative norms and rules of verbal behaviour. For students of the 21st century to pick up new words, terms, clichés, set expressions and grammatical structures is not enough any more to sustain an efficient conversation or write a convincing persuasive text. They need to be taught cooperative and conflictual communicative strategies, the latter being the biggest problem because of culturally relevant cognitive models that regulate how native speakers manipulate language units in order to achieve their communicative goals in a ‘win-lose’ situation. The aim of this paper is to find out what modern EFL teachers should know about conflictual communicative strategies to help students develop professionally required communicative skills, comprising the ability to comprehend the pragma-semantic scope of speech and properly react to signals, sent by their American counterparts in confrontational political discourse.

Keywords: political discourse, functional linguistics, teaching methodology, rhetoric, communicative strategy, communicative tactics.

1 INTRODUCTION

Nowadays political situation in the USA can be characterized with rather negative dynamics, especially concerning resolutions of various conflicts both at home and abroad, e.g. the current White House administration vs. the country’s establishment, no public consensus on the problem of migration, soaring number of victims in incidents involving fire arms, fight against international terrorism, etc. All these issues are unavoidably reflected in multiple functional properties of modern English political discourse and its transformational tendencies.

American politicians’ strategic communicative models of verbal behaviour demonstrate conspicuous intensification of conflictual rhetoric. This specific rhetorical mode is often abundant in negative pragma-semantic components of evaluation, directed against the opposition and ideological rivals. Functional linguistics provide researchers with necessary methodological tools to analyze why and how native speakers choose words and manipulate discursive elements to achieve their communicative goals in conflictual situations of verbal political interaction. Such data is not only significant as it enhances existing linguistic views on political discourse and the theory of communicative strategies, but also valuable for its application in improvement of educational process.

For EFL students of the 21st century to pick up new words, terms, clichés, set expressions and grammatical structures is not enough any more to sustain an efficient conversation or write a convincing persuasive text. At Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University) future diplomats, businessmen, interpreters and specialists in professional cross-cultural communication find this problem especially pressing as they will have to deal with English-speaking politicians at different levels of governmental system as part of their jobs. They need to be taught cooperative and, most importantly, conflictual communicative strategies, the latter being the biggest challenge because of culturally relevant cognitive models that regulate how native speakers manipulate language units in order to achieve their communicative goals in a ‘win-lose’ situation. The aim of this paper is to find out what modern EFL teachers should know about conflictual communicative strategies to help students develop professionally required communicative skills, comprising the ability to comprehend the pragma-semantic scope of speech and properly react to signals, sent by their American counterparts in confrontational political discourse.
2 THEORETICAL GROUNDING

The functional-linguistic theory of communicative strategies and tactics is based on the concept of the communicative purpose which serves as the driving force for the development of the pragma-semantic field of any discourse (political discourse included). The main thing any speaker does – both consciously and subconsciously due to special linguocultural cognitive patterns of verbal behaviour, ingrained in the mind of every native English speaker – is setting goals and then selecting efficient means of their attainment. It was a matter of time for terminology to appear to designate discursive parameters connected with making a plan of your speech and choosing purely linguistic ways of its implementation.

A set of speech acts aimed at achieving one’s communicative goal is usually called a communicative (or speech / verbal / discourse) strategy. Such strategies are manifested at all levels of discourse and presuppose working out a plan of interaction that considers personal features of interlocutors, their typical traits of character and individual peculiarities, the specifics of the communicative situation, cultural traditions and communicative norms of social groups, members of particular communities, citizens of a certain country, etc. By strategies linguists also mean careful selection of facts to be presented in a convenient way in order to influence recipients’ volition and emotions.

The second important term is communicative tactics. It’s a set of particular linguistic / rhetorical means which are used by the speaker to attain the communicative goal. Both notions go hand in hand together, and it is impossible to implement a strategy without resorting to specific tactical devices. On the other hand, in carefully preplanned speech any linguistic unit, used by one of the interlocutors, should be regarded as a tactical means to achieve a certain communicative goal. Therefore, it is important to explain the basics of functional-linguistic analysis to EFL students.

Drilling clichés, role-playing typical situations, studying various forms of linguistic politeness and communicative rituals play a significant role in teaching students how to plan the functional perspective, transforming theoretical knowledge into a very useful skill. Ritualization of verbal behaviour allows students to predict possible reaction of their interlocutors and respond according to an effective communicative strategy. The problem is that teachers traditionally pay most of their attention in the classroom to practicing the cooperative mode of verbal interaction, especially when it comes to English political discourse. It leaves students without necessary skills to respond to non-standard situations when a conflict arises. This paper suggests easy first steps to making EFL students better prepared for verbal confrontation, so typical of the 21st century American politics.

The theoretical basis for this paper includes works on functional linguistics and the theory of communicative strategies [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7], the theory of discourse and its semantic field [8, 9], linguodidactics and teaching methodology [10, 11, 12].

3 CONFLICTUAL COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES: TEACHING TACTICAL MEANS OF THEIR IMPLEMENTATION IN AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

The first step of building students’ awareness of the variety of tactical verbal means in a conflictual communicative situation is introduction of basic elements of functional-linguistic analysis. At Moscow State Institute of International Relations it is usually done in the lessons of General English or ESP when students read authentic articles on political issues in the US or watch videos of press conferences and debates. Future specialists in professional communication should clearly understand that each word, phrase or construction has its own purpose and contributes to the implementation of the communicative strategy. So the work on written and oral texts should be organized with the following points in mind:

- identification of goals the interlocutors / the author are going to pursue based on the general understanding of the communicative situation and wider context (at the pre-reading / pre-listening stage);
- looking for specific language units which individually help achieve the communicative goal (while reading / listening), explaining why this or that language unit is used by the native speaker;
highlighting the cooperative effect of political rhetoric, i.e. showing students that the functional loading of every tactical language unit contributes to the larger functional field of the whole text, and the communicative purpose is fulfilled with all the rhetorical means altogether;

generalization and summary.

Step 2 is supposed to bring students’ awareness of conflictual strategies even further with introduction of concrete communicative tactics and working on each of them separately with the help of thoroughly selected illustrative materials that both seem interesting to students and have educational value in terms of their rhetorical structure.

Consider communicative tactics of blaming as an example. Blaming is a useful trick which helps the participants of political discourse destroy their opponents’ reputation by using certain linguistic means of discrediting rivals, accusing them of crimes or deviations from moral and ethical standards. Tactics of blaming is one of the ways to implement speech strategy of demotion and denunciation, when interlocutors deliberately express their negative attitude to a rival, belittle his / her public status and debunk opposite political views. Blaming can be personal and impersonal. The former is directed against a certain person or a group of people, while the latter doesn’t mention the name of a person, responsible for something which is being criticized.

One can single out a number of extralinguistic issues touched upon in American political discourse when the tactics of blaming is being used. Usually it’s whether the rival is patriotic enough or not, denunciation of the opponent’s life style, contacts with dubious social and political groups, collaboration with an ideological enemy, violation of human rights and freedom, commitment to particular views and values. For example, former US President Barack Obama’s words about his predecessor George Bush Jr.:

*The problem is, is that the way Bush has done it over the last eight years is to take out a credit card from the Bank of China in the name of our children, driving up our national debt from $5 trillion for the first 42 presidents - #43 added $4 trillion by his lonesome, so that we now have over $9 trillion of debt that we are going to have to pay back -- $30,000 for every man, woman and child. That's irresponsible. It's unpatriotic.* [13]

In this speech act the speaker accuses Bush of several state problems directly and indirectly. First of all, Obama’s predecessor is allegedly responsible for the increased national debt, which is accentuated with the help of discursive elements *unpatriotic, irresponsible* and *in the name of our children*, the latter pointing at how double-faced the opponent is. China is directly named as the creditor, which is a hint at excessively active cooperation between Bush and the ideological rival of the US. Idiom *by his lonesome* stresses how selfish Bush’s decisions are, their consequences are now to be dealt with by the new administration and the American population (we are going to have pay back). Obama uses deictic elements expressed with plural pronouns (*we, our*) and phrases with a generalizing indefinite lexeme *every* (*for every man, woman and child*) to underline his commitment to democratic values and dedication to the people. Thus, the speaker exploits not only the tactics of blaming to discredit his opponent, but also uses the tactics of self-presentation, implicitly describing himself as the complete opposite of George Bush Jr. in the role of the President.

One of the main markers of the tactics of blaming, that students should be able to identify, is a nomination, performed with words having negative lexical meaning as well as evaluative epithets with negative semantics. E.g. Senator Ted Cruz’s saying about his then rival Donald Trump:

*I want to be crystal clear: these attacks are garbage. For Donald J. Trump to enlist his friends at the National Enquirer and his political henchmen to do his bidding shows you that there is no low Donald won’t go.*

*These smears are completely false, they’re offensive to Heidi and me, they’re offensive to our daughters, and they’re offensive to everyone Donald continues to personally attack.*

*Donald Trump’s consistently disgraceful behavior is beneath the office we are seeking and we are not going to follow* [14].

For the nomination of Trump’s actions Cruz uses the noun *garbage* to make it sound as derogatory as possible, underlining his lack of respect for the opponent. Senator accuses Trump of unfair campaigning, abuse of his influence on mass media and spreading gossips. Trump’s supporters are pejoratively nominated as *henchmen*. This lexical unit is often used in English to refer to gangbangers or governmental officials in countries with a dictatorial regime. Discursive elements *do his bidding* and
there is no low Donald won’t go aim at showing Trump’s questionable past in business, accusing him of breaking laws and unfair games.

The second paragraph contains syntactical parallelism, which intensifies persuasive pragmatic impact on voters and allows the speaker to pose as a victim of foul play in politics. To sum it up, Cruz uses the tactics of blaming to create a negative image of his opponent, giving a negative characteristics of his actions and behaviour, but avoiding direct insults. Careful implementation of a conflictual communicative strategy gives Cruz an opportunity to contrastively juxtapose himself to the political rival and highlight his own honesty and ethics.

To set a negative image of an opponent in the minds of the audience, politicians often use the so-called "labels", manifested in

- metaphors with a negative evaluative component of meaning, e.g.: Senator Obama suspended those requests for pork-barrel projects after he was running for president of the United States. He didn't happen to see that light during the first three years as a member of the United States Senate, $932 million in requests [15]. Metaphor pork-barrel projects is used to denounce corrupted laws, passed when Barack Obama was a senator. Discursive element see the light stresses shortsightedness and hypocrisy of the future President as he noticed mistakes of the Senate only during his presidential campaign and not before.

- pejorative language units, e.g.: President Obama is acting like the playground bully who, when he can't have everything he wants, decides to take his ball and go home. (...) I ask President Obama not to divide us further by acting like an imperial president [16]. Obama is compared to a playground bully and then to a leader of an empire (an imperial president). The use of pejoratives makes it easy to accuse the president of insufficiently democratic views and incorrect political behaviour. Element I ask belongs to the communicative tactics of reproach aimed at changing the situation to the speaker’s advantage.

- dysphemisms, e.g.: The blood on George W. Bush’s hands will never dry. Don’t glorify this man, (...) For liberals across the spectrum, the temptation is real to lionize George W Bush now. Donald Trump is our child-king, slobbering over the country and embarrassing us all. He is parody made real, a lackey for rightwing billionaires everywhere [17]. Former president of the United States George W. Bush is compared with the current head of state Donald Trump. Slightly transformed idiom blood on George W. Bush’s hands replaces a neutral to be guilty of and points out that Bush is responsible for 9/11 terrorist acts and the war in Iraq. Elevated lexeme to lionize is used in a negative meaning to show that liberals generally overestimate the former president. Trump is nominated as child-king, parody made real and a lackey for rightwing billionaires to make recipients believe in the president’s inefficiency and inability to rule the country.

When American politicians want to avoid legal prosecution for their words or an international scandal, they tend to use the tactics of impersonal blaming. In this case the speaker doesn’t call the accused person by his / her name, instead using deictic constructions, generalizing expressions or words with wider context. Consider the following examples:

- Deictic constructions: Those in powers seek to undermine every institution or norm that gives democracy meaning [18]. Former president of the US blames his successor Donald Trump for the failure of democratic institutions and outdated political views. Conventional communicative norms of “classical” political discourse forbid naming the criticized members of the current administration, so Obama has to resort to impersonal blaming as the tactics of fulfilling the strategic plan.

- Generalizing expressions: What we can’t have is the same old politics of division that we have seen so many times before that dates back centuries. Some of the politics we see now, we thought we put that to bed. That has folks looking 50 years back. It’s the 21st century, not the 19th century. Come on! [18]

- Words with wider context: The Chinese Envoy, who just returned from North Korea, seems to have had no impact on Little Rocket Man. Hard to believe his people, and the military, put up with living in such horrible conditions [19]. Donald Trump calls Kim Jong-Un a Little Rocket man, which doesn’t seemingly have a negative colouring. But if you dig deeper and look at the macrocontext, such nomination may be regarded as mockery. Discursive element Little hints at the Korean leader’s infantile character and small height, whereas Rocket Man becomes a dysphemism for a madman due to the North Korean nuclear weapons scandal not long ago.
It is important for teachers to raise students’ awareness of diverse tactics, acceptable in modern American political discourse: blaming, threatening, discrediting, sarcasm and many others. Each tactic has to be thoroughly analyzed to see how the English language works in various communicative situations of conflict and understand which linguistic means are the most efficient.

Step 3 is applying the knowledge of communicative tactics in a simulated extralinguistic environment, making dialogues, role-playing real-life conflictual communicative situations, having classroom debates on pressing issues of modern political agenda.

4 CONCLUSION

Having analyzed the teaching practice at Moscow State Institute of International Relations and all major difficulties future diplomats, statesmen and specialists in cross-cultural interaction encounter when they try to plan their speech and predict their English-speaking opponents’ moves in a conflictual situation, we come to the conclusion that elements of functional-linguistic analysis during reading and listening activities in the classroom help students see through the surface of discursive structures, absorbing semantic and pragmatic nuances of the functional perspective. If properly applied to the educational process, functional linguistic theory can enrich teaching experience and deliver impressive results by enhancing necessary skills of EFL learners.

REFERENCES


