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Political Language and Discourse: Western and Russian Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This article undertakes a comparative examination of the evolution and defining characteristics of political language studies within Western and Russian academic traditions. It foregrounds Harold Lasswell's seminal contributions, positioning him as a foundational figure whose work reconceptualized language as an instrument of political power rather than a neutral medium of exchange. In Western scholarship, political discourse analysis has emerged as a multidisciplinary enterprise, increasingly informed by critical discourse analysis (CDA), which interrogates the latent power structures encoded in linguistic practices. By contrast, the Russian approach—still in a developmental phase—remains shaped by the ideological and methodological legacy of Soviet linguistics, albeit with growing receptivity to Western theoretical paradigms. Particular attention is devoted to the rhetorical function of metaphor in totalitarian discourse, illustrating how symbolic language operates as a vehicle of ideological reinforcement within Soviet and analogous regimes. Through a synthesis of Western and post-Soviet perspectives, the article advocates for a more integrative global framework for the study of political discourse.

Keywords: political language, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, metaphor in political discourse, power and ideology

INTRODUCTION

Political language plays a critical role in shaping public opinion, legitimising authority, and constructing ideological narratives. Across different cultural and political systems, the nature and function of political discourse vary significantly, reflecting broader societal values and power structures. In Western democracies, political language is often framed around principles such as transparency, individual rights, and institutional critique. Rhetoric in these contexts tends to be more pluralistic and media-driven, with an emphasis on persuasive strategies tailored to diverse electorates. Political actors in the West frequently rely on appeals to democratic norms, policy expertise, and emotional resonance to mobilise support and maintain legitimacy.

In contrast, the Russian tradition of political discourse is deeply influenced by historical, ideological, and cultural legacies, including the Soviet experience and the centralised role of the state. Russian political language often employs more hierarchical, collectivist, and nationalistic tones, with a focus on stability, sovereignty, and unity. The use of metaphor, euphemism, and

strategic ambiguity is common, serving both to consolidate power and to navigate internal and external threats. Comparing Western and Russian approaches reveals not only linguistic and rhetorical differences, but also fundamental divergences in political communication styles, identity construction, and conceptions of governance. Understanding these distinctions is essential for meaningful intercultural dialogue and geopolitical analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The Evolution of Political Language Studies in the West

Western scholarship generally credits Harold Lasswell with inaugurating the study of political language as a distinct field of inquiry. His theoretical interventions reshaped prevailing understandings of language by demonstrating its capacity to construct political realities rather than merely reflect them. Among Lasswell's most frequently cited insights is the notion that stylistic shifts in political discourse may presage systemic instability or signal the erosion of democratic norms. Such observations underscore the diagnostic potential of linguistic analysis within political contexts.

Since Lasswell's foundational work, the study of political discourse in Western academia has matured into a methodologically diverse and institutionally established field, integrating insights from political science, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and critical discourse analysis. Researchers have systematically explored how political actors manipulate rhetorical strategies, metaphorical frameworks, and lexical selections to shape public perception, assert legitimacy, and consolidate authority. These scholarly traditions have been formalized through dedicated academic programs, specialized journals, and cross-disciplinary research networks throughout Europe and North America.

Nevertheless, these intellectual developments remain relatively underexplored within post-Soviet academic contexts. The enduring influence of Soviet-era linguistics—with its predominant emphasis on grammar and stylistics—has limited the conceptual space available for critical engagement with political language. A notable exception is the volume edited by Patrick Serio (1999), which introduces the French tradition of political lexicology to a Russian-speaking audience. This work offers valuable methodological tools for understanding how political meaning is linguistically constructed and provides an important point of reference for comparative inquiry.

The increasing scholarly interest in political discourse across culturally and linguistically diverse environments signals a pressing need to foster dialogic engagement between Western and post-Soviet frameworks. Such cross-traditional interaction not only enriches the analytical repertoire available to scholars but also facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the role of language in mediating political transformation on a global scale.

The institutionalization of political linguistics in the West has also prompted a reconceptualization of what constitutes "political discourse." Drawing on E. I. Sheygal's model (1998) —which differentiates between core and peripheral elements—one observes a substantial expansion in scope, attributable to the erosion of conventional genre boundaries. While earlier studies were primarily concerned with prototypical genres of political communication—such as parliamentary debates, public addresses, and official policy documents—contemporary research increasingly encompasses hybrid forms, including political advertising, autobiographical writings by statespersons, televised debates, roundtable discussions, and various media discourses. Moreover, there is a growing scholarly inclination to interpret any public utterance as potentially political, insofar as public language use invariably implicates relations of power.

Within political science, the conceptual linkage between politics and power renders political language a privileged site for critical interrogation. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) positions language not as a neutral conduit of information, but as a social practice through which structures of domination, inequality, and exclusion are reproduced (Fairclough, 1995). Central to CDA is the premise that linguistic forms are not ideologically innocent; rather, they function as mechanisms through which authority is naturalized and dissent is delegitimized.

Fairclough (1995) argues that political discourse plays a central role in the construction of ideological consensus and the legitimization of institutional power. In parallel, van Dijk (2006) conceptualizes political language as a discursive apparatus that sustains hegemonic power through the normalization of hierarchical social relations. These ideological operations are often subtle and implicit, embedded in lexical choices and discourse structures that obscure asymmetries of power.

For any political discourse, ideology is the pillar, both in terms of domestic and foreign policy. But the priorities obviously change, depending on the context in which the ideology exists. We have already mentioned van Dijk's views on the formation of ideology in political discourse; according to him, each ideology, despite its universal nature, depends for its existence on the concrete political culture (Mammadov, 2010).

Wodak and Meyer (2009) further emphasize that CDA is particularly attuned to the covert ways in which language perpetuates systemic inequalities. Through the analysis of political speeches, media narratives, and other communicative genres, researchers are able to reveal how ostensibly neutral linguistic practices contribute to the maintenance of dominant ideologies.

Phil Chilton (2004) underscores the necessity of situating political discourse within its sociohistorical context, arguing that language functions as a constitutive force in shaping collective perception and political subjectivity. This analytical expansion—reflected in the inclusion of media texts, advertising, and hybrid genres—marks the broadening remit of contemporary political discourse studies (van Leeuwen, 2008).

In sum, critical discourse analysis provides indispensable conceptual and methodological tools for interrogating political language as a conduit of power. It enables scholars to deconstruct the discursive strategies through which authority is exercised, contested, and inscribed within everyday communicative practices.

2. Political Discourse Studies in Russia: Contexts, Challenges, and Metaphorical Dimensions

The study of political discourse in Russia has evolved within a socio-political and linguistic framework shaped by the country's complex historical, cultural, and ideological trajectories. Russian scholarship in this field reflects a hybridized paradigm, simultaneously informed by Western theoretical models and indigenous traditions rooted in Soviet-era linguistics and rhetorical practice. This dual inheritance has produced a distinctive analytical lens through which Russian political communication is conceptualized and studied.

Contemporary Russian research frequently focuses on the discursive construction of political reality within official state rhetoric, political speeches, media narratives, and public discourse more broadly. Particular attention is devoted to the intersections of language and ideology, the deployment of metaphor and symbolism, and the rhetorical strategies employed to legitimize authority or contest hegemonic narratives.

Given the constraints of historical and institutional development, political discourse analysis in Russia has only begun to gain significant scholarly traction over the past decade and a half. While the field of political linguistics is still in its formative

stages, a number of foundational Russian-language studies have emerged. These tend, however, to adopt broad and generalizing approaches, and thus fall short of compensating for the relative scarcity of detailed, micro-level analyses of specific spoken or written texts. By contrast, Western discourse studies are characterized by methodologically rigorous investigations of narrowly defined corpora—often consisting of transcribed oral interactions—allowing for fine-grained linguistic analysis that incorporates prosodic, and occasionally paralinguistic, dimensions.

Such analytical precision necessitates a command of notational systems for representing spoken language in textual form, as well as a capacity for interpretive depth and methodological transparency. For Russian-speaking scholars, a point of access to these methodological practices is provided by the Minsk-based collective monograph series Methodology of Political Discourse Research: Current Issues in the Content Analysis of Socio-Political Texts (Sarna, 2000), which introduces both qualitative and quantitative approaches to contemporary political and media discourse.

Among the most theoretically productive areas of political discourse analysis in Russia is the study of metaphor. Metaphor is approached not merely as a stylistic device but as a discursive mechanism capable of generating new meanings, shaping ideological frameworks, and eliciting emotional engagement. This function is particularly salient in totalitarian regimes, where metaphor operates as a semiotic infrastructure underpinning the mythologization of political reality. Eleonora Lassahn's Discourse of Power and Dissent in the USSR: A Cognitive-Rhetorical Analysis (Lassan,1995) offers an exemplary treatment of this phenomenon. She argues that ideologically structured consciousness in the Soviet context was undergirded by binary oppositions—such as individualism versus altruism, communism versus anti-communism—that were systematically actualized through metaphorical mappings. These metaphors unfold into larger cognitive scenarios, evoking conceptual frames that organize and stabilize political meaning.

A particularly salient metaphorical domain within totalitarian discourse is the military. Irrespective of genre, the metaphor of perpetual warfare occupies a central discursive position. A scholar of Stalinist literature, for instance, contends that the metaphor of "the world as war" saturates the semantic field of Soviet political culture: "War is the natural and ever-desired environment-context of totalitarian culture" (Dobrenko, 1993). Tracing Soviet literature from the 1930s to the 1950s, the author demonstrates how the motif of permanent war supplanted the earlier revolutionary imaginary, ultimately crystallizing into the ideology of the "struggle for peace."

Equally prominent during the Stalinist era were familial metaphors such as Motherland-mother, father of peoples, brotherly nations, and sister republics. These metaphorical constructs exemplify a broader strategy of substituting social relations with familial ones—an approach that Lassan interprets as rooted in the patriarchal underpinnings of totalitarian culture. On a deeper psychological level, such metaphors served to compensate for existential anxieties and the human longing for belonging, offering symbolic inclusion within an imagined kinship network orchestrated by the state (Dobrenko, 1993).

Victor Klemperer's (1998) work offers a compelling comparative framework for analyzing linguistic strategies in totalitarian regimes. In his observations on the German language of the Third Reich, Klemperer identifies a pattern of emotional intensification and exalted diction, which closely parallels Dobrenko's characterization of Soviet literature in the 1930s. (Dobrenko, 1993) A shared discursive feature is the prevalence of superlative semantics, evident in expressions such as great, best, total, unique, nationwide, world-historical, unrepeatable, countless (in reference to

enemy losses), world power, and The world listens to the Führer. These lexical choices function ideologically by amplifying affective resonance and asserting symbolic grandeur.

Klemperer also identifies the proliferation of technical metaphors applied to human activity and identity, such as depicting individuals as engines running at full capacity or describing social cohesion through phrases like well-tuned management and under full load. Comparable insights emerge in the work of A. N. Baranov, who observes a discursive transition in post-revolutionary Russia from organic metaphors—drawn from nature and the human body—to mechanistic metaphors rooted in engineering, machinery, and industrial rationality. As Baranov notes (1991), "One of the most important tasks in changing public consciousness after October 1917 was the attempt to reconcile the organic mode of thinking… with the mechanistic, rational thinking fixed in metaphors of mechanisms, construction, machines, engines, etc." This ideological shift is encapsulated in the oft-cited Soviet slogan: "*Our mind gave us steel arms-wings, and instead of a heart—a fiery motor.*"

CONCLUSION

The analysis of political language has undergone substantial theoretical and methodological expansion within Western academic traditions, where Harold Lasswell is recognized as a seminal figure in framing language as a key instrument of political agency. Western scholarship has progressively extended the domain of political discourse analysis beyond the boundaries of institutional communication, embracing a wide array of public texts and discursive genres. The integration of critical discourse analysis has further enabled scholars to interrogate the latent power structures embedded in linguistic practices, revealing how discourse functions to legitimize authority, naturalize social hierarchies, and sustain ideological dominance.

By contrast, political linguistics in the Russian context remains in a relatively formative phase, marked by the confluence of Soviet-era linguistic paradigms and contemporary Western theoretical frameworks. While Russian researchers have made notable contributions—particularly in the analysis of state rhetoric and media discourse—the field continues to grapple with the limited availability of detailed, empirically grounded studies of spoken political language. This methodological lacuna constrains the development of nuanced insights into the performative and multimodal dimensions of political communication.

Metaphor emerges as a particularly salient analytic lens in the study of totalitarian discourse. As demonstrated through Soviet-era rhetoric, metaphor operates not only as a rhetorical embellishment but as a structuring device that encodes ideological binaries and elicits affective identification. Military and familial metaphors, in particular, serve as discursive technologies for reinforcing collective loyalty, emotional cohesion, and hierarchical authority. Comparative observations—such as those drawn from the linguistic landscape of the Third Reich—underscore the shared features of totalitarian discourse: its emotive intensification, mechanistic metaphorical structures, and reliance on superlative semantics.

This article has underscored the necessity of fostering sustained intellectual exchange between Western and post-Soviet traditions in political discourse analysis. Such cross-cultural engagement holds the potential to enrich the global understanding of how language constitutes political reality, mediates power relations, and shapes ideological worldviews across diverse sociopolitical contexts.

Declaration by Authors

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