From Conflict of Interpretations to a Fratricidal War

Asia Khilkovska

Abstract: *The author reviews the case of a military conflict which broke out in Europe in 2014 with the aim to analyze the role of the Media and their extensive use of the language of conflict in fueling the confrontation. The article dwells upon a special role of mass communication media in heating up "sleeping" antagonisms in society by using potentially contentious language (further named "the language of conflict") in social and political discourse, by consistent "constructing history" in public perception and provoking "conflicts of interpretations". Communication strategies by which the language of conflict manifests itself in the texts of social and political journalism are reviewed in the paper, which may be used as a system of early warning signals of potential confrontations in society.*

Keywords: discourse, conflict, language of conflict, communication strategies

There has been a lot of concern and debate about "fake news", a recent survey having questioned 50 Nobel Prize winners rate the problem among the top ten world's most serious and urgent problems. British education officials are particular about teaching young people as early as in secondary schools to work with information from different sources, check its validity, tell true from fake, facts from opinions.

Topicality of the issue is the feature of information-oriented society we are living in, with a bigger role and power of a word, a text, no matter written or pronounced. We can observe torrents of information cause and settle conflicts, legitimize social changes, promote populist ideas and simple solutions by inculcating certain values into public conscience.

With this special role of mass communication media the term "fake news" goes beyond fictitious pieces of information thrown into public discourse by some media, and fictitious information doesn't seem to be the biggest problem, Public conscience is being manipulated with other more sophisticated and subtle (language and non-language) instruments, which are harder to spot, impossible to disprove (refute) and very difficult to resist. One of the most efficient and called-for manipulation strategies is "constructing conflict" using potentially contentious language (further named "the language of conflict") in social and political discourse.

"Constructing conflict" in public discourse is a way to draw attention to certain aspects of everyday life of society; to have a pretext for breaking common everyday practices and transition to some new ones, to promote and legitimize social changes in society. (*The idea of "Overtone window" says that conflicts change a framework of normality in society bringing out things unacceptable in public discussion hitherto* [4]*.*)

And, unfortunately, in Europe of 2014 we had bloody fratricidal war stirred up and inflamed by extensive and deliberate use of the language of conflict in public discourse, which made people take up arms literally and get involved into a military confrontation they couldn't have ever foreseen. This case is worth looking into as it gives a very clear picture of the language of conflict involved in "constructing history", provoking "conflict of interpretations" and contributing to forming new identities (or "fabrication of identities").

As "the language of conflict" is engaged in "constructing conflicts" by heating up "sleeping" antagonisms in society, being, therefore, a powerful tool of manipulation in the hands of politicians, this research is aimed to study the language of conflict as both means of communication and means of interpretation.

Texts of social and political journalism which serve as factual material for our analysis have been drawn from printed and Internet media (dated 2013/14/15) and whose target audience included Russian-language information recipients all over the former USSR.

Language of conflict manifests itself by a high level of "agonism" (as a linguistic term, it comes from the Greek word "agon" - competition, contest, dispute, conflict) typical for such genres of political discourse as slogans, streamers and political debate [5]. Agonistic language of these genres is relevant and fully justified by the major function of the texts (to defeat the opponent), whereas it comes as a disturbing signal when seen in news bulletins (supposed to inform) or editorials (expected to provide serious analyses), etc.

The shift of social and political journalism towards the language of conflict results in a stealth genre confusion, when texts supposed to inform and analyze, compare opinions or give factual information turn into highly agonistic, emotional pieces, appealing to readers with the goal of making them "take sides", leaving them no opportunity to stay neutral. Gradually we end up in such information context where all texts covering particular touchy issues reach a very high level of emotional tension, making discussion no longer possible. (Consumers of information in the Russian Federation and in those parts of Ukraine where they traditionally were within the reach of Russian television and printed media became aware of the shift only after political temperature in the country had reached the point that made texts almost impossible to read and TV programmes – to watch due to accelerating aggression.)

Agonism as a super strategy is achieved by applying a number of communication strategies; concept modification is one of them. Its mechanism can be described as breaking

existing semantic bonds and associations and building new ones instead by categorising (identifying or contrasting) objects of the same kind. For instance, at a certain point the Government of Ukraine started being referred to as *"Киевская хунта"* *(junta, Kyiv junta),* calling for interpretation desired and expected by the author, thus a purpose of agonistic language "to imbed new propositions into the knowledge structure of information recipient" [5, p.145] was achieved.

Linguists talk about notional and figurative categorization (depending which component of a concept (notional or imaginal/figurative) is modified

Some more examples of notional categorization:
*the change of political power in Ukraine in 2014 is described as *"переворот*, *военный переворот, захват власти"* (coup, coup d'etat, military coup, seizure of power), "***так называемая*** *революция достоинства*" (the "**so called** revolution of dignity"), suggesting that the opponent's categorization is faulty, defective),

*people fighting to separate their regions from Ukraine are named "*ополченцы*" (members of the volunteer corps) – the word firmly associated in the knowledge structure of native speakers with those who volunteered to join the Soviet Army during the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945),

*appearance of Russian military forces on Ukrainian territory is nothing but "*защита соотечественников"* (fellow countrymen defense).

So notional categorization works with the notional component of a concept: certain slots of meaning in the concept's frame are actualized, therefore, remaining within the frame of the concept, the idea changes in recipient's perception.

Figurative categorization exploits figurative components of certain concepts with the purpose of creating some metaphoric denominations and building broader metaphors on their basis. The fundamental metaphor of the conflict under discussion is that people who stood for European integration of Ukraine and against president Yanukovich were called "*бандеровцы*" ("banderovtsi" – the supporters of Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) which functioned in Western Ukraine until about 1956 and was named after its founder and leader Stepan Bandera – a controversial figure in Ukrainian history). Later, largely due to Soviet history textbooks, the metaphoric meaning of the term was extended and has been for decades applied to all people and organizations which declared independence of Ukraine as their goal. In spoken language the term has acquired an even broader meaning: anyone speaking Ukrainian, keen on Ukrainian art or History, critical of the Soviet regime could be "branded" as a nationalist or "banderovets". So historically, "banderovtsi" have always been a label of enemies, no wonder, it was and is used widely in the conflict discourse:

"…*бандеровцы едут к вам*" (banderovtsi" are coming),
"*на всем Юго-Востоке Украины начались митинги против бандеровской власти*' (everywhere in the South-

East of Ukraine rallies against the power of "banderovtsi" have broken out).

The metaphoric discourse of the current military conflict in Ukraine is a good illustration to a phenomenon of a metaphor realization / actualization: metaphors replacing facts and developing into an extensive metaphoric image "*Великая Отечественная Война продолжается"* *(*The Great Patriotic War is still going on*)* which unites all the above mentioned concepts in a very familiar and recognizable story calling for predictable interpretation and emotional response.

As we can see, both notional and figurative categorization modify value orientation of a concept, its interpretation (as positive or negative) is based on value orientations in society and "knowledge" (experience gained and passed down to an individual by parents and teachers) and is, therefore, predictable.

To serve "constructing conflict" purposes the label "banderovtsi" was cleverly selected. In Soviet History course books the controversial phenomenon of OUN has been reduced to a number of very negative associations / properties: nationalism, anti-Semitism, collaboration with fascists, while features, facts or figures unrelated to or contradicting this monochrome image have been subdued, understated or silenced completely. These texts contributed to identity formation of several generations of Soviet and Russian students, so emergence of the term in political journalism was bound to cause a "conflict of interpretations" and was intentionally used to provoke real conflicts on different levels. A great lot of information recipients all over the former USSR were ready (and happy) to interpret new pieces of information about Ukraine in Mass Media so they fit into a "bigger picture" they already had embedded in their knowledge (or even in their identity).

Giving your enemy a strategically "right" name is important part of "constructing conflict". Image of the enemy and its mobilization potential is exploited to divide society into groups and stimulate solidarity within a group by associating the "WE" side with positive values whereas the enemy side - the "They", is presented as contradicting the unanimously acknowledged human values.

The enemy – often an extensive group of people or even the citizens of a whole country – are ascribed dehumanizing attributes, examples of the enemy's inhumane behaviour, which claim to be documentary, are presented in abundance:
*"*бандеровцы в Харькове напали на участников шествия*…" ("banderovtsi" have attacked the demonstration),
*"*не помню, кто и когда, но они сказали, что казакам будут отрезать головы*" (don't remember who and where, but they threatened to cut off cossack's heads).

Information recipients are expected to perceive it not in metaphoric but in its direct sense, denoting something that presents a real threat and calls for immediate counteraction.

The "WE" side, on the contrary, is endowed with all possible virtues. Thus, the Russian military action in the

East of Ukraine was declared to have been started "*…для спасения русских на Донбассе*" (to rescue the Russians in Donbas) – a noble aim, which can justify the use of arms against "the offenders".

Being on "the right side" of a conflict fuels a comfortable feeling of pride for supporting "The Good" against "The Evil" in information recipients, this is the feeling readers of social and political journalism often seek. In the conflict under discussion political journalism exploited the view that being anti-fascist is purely and unconditionally good, no matter who is called a fascist.

Agonistic texts build and consistently accentuate the "We against Them" opposition, e.g.: "*они убивают ... неужели мы должны смотреть? (***They** kill…should **we** just stand and watch?*)*, the implication being: it's "them"," the enemy" that is to be blamed for the aggravation of the conflict and all its negative consequences.

 A warning signal of the language of conflict being taken as arms by certain mass media, political groups or even country governments is a genre shift with a hard-edged agonistic language typical of genres like political debate penetrating other types of social and political discourse not normally associated with the goals and functions of agonistic vernacular and supposed to convey information, opinion in public debate or serious analysis.

This super-strategy manifests itself in a set of strategies, like:
- modification of concepts by notional and figurative categorization, forming new labels and clichés, thus, changing value emphases,
- creating a deliberate artificial "We – They" opposition, in which the "WE" side is endowed with virtues, whereas the "enemy side" is to blame for all the evils of this world, including the conflict in question;
- ascribing dehumanizing attributes to large groups of people, including nations, in order to create an image of "the enemy";
- falsifying the documentary validity of texts by repeatedly publishing unverifiable "real stories";
- intrusive repetition of newly invented labels as a part of a well-organised "brain-washing" campaign in order to familiarize the readers with them, thus making them acceptable in public discussion;
- manipulating direct and metaphoric meanings of words to create a new reality and a new perception of a phenomenon or situation.

With the help of the above-mentioned strategies, the author deliberately raises the emotional "temperature" of a text (or a public discussion, read "discourse") bringing it to an exaggerated dramatic peak.

Joseph Overton [4], the author of the "Overton Window" (window of discourse concept) argues that the very moment when first signals of "constructing conflict" emerge in public discourse can be spotted. Through multiple repetition of newly modified concepts (such as "*ополченцы*", "*защита соотечественников*", "*бандеровская власть*" (members of the volunteer corps, fellow countrymen

defense, power of "banderovtsi")) the framework of what is acceptable for public discussion in society changes.

For instance, even the possibility of a military conflict between Russia and Ukraine had been impossible to picture and believe, so to a lot of people, in both Ukraine and Russia, the first mention of "fascists in Ukraine" was absolutely marginal (in other words, it was beyond the framework of acceptable), information recipients refused to take it seriously. But it was the first stage of opening a new "window of discourse", a new window of acceptable, discussable and understandable. Gradually, with the anti-Ukrainian campaign in the Russian media accelerating, with abundant use of the concepts already mentioned in the paper, the idea took roots and soon became firmly established within the range of the acceptable. Constructing conflict takes place not only in legitimate discourse, the extent to which the language of conflict translated by legitimate media is adopted in everyday communication is the measure of how efficient the strategy has been [2].

Here is a conversation the author of this paper personally overheard in Kharkiv soon after the events of 2014 in Ukraine (originally the conversation was in Russian):
- *Do you still support the new government authorities?*
- *I do, actually.*
- *How can you support these people? They killed our grandparents*!

A metaphoric picture of the conflict constructed in legitimate discourse seem to be taken as real by information recipients who identify themselves with one of the conflicting sides, and being metaphoric deprives the other side of a chance to refute, contradict or counter argue. Did THEY (the new Ukrainian government) actually *kill* anybody? Very unlikely, and, definitely, not our contemporaries' grandparents. The phrase was used figuratively, its real message probably being: "The political forces that came to power in Ukraine descend from the organizations of Ukrainian nationalists which are known to have collaborated with the Nazi occupation forces during WW II, therefore, we can't support them". If the arguments were phrased this way, the view could be opposed and some well-reasoned counter-arguments could be provided, but no well-reasoned counter-arguments would carry much weight against the hypnotic power of the metaphor.

The language of conflict is involved in "constructing conflicts" by linguistic means, which becomes apparent in the role it plays in
1) Provoking conflicts, stirring protest behaviour,
2) Developing images of enemies,
3) Changing value interpretations of socially significant events,
4) Affecting the framework of acceptable/unacceptable,
5) Legitimizing social changes,
6) Contributing to formation of new identities,
7) Modeling social interaction with the help of some verbal constructs [2, p.81].

This phenomenon is the object of research in Sociology (or Lingua sociology), and it seems useful to study it as a type

of discourse to detect its warning signals as early as possible.

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