

DISCURSIVE MECHANISMS OF LEGITIMIZATION: FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper aims to introduce a framework for interdisciplinary analysis in history, political science and linguistics. When governments pursue a controversial foreign policy and are fully aware of the potential negative domestic and international reception, one of the tools to create consent with the policies is the use of the discursive legitimizing mechanisms. Inspired by Frankfurt school and critical linguistics the paper presents specific mechanisms that could be used for legitimizing problematic foreign policy strategies.

Keywords: United States, Foreign Policy, Legitimization, Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction

Foreign policy strategy of any government in the world does not necessarily have to correspond with the contemporary zeitgeist in the domestic electorate or international community. The U.S. administrations, most prominently during the cold war era, considered the democracy promotion and also good governance in the world as an inseparable part of the foreign policy strategy. However, the United States consequently provided extended military and other assistance to authoritarian and non-democratic regimes. The U.S. political elites have been fully aware of the fact that such support and strategy towards authoritarian regimes as a whole would have been perceived highly excessive and illegitimate both domestically and internationally. It might be assumed that administrations had to invest some effort to create public consent with controversial foreign policy strategies.

The role of language in foreign policy analysis has already been studied by many prominent scholars. Constructivists, post-structuralists and others do not consider language just as a tool to describe or to facilitate a

communication. According to them language has also a performative force that could discursively contract the reality.

Sometimes the foreign policy strategy is considered so illegitimate by domestic and international audience that it has to be discursively adjusted to become acceptable. Language could be one of the extremely powerful tools to legitimize such foreign policy strategies. This paper aims to introduce a framework how to deconstruct the discursive mechanisms the administrations used for legitimization of own policies.

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The paper works with an assumption that the U.S. administrations have been creating images, initially consciously and later unconsciously (Yurchak, 2013), about the foreign authoritarian regimes, have used sophisticated linguistic mechanisms to enforce consent with the foreign policy strategy, to avoid accusation of hypocrisy and general criticism, and therefore have been discursively constructing desirable social consciousness about an allied authoritarian regime.

- Based on the assumption that language is not just a mean of communication, but it inherently includes a performative power to construct a reality (Berger and Luckmann, 2011), and drawing from the speech act theory (Austin, 1975), considering the reconceptualization within the IR theory (Onuf, 1989), the linguistic methods used by U.S. political elites could be deconstructed by performing a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak, 1989, van Dijk, 2008).

- If the foreign policy strategy found itself at risk of having lack of legitimacy, political elites could use various methods of legitimization through discourse. Inspired by four key legitimization strategies - authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, mythopoesis - (Van Leeuwen, 2007), reconceptualization of mechanisms could be suggested to deconstruct the propaganda meta-model (Herman and Chomsky, 2011; Ellul, 1973) in the U.S. foreign policy discourse more accurately.

- To find an answer to the question how did the U.S. political elites discursively legitimized the foreign policy towards authoritarian regimes in front of its own electorate and international community, and thus created a public consent with the morally hazardous policy, main legitimization approaches could be suggested as follows:

- Legitimization through dichotomization. The discourse based on construction of “them” and “us” dichotomization is one of the most prominent legitimizing mechanisms (Rojo, van Dijk, 1997). Political elites discursively place their opponents into effectively negative light whose rogue characteristics allow using various appropriate measures.

- Legitimization through moralization (moral evaluation). Legitimacy could be enhanced by appealing to personal moral values very closely associated with “good” or “bad” dichotomization (Van Leeuwen, 1997). Metaphoric terms to attach value or goodness to the policy necessarily reflect the socio-historical discursive system which the legitimization operates in.
- Legitimization through authorization (expertization). Political elites refer to selectively determined expert community whose opinions are in accordance with desired discursively constructed reality (Reyes, 2011), adding credibility to morally hazardous foreign policy.
- Legitimization through demonization. Those individuals or nations with viewpoints different from desirable discourse could be described as immoral or destructive to inspire hatred. Discursive dehumanization could be suggested as legitimization mechanism as well.
- Legitimization through euphemization. Use of specific words or expressions to reduce the unpleasant connotation with the original meaning could enhance the policy legitimacy accordingly.
- Legitimization through exaggeration. The use of hyperbole in the text or speech is one of the linguistic tools the political elites could benefit from if the statement is essentially correct, but only to a certain degree (Cole, 1998).
- Legitimization through association. Political elites could often use an inductive fallacy that works with on the premises of first-order logic, providing the audience with the impression that characteristics of one individual or group are inherently characteristics of another. If premise $A = B$ and also $A = C$, therefore all $Bs = Cs$, which could represent fully irrelevant association.
- Legitimization through rationalization. Drawing from the political-cultural context political elites explain the policy as a „right“ thing to do and the administration implements the policy after the profound deliberation, which add more legitimacy than any rushed solution (Reyes, 2011).
- Legitimization through oversimplification. Foreign policy with its all social, economic, diplomatic and military aspects represents a complex structure difficult to be explained by political elites. Provision of general and simple answers to general audience could eventually cover some problematic particularities.
- Legitimization through stereotypization. The stereotyping is commonly used to instigate a particular stance within the target audience, to present the object of problematic foreign policy in a positive or negative light.
- Legitimization through emotionalization. Discourses that appeal on people`s emotions could significantly help to create a public consent with

any policy. Particular expressions and lofty slogans have the performative power to arouse irrational tendencies within the audience (Reyes, 2011).

- Legitimization through hypothetical futurization. Political elites could discursively construct the relationship between the past, present and future. The discursively enforced action now would allow avoiding the repetition of the negative impact of past events (Reyes, 2011).

▪ While the list of the legitimization mechanisms introduced above is not naturally exhaustive, it could be considered as an example of general consensus among authors dealing with discursive legitimization, critical linguistics and social psychology.

Conclusion

Thorough history the United States discursively attaches its foreign policy towards human rights and democracy promotion in the world. Due to various geopolitical, economic, security and other reasons the support of foreign authoritarian or dictatorial regime became an utmost imperative. The discourse therefore has to be adjusted accordingly to make the controversial foreign policy strategy domestically and internationally legitimate. This framework is meant to be a part of the complex effort to analyze and deconstruct the discursive mechanisms of legitimization the political elites have at their disposal in order to introduce a meta-model which could be utilized for upcoming legitimization strategies.

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