

Mass media as a factor influencing the concepts semantic field

Os meios de comunicação de massa como fator de influência no campo semântico dos conceitos.

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Abstract: The given study focuses on the media influence on the worldview representation determined by the audience-induced changes in the semantic field of a concept. The aim of our research is to examine the media's effect on the core of the semantic field regarding the concept of conflict and single out the methods employed by a journalist to alter the semantic field of concepts and influence the audience's worldview. Lev Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory, Marshall McLuhan's media theory, and Lasswell's theoretical foundations on the potentiality of media to influence the audience's preferences are theoretical foundations for researching in this area. I conducted a four-stage study to define the way media content affects change the concept meaning by analysing the multidimensional concept «conflict» as an example. I exploited free listing methods, which were refined to accomplish my goal, data collection, and analysis methods as diagnostic instruments and conducted the survey among 88 students of the State University of Telecommunication (Kiev, Ukraine). The experimental studies showed that even after a short period of intense media impact, a tested subject admitted the significant change in his point of view on the current events. The obtained results give grounds for further quantitative research to scrutinize the media impact on the audience's worldview.

Keywords: mass media influence; semantic field; conflicts alter the concept's meaning; audience's worldview.

Resumo: O presente estudo enfoca a influência da mídia na representação da visão de mundo determinada pelas mudanças induzidas pela audiência no campo semântico de um conceito. O objetivo de nossa pesquisa é examinar o efeito da mídia no cerne do campo semântico em relação ao conceito de conflito e destacar os métodos empregados por um jornalista para alterar o campo semântico dos conceitos e influenciar a visão de mundo da audiência. A teoria histórico-cultural de Lev Vygotsky, a teoria da mídia de Marshall McLuhan e os fundamentos teóricos de Lasswell sobre a potencialidade da mídia para influenciar as preferências do público são fundamentos teóricos para pesquisas nessa área. Realizei um estudo de quatro etapas para definir a maneira como o conteúdo da mídia afeta a mudança do significado do conceito, analisando o conceito multidimensional «conflito» como exemplo. Explorei métodos de listagem livre, que foram refinados para atingir meu objetivo, coleta de dados e métodos de análise como instrumentos de diagnóstico e conduzi a pesquisa entre 88 estudantes da Universidade Estadual de Telecomunicações (Kiev, Ucrânia). Os estudos experimentais mostraram que, mesmo após um curto período de intenso impacto midiático, um sujeito testado admitiu a mudança significativa em seu ponto de vista sobre os eventos atuais. Os resultados obtidos dão base para novas pesquisas quantitativas para esmiuçar o impacto da mídia na visão de mundo do público.

Palavras-chave: influência da mídia de massa; campo semântico; conflitos alteram o significado do conceito; visão de mundo do público.

Introduction

Never before in human history has media played such an important role in society. In addition to providing information about current news, it has become a powerful tool for social influence and information dissemination.

Today, the negative effect of media on society and individuals has received much attention. Researchers are deeply concerned about propaganda and the manipulation of public opinion in media through the spreading of fake news, the use of hate speech, etc., which have become a pervasive part of our everyday life. Each of the aforementioned methods tends to employ linguistic and visual means of influence, the combination of which can trigger strong emotional responses in the audience and lead to active actions or cause violence. For instance, the role of the Rwandan media during the 1994 genocide is difficult to overestimate, as Hutu propagandists used both newspapers and the radio to disseminate ideas hostile to the Tutsi minority (Kirschke, 1996). As a result, in just 100 days, about 491,000–800,000 persons were killed in the mass slaughter (Meierhenrich, 2020).

Modern online media possesses more opportunities to incorporate written language and visual means to enhance influence. Thus, I analyse media's influence in the psycholinguistic context since language is the essential tool for conveying information, expressing journalists' views, and influencing public opinion. Additionally, I take into account non-linguistic factors, including cultural environment, social and economic status, political interests, and so on.

The current events that have created far-reaching tensions (i.e., the ongoing global pandemic of COVID-19, political conflicts, and hybrid wars) make it possible to speak about the influence of linguistic means, which, in combination with visual mediums, are widely exploited by journalists to affect consciousness, opinions, and attitudes towards people, ideas, or events. I regard propaganda and manipulation as the key methods of influence whose repeated exposure in various mass media and social networks has a negative impact on public opinion over time.

The paper aims at analysing the methods and techniques employed by a journalist to alter the

semantic field of concepts and influence the audience's worldview, as well as to examine the media's effect on the core of the semantic field regarding the *conflict* concept.

1. Theoretical framework

The media industry has become an issue of great importance after World War I, when media turned into the weapon of political warfare. The American political scientist Harold Dwight Lasswell investigated the propaganda influence during World War I. In his seminal work *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (Lasswell, 2013 [1938]), he viewed propaganda as a psychological weapon used by all conflict participant parties to influence public opinion. Moreover, Lasswell is famous for the 5W model of communication used as a basis for further media analysis. This model includes five questions as follows: 1) Who says; 2) What says; 3) to Whom says; 4) in What Channel and 5) with What Effect (Lasswell, 1948) that assist in clarifying the stakeholders of the attitude distribution.

A growing body of literature (Cantril & Herzog, 1940; Lazarsfeld, 1940; Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944; McLuhan, 1951, 1962; Zucker, 1978; Fromm, 2012 [1973]; Mutz, 1989; Habermas, 1985 [1988]; Herman & Chomsky, 2002 [1988]; McGuire, 1986; Browne & Keeley, 2007; Giles, 2003; Leontiev, 2008; McCombs, 2002; Wanta et al., 2004; Christen & Huberty, 2007; etc.) has examined the media influence on the audience's worldview and behaviour.

Many attempts have been made to highlight the positive impact of media, its informational and regulatory functions, the ability to expand the communication field and the mass media role in shaping public opinion (Leontiev, 2008; Habermas, 1985 [1988]).

Lazarsfeld (1940) Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet (1944) and McGuire (1986) considered media as a tool of political propaganda exploited by stakeholders to their advantage.

The propaganda model was advanced by Herman & Chomsky (2002 [1988]), who strongly believe that media is controlled by influential politicians and economically dominant corporations to serve their own

interests. In turn, Fromm (2012 [1973], 61) was convinced that the media psychological impact is based on emotions produced by such primitive stimuli as sex, narcissism, and destructiveness. Examining the impact of modern information technology, media psychologist Giles (2003) specifies the increasing role of social networks in shaping public opinion. In particular, the scholar emphasizes the supreme reign of celebrities on social media.

Browne & Keeley (2007) report on the rhetoric of propaganda speech that neither regards the argument's proposition or logic nor provides quantitative empirical evidence, thus becoming ambiguous and semantically overloaded. The authors give an example using words that mean a government payment to certain population segments: The terms *subsidy*, *incentive* and *welfare* that have positive and negative connotations, respectively, were employed to describe payments to different social groups.

The actual force exerted by media is proved by Welles' «War of the Worlds» broadcast on October 30, 1938, which is famous for causing mass panic among the audience. About 1 million listeners took the radio production as a real fact, so they started panicking, barricaded themselves in cellars, and even loaded their guns to combat the Martians (Schwartz & Brad, 2015; Cantril & Herzog, 1940).

The principal means of media influence is oral and written media products, which are widely distributed by contemporary Internet technology, television, and radio: audio and video stories, movies, text messages, etc. (Detector media, 2019; Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2021). To enhance the psychological impact, journalists frequently use verbal and written communication accompanied by video and audio.

Linguistic means are the key tools of the written media, as already mentioned. They are intensified by pictures and photos, while oral media enhances the impact of speech through the use of video, music, and a wide array of paralinguistic means, including tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, etc. Information (news) online agencies have the opportunity to combine written (text) and extra means (photos, videos, pictures, links, etc.), which provide them with technical tools to

influence and shape the public attitude regarding a certain event, person, or group of people. Texts formed by combining diverse means are referred to as creolized. Currently, this type of text is the most common in online sources, since the complex synthesis of content and form is aimed at creating imagery and evoking particular emotions (Sorokin, 1990, 180-186).

In linguistics, much work on the potential of speech propaganda and manipulation has been carried out by Bulygina & Shmelev (1997), Elswah & Howard (2020), Aronson & McGlone (2009), Rizun, Nepiyivoda & Kornieiev (2005), Arutyunova (1990), etc. McGlone, Beck & Pfiester (2006), Shmelev (2008), Keith & Burridge (1991), and others focus on the deliberate distortion of the concept meaning in media texts. To be specific, scholars pay attention to the methods of manipulating concepts by their replacing with euphemisms and dysphemisms to make something sound positive and likeable or, vice versa, negative and unlikeable, thus shaping a certain attitude to an object or person.

It is generally believed that today's media performs both informational and expressive functions that affect the audience's consciousness and serve as a tool for manipulation that is widely used in times of conflict and change. Merton et al. (1956) and Breton & Proulx (Larochelle, 2004, p.380-383) studied the effects of media on the audience's consciousness. As stated by the authors, the interview with the focus group took place after the respondents became acquainted with the media products (texts, audio recordings, etc). The effectiveness of content exposure was determined by the number of times the respondents cited facts or arguments they had read or heard during the pre-interview stage. Using the focused interview, the researchers demonstrated the effectiveness of media propaganda's influence on recipients' worldview.

Speaking of psychological influence, it is worth mentioning aspects of journalism such as the journalist's interpretation of events and their coverage as it relates to their purpose and intentions. In this case, media text can be exploited as a powerful tool with psychological impact (Schreiber & Kampf, 2021; Cotter, 2010). The journalist's intentions dictate the choice of

linguistic and additional means by which they try to exert an effective influence on the reader's mind.

2. Methodological framework

HYPOTHESIS. I ASSUME THAT MEDIA IS ABLE TO INFLUENCE AND CHANGE A PERSON'S WORLDVIEW. SINCE ONE OF THE FACTORS THAT DETERMINES ONE'S WORLDVIEW IS A COMPLEX SYSTEM OF NATIVE LANGUAGE CONCEPTS, WHICH REFLECTS THE ESSENTIAL PROPERTIES OF OBJECTS AND PHENOMENA, I BELIEVE THAT MEDIA SIGNIFICANTLY AFFECTS THE REPRESENTATION OF ONE'S PICTURE OF THE WORLD CONCERNING CHANGES IN THE SEMANTIC FIELD REGARDING THE CONCEPT AT HAND

The theoretical bases of my research are the Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory, Marshall McLuhan's media theory, and Lasswell's theory of direct media influence on the audience's consciousness and preferences.

To conduct the experimental part of the given study, I adapted the free listing method, as well as exploited the method of mathematical calculation to process, systematize, and summarize the data.

McLuhan points out the hidden influence on the mass consciousness produced by various forms of mass communication: advertising, television, film, etc. (McLuhan, 1951). In his view, communication technologies affect the organization of human cognitive processes (McLuhan, 1962).

I applied McLuhan's idea about the significant media effect on people and society to consider the mass media influence on changing the concepts in the entire view of the world in the human's mind.

Mass media has an impact on the higher psychological functions, based on archetypes, mental characteristics, cultural traditions, and historical experience: media draws the audience's attention to certain topics and events, thus causing changes in the existed meanings of concepts or constructing new ones. According to Lev Vygotsky, this is a way the mass media culture creates new patterns and modifies the activity of psychological functions.

Vygotsky (1986) strongly believed that conceptual thinking is the key type of thinking that is

characterized by the use of logical constructions, induction, and deduction, ability to draw distinctions between basic and non-basic features, etc. He pointed out the verbliness of language and speech-based conceptual thinking. I will explore Vygotsky's theory and try to prove that the analysis of the semantic field of a concept can provide information on language picture peculiarities of the world in diverse cultures.

I also suppose that the worldview of people is also under the influence of current external circumstances, such as social and political context represented by media means.

Based on the media content analysis, I succeeded in defining a number of linguistic tools that manipulate individuals' emotional and sensory spheres, as well as their cultural and historical experience. Since they are associated with them, traditions accepted in a particular society are primarily aimed at influencing basic emotions: anger (rage), distress (anguish), shame (humiliation), contempt (disgust), enjoyment (joy), interest (excitement), fear (terror), and surprise. For example, it can be the manipulation of archetypes, stereotypes, historical events (Lövheim, 2012 Feb.).

As reported by Vygotsky (1986), the social environment is the key factor influencing an individual's worldview. Besides their effects on child development, external factors induce changes in a person's worldview throughout their entire life.

Lasswell (1965; 2013 [1938]) admitted the words magical power and their ability to influence human consciousness. He linked the impact on the audience to media that expresses the stakeholders' political interests. On the topic of political communication, he noted that political language has power of its own. Moreover, he believed that understanding the influence of political speech is impossible without language analysis (Lasswell, 1965). Lasswell emphasised that a journalist must use certain words and expressions that evoke particular allusions in society to successfully influence public opinion. He singled out the semantic aspect of language and described the key concepts, slogans, and dogmas whose selection for speech is based on culture, history, and other important features of society (Lasswell, 2013

[1938]). He also proposed a method of counting the number of word occurrences in political communication, the use of which allows for an analysis of the essence of political ideology (Lasswell & Caplan, 1950).

Thus, based on Lasswell's theory, I will consider the communication of influence in terms of semantics. In particular, I will demonstrate how language can be an effective tool for manipulation: in other words, suggesting new meanings or correcting the semantic field of concepts has an immense impact on audience's perception of certain events or people.

In this paper, I view media as one of the fundamental factors that affects the individual's perception and awareness of the surrounding reality. In terms of linguistic means, I consider the text (both oral and written) as a holistic structure consisting of a set of related parts (sentences) and elements (words-names, words-concepts, words-symbols) (Krylova-Grek, 2007). The cited paper studies how media can influence the concepts semantic field change that are part of an audience's worldview and affect their surrounding reality attitude.

Therefore, using a variety of means (language, photos, videos, etc.), media has an effect on a person's mental processes, forming new concepts and changing the old meanings of the semantic field of concepts.

It is worth noting that persistent changes in the understanding of a concept's meaning or the entry into the use of new concepts occur only under the condition of their constant repetition in different media sources.

3. Results

Using the concept "conflict" example, I studied how media can influence the changing (shifting) meaning of a concept, even during a short-term.

I conducted the survey among second-year students at the State University of Telecommunication (Kyiv, Ukraine). A total of 88 people were involved in the experiment. To carry out the research, I used the free-listing method, which was refined to accomplish my goal.

Traditionally, free listing is a well-established ethnographic method that serves to identify cultural domains (a common beliefs set, behaviour patterns,

values, meanings, that are shared among people belonging to a particular culture).

In contrast to the traditional method, I interviewed students twice, both before and after they became acquainted with media materials. While conducting the research, I was concerned whether the semantic field of the concept would change before and after subjects' acquaintance with specially selected media content on the topic. To clarify the aforementioned issue, I asked respondents to list the words they personally associate with the conflict concept in order of importance.

It is considered that it is enough interviewing 20-30 respondents to obtain the required data (Weller & Romney, 1988). The larger the sample is, the more reliable the results. As stated by (Girnik, 2016), the frequency of each word specified by respondents is important for results and conclusions. Thus, I can get a core-periphery concept structure, where the core is made up of the most frequently mentioned words. One of the approaches to reducing the number of items in the studied area is to find a natural gap in the frequency distribution (Girnyk, 2016). The data processing phase includes systematizing and generalizing subjective and objective indicators, identifying the core and periphery of the semantic field and obtaining quantitative and qualitative results. The study was conducted through four stages as explained below.

At the first stage (before getting acquainted with media materials), the students filled out a questionnaire with the words that came to mind, when they thought about conflict in descending order. The respondents made a list of words based on their personal understanding of the concept and dominants accepted in their culture.

At the second stage, students read and watched media content and videos, depicting conflict as family and interpersonal interaction. This stage lasted for two days. On the first day, subjects watched documentaries about interpersonal conflict; on the second day, they read a newspaper article about family conflicts.

Since the combination of textual and visual information is considered to be the most influential, I

offered students both texts and videos created by professional journalists. Based on ethical reasons, I did not use materials that included scenes of violence or battles, instead I used materials about family and interpersonal conflicts.

At the third stage, I asked the students to write down their personal responses to the stimulus word "conflict" in descending order again.

At the fourth step, I came to conclusions, based on quantitative and qualitative results to verify if media influenced the concept building and if the semantic field would change after the subjects became familiar with the media content.

The results of the experiment demonstrated a slight change in the word order in the associative array and the emergence of new associative responses due to the impact on students' emotional sphere. The words related to interfamily relations, personal life, senselessness of the conflict and communication as a tool for conflict resolution appeared in the list. However, the words related to aggression, violence, collision, and war disappeared from the list, or have become less frequently used (TABLE 1).

№	Before acquaintance with media information		After acquaintance with media information	
	Word in Ukrainian with English equivalent	Number of mentions	Word in Ukrainian with English equivalent	Number of mentions
1	сварка - argument	54	сварка - argument	31
2	суперечка - quarrel	34	безглуздя, дурість - nonsense	27
3	бійка - fight	25	бійка - fight	25
4	війна - war	25	різні думки - different opinion	22
5	супи́чка - collision	21	взаємодія - collaboration	21
6	непорозуміння - misunderstanding	21	злість - anger	20
7	агресія - aggression	18	непорозуміння - misunderstanding	20
8	спір - dispute	13	спір - dispute	18
9	образа - resentment	12	образа - resentment	16
10	незгода - disagreement	12	приниження - humiliation	16
11	протиріччя - contradiction	11	суперництво - rivalry	11
12	боротьба - struggle	11	відносини - relationships	9
13	протистояння - confrontation	9	з'ясування стосунків - to deal with relationship problems	8
14	зіткнення - clash	8	війна - war	5
15	розбірка - showdown	6	нецензурна лексика - obscene language	4

TABLE 1. Word order in the associative array, before and after acquaintance with media information.

Thus, it makes it possible to conclude that only a few classes are able to cause a partial change in the semantic field. Even after a week of intense media

impact, a tested subject admitted the significant change in his/her point of view on the current events.

4. Discussion

The experiment undoubtedly evinces the tremendous influence of mass media content. It affects a person's worldview and meanings of already familiar concepts and notions and also forms new ones.

Using the concept, media can form both negative and positive attitudes towards people or events. Concepts as characteristics are widely exploited in hate speech, encouraging a person or group of people to express hate and contributing to the dehumanization, demonization, and opposition of other people based on the in-group – out-group division (we stress that hate speech in media can provoke conflicts in society).

I am convinced that media regularly employs the following methods to alter the concept's meaning:

- use of archetypes and stereotypes (Krylova-Grek, 2016);
- exploitation of the concept as a symbolic image (Krylova-Grek, 2016);
- transfer of meaning from one object to another (for instance, the comparison of an event, person, or group of people with past events and characters);
- creation of new associative fields;
- production of new concepts with a certain connotation (positive or negative);
- replacement of the concept's meaning with another one with a subtle difference (euphemisms, dysphemisms) (Shmelev, 2008).

The use of archetypes and the formation of new concepts are exemplified in the The Finnish Institute of International Affairs (2016) report on the strategy of Russian media fabrications in a hybrid war with Ukraine. In particular, the report emphasizes that the newly formed images are based on individual and collective subconscious images of the past. It highlights that the memories of the past play a crucial role in building the entire political and social infrastructure in Russia (education, culture, upbringing, etc.).

Changes in the concept's meaning that are grounded in the use of either euphemism or

dysphemism assist in strengthening the perception or vice versa, softening it: for example, the word “killing” is replaced with “liquidation” and “protective manoeuvres” is replaced with “bombards”, while the other party of the armed conflict is named “killers”.

Thus, the concept’s meanings are of great importance, both in shaping people’s worldviews and creating strong associations that promote xenophobia, hostility, marginalization, or violence (for instance, the Rwandan genocide). Hence, in public spaces, the use of concepts with a negative connotation leads to dehumanization and subsequent violence against a person or group of persons.

Viewing concept as an essential part of the media text, I analyse both linguistic and non-linguistic factors (intentions, cultural, pragmatic, social, economic, and political factors, etc.), that may affect the text as a final product. I consider the psycholinguistic approach to be an effective method in identifying which linguistic means are employed to express an opinion, achieving a goal and influencing the public.

Conclusions

The findings of the present study have strengthened our confidence in the postulation that media is an extremely powerful tool for influencing an audience’s worldview. Under the condition of purposeful impact, it can change the concept’s meaning or introduce new concepts with a different shade of meaning into speech. To manipulate the concepts, media uses a plethora of methods and techniques, which I will apply while conducting a psycholinguistic text analysis to identify hate speech and manipulation.

The obtained results give grounds for further quantitative research to scrutinize the media’s impact on an audience’s worldview. In addition, the given issue study is fundamental for understanding social processes in current society, as well as for surveying possible event development by media content analysis.

The present findings have important implications for solving the problem of misinformation and propaganda through media, which, while presenting conflicts, appeals to a person’s emotional and sensory

spheres. For instance, journalists tend to divide the sides of the conflict into in-group and out-group members, dehumanizing the opponent, and presenting the situation as a lose-win (in contrast to the mediation that aims at a win-win position).

To further our research, I am planning to develop a psycholinguistic approach for the analysis of media content in order to detect manipulation and hate speech.

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