

Ukrainian President Zelensky's resistance discourse

Cognitive rhetorical analysis of the address to the UK Parliament

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The influence of the war against
Ukraine on discourses worldwide

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About the Special Issue: Discourses of War: The influence of the war against Ukraine on discourses worldwide

*Edited by Jens Maesse, Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak,
Elena Psyllakou, Gerardo Nicoletta & David Adler*

The war against Ukraine has significant impacts on many societies world-wide, especially in Europe. The war changes public debates and political discourses in many countries. In addition to that, economic, technical, academic and other discourses are also influenced by this new state of things. We invite Short Papers (1200–3000 words) which reflect on these discourses.

Ukrainian President Zelensky's resistance discourse

Cognitive rhetorical analysis of the address to the UK Parliament

Serhiy Potapenko

The application of cognitive rhetorical methodology combining conceptual structures with rhetorical canons and human needs associated with pathos reveals that President Zelensky's speech achieves its persuasive appeal incorporating the concept of a fighting Ukraine into the British worldview; constructing the 13 days of war concept; referring to the Shakespearean "To be or not to be" prototypical question to emphasise Ukraine's survival and to Churchill's iconic wartime speech to underscore the two nations' common destiny.

Keywords: cognitive rhetoric, address, human needs, concept, worldview

The Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's contribution to the international online discourse of resistance to Russia's aggression comprises addresses to the parliaments of different states in search of support in the Russia-Ukrainian war. During the first weeks of the war his online speeches seemed to be the most convenient means of diplomacy.

One of the first speeches addressing the UK parliament (Zelensky 2022) deserves special attention. First, the UK has been one of the prominent supporters of Ukraine since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. British forces have trained thousands of Ukrainian personnel every year and performed regular joint land and naval exercises (Tossini 2021). This cooperation has accelerated since the beginning of the war. As of September 2022 the UK is already the second largest military donor to Ukraine, committing £2.3bn in 2022. Besides training 27,000 members of the Ukrainian Armed Forces since 2015, in the last year UK has provided hundreds of rockets, five air defence systems, 120 armoured vehicles and over 200,000 pieces of non-lethal military equipment (Press release 2022). Moreover, the British Government enhances ties with Ukraine "to display how the UK can reaffirm its position as the leading European contributor to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area and major supporter of the international rules-based system" (Tossini 2021). Second, being among the first in Zelensky's international resistance discourse the address serves as a prototype for the subsequent speeches delivered to the parliaments of other countries. The address in question can be found on the president's site in Ukrainian and English languages (Zelensky 2022) with the latter version studied in this paper.

Methodology

To analyze Zelensky's address to the UK Parliament this paper employs the cognitive rhetorical methodology. It combines the structures pinpointed by cognitive linguistics with the main rhetorical canons: invention, concerning the choice of arguments; disposition, connected with their arrangement; elocution, related to speech ornamentation (Leith 2012: 43). The impact of arguments selected at the invention stage can be formulated in different terms. Taking into account the life and death situation in Ukraine this paper draws on the classification of human needs into physiological, safety, belongingness, reputation and self-actualization (Maslow 1970).

Being selected at the invention stage arguments are associated with different cognitive structures. The most general is the worldview encompassing the whole of knowledge (Głaz 2022: 3). The second level is represented by concepts structuring the worldview (Riemer 2013: 1). The third level concerns the innate organisation of concepts, represented by prototypes (Rosch 2009: 42); schemata comprising frames (Fillmore 2006: 373), scripts/scenarios (Schank, Abelson 1977); image schemas, i. e., patterns of body-environment interaction (Johnson 1987: xvi). The fourth level deals with categorization (Ramscar, Port 2019: 87), reflected in the choice of naming units representing the same concept from differing perspectives and in this way related to the rhetorical canon of elocution.

The verbalization of the structures discussed above is best reflected in the introduction to the speech under discussion since opening the text it evokes all the levels of the addressee's knowledge system:

(1) I'm addressing all the people of the United Kingdom. All the people of Great Britain. Great people. With a great history. I'm addressing you as a citizen, as President of a great country as well. With a great dream. And a great struggle. I want to tell you about our 13 days. 13 days of fierce war, which we did not start and did not want. But we are waging it.

(2) Because we do not want to lose what we have, what is ours – Ukraine. Just as you did not want to lose your island when the Nazis were preparing to start the battle for your great power, the battle for Britain.

(3) 13 days of our defense.

The first – worldview – step of analysis reveals that the introduction evokes only part of the audience's mindset, i. e., singles out several concepts which are a matter of consideration at the next level.

At the second step it is tempting to distinguish four separate concepts: Great Britain, denoted by the names of the country; Ukraine, evoked by reference to its President; 13 days of war named three times; Nazis, referring to the Britons' enemy of World War Two. The former two concepts are related to the belongingness need while the latter two appeal to safety. However, the treatment of Britain

and Ukraine as two separate concepts faces difficulties at the next level.

At the third – concept-structuring – step it turns out that the speech portrays Britain and Ukraine from two perspectives: prototypical and schematic. From the former the concept of Britain which dominates in the audience's worldview is transformed into that of Ukraine, a country fairly known to the public. This procedure is signaled by foregrounding the linguistic units referring to the UK (1) which are followed by the means forming a similar image of Ukraine (1). From the schematic perspective the introduction evokes the components of the frame structuring Ukraine as a country with its leadership, people, citizens and president with the noun "citizen" preceding "president" since its meaning is closer to the semantics of the unit "people". The territorial parameters of the frame representing Britain (2) are indicated by the term "island" followed by the reiteration of the noun "battle".

The fourth – categorising – step consists in the choice of different units to name the same referent. Their biggest number refers to the country addressed: "United Kingdom", "Great Britain" (1), "island", "great power", "Britain" (2).

The cognitive structures discussed above are evoked differently in the text body sections associated with the rhetorical canon of disposition: narration, setting out the area of arguments; proof, resorting to the arguments supporting your case (Leith 2012: 82); closure, splitting into pre- and final conclusions.

Results

The narration section opening the text body aims at forming the 13 days dynamic concept foreshadowed in the introduction by repeating the corresponding phrase three times. The construction of this concept appears to draw on two types of cognitive structures. The succession script forms its dynamic basis while the concepts of separate days or their clusters are structured by two image schemas: COUNTERFORCE, focusing on the head-on meetings of forces (Johnson 1987: 46), and BLOCKAGE, impersonating the barrier (Johnson 1987: 45).

The cluster of the first four days splits into opposing pairs structured by COUNTERFORCE and BLOCKAGE:

(4) On the first day at 4 am, cruise missiles were fired at us. So that everyone woke up - we, the children, all of us, living people, all of Ukraine. And we haven't slept since. We all took up arms becoming a large army.

(5) The next day we fought off attacks in the air, on land and at sea. <...>

To describe the first day (4) COUNTERFORCE is evoked by the verb "fire" with the source indicated by the collocation "cruise missiles" and the Ukrainians depicted as the target

by the pronoun “us” and the units “we”, “children”, “all of us”, “living people”, “all of Ukraine”. In the final utterance of the paragraph (4) the predicative group “took up arms” transforms the Ukrainians into a source of BLOCKAGE organising the next paragraph (5) where “we” combines with the predicate “fought off” with the target indicated by the noun “attacks”.

The contrast between the following two days rests on the reference to the Russians’ activities denoted by the verb “fire” and intensified by the units “artillery” and “air bombs” (6) with Ukrainians poised as a source of BLOCKAGE by the predicative group “have begun to take dozens of prisoners” (7):

(6) On the third day, Russian troops openly fired at people and apartment buildings without hiding. Used artillery, air bombs. <...>

(7) On the fourth day, when we have already begun to take dozens of prisoners, we have not lost our dignity. <...>

The cluster embracing the fifth through seventh days reflects the intensification of Russians’ actions by reference to the Ukrainian targets of increasing vulnerability: cities, towns, districts, houses, schools, hospitals (8), the Kyiv Babyn Yar memorial of the Jews murdered during World War Two (9), churches (10), a nuclear power station (11):

(8) On the fifth day, the terror against us has already become outright. Against cities, against small towns. Ruined districts. Bombs, bombs, bombs, again bombs on houses, on schools, on hospitals. <...>

(9) On the sixth day, Russian missiles hit Babyn Yar. This is the place where the Nazis executed 100,000 people during World War II. <...>

(10) On the seventh day, we realized they were destroying even the churches. Using bombs! Rockets again. <...>

(11) On the eighth day, the world saw Russian tanks firing at a nuclear power plant. The largest in Europe. <...>

The cluster of the next five days establishes the Ukrainians’ defence perspective based on the BLOCKAGE schema:

(12) On the ninth day, we listened to a meeting of NATO countries. Without the desired result for us. Without courage. That’s how we felt - I don’t want to offend anyone - we felt that alliances don’t work. They can’t even close the sky. <...>

(13) On the tenth day, unarmed Ukrainians protested everywhere in the occupied cities. Stopping armored vehicles with bare hands. We have become unbreakable.

(14) On the eleventh day, when residential areas were already bombed, when everything was destroyed by explosions, when children were evacuated from a damaged children’s oncology hospital... We realized: Ukrainians became heroes. Hundreds of thousands of people. Entire cities. Children, adults - all.

(15) On the twelfth day, when the losses of the Russian army have already exceeded 10,000 killed, the general also appeared in this number. And this gave us confidence: for all crimes, for all shameful orders there will still be responsibility before the International Court or Ukrainian weapons.

In the cluster depicted above the NATO meeting is devoid of any BLOCKAGE expectations (12) which is indicated by the preposition “without” and the negations “don’t (work)” and “can’t (close)”. Meanwhile, the Ukrainians as a source of BLOCKAGE are characterised by the units “protest”, “stop”, “unbreakable” (13) with its degree implied by the noun “heroes”, collocations “hundreds of thousands of people”, “entire cities”, “children, adults – all” (14) and the noun “confidence” (15).

The final – thirteenth – day since the war beginning stands apart due to the deprivation degree implied by an appeal to the most basic – physiological – need:

(16) On the thirteenth day, a child died in Russian-occupied Mariupol. Died of dehydration. They do not allow food or water to people. They just blocked it - and people are in the basements. I think everyone hears: people don’t have water there!

The physiological need is evoked (16) by the repetition of the verb “die”, the negation “do not (allow food or water)”, the verb “block” followed by the negation “don’t (have water)”.

The proof section, setting out the arguments which support the speaker’s case, sums up the construction of the 13 days concept (17) emphasising the loss of 50 children’s lives with respect to three needs: physiological (“50 children were killed”), reputation (“50 great martyrs”), self-actualisation deficiency (“50 universes that could live”):

(17) In 13 days of the Russian invasion, 50 children were killed. 50 great martyrs. This is dreadful! This is emptiness. Instead of 50 universes that could live, they took them away.

The generalised proof subsection introduced by the “Great Britain!” address passes over from the 13 days concept to Ukraine’s fate (18–20):

(18) Great Britain!

Ukraine did not strive for that. It did not seek greatness. But it became great during these days of this war.

(19) Ukraine that saves people despite the terror of the invaders. Defends freedom despite the blows of one of the world’s largest armies. Defends despite the open sky. Still open to Russian missiles, aircraft, helicopters.

(20) “To be or not to be?” – You know this Shakespearean question well. 13 days ago, this question could still be raised about Ukraine. But not now. Obviously, to be. Obviously, to be free.

The first opposition (18) is represented by reference to reputation deficiency by negations “did not strive / did not seek” and to reputation affirmation by “became great”.

The second – BLOCKAGE – opposition (19) evokes the safety need contrasting the units “save”, “defend” and their antonym “open”.

The third – existential idea – draws on the Shakespearean prototypical “To be or not to be?” question (20) and gives a Ukrainian response to it expressed by the predicate “could be raised”, negation “not (now)” and intensified by the existential verb “to be” in combination with the adjective “free” laying ground for the next section of the speech.

The pre-concluding section (21) combines appeals to reputation and safety evoking a more powerful prototype of Winston Churchill’s “On the seas and oceans” speech (Churchill 1940):

(21) And if not here, where should I remind you of the words that Great Britain has already heard. And which are relevant again.

We shall not give up and shall not lose!

We shall go the whole way.

We shall fight in the seas, we shall fight in the air, we shall defend our land, whatever the cost may be.

We shall fight in the woods, in the fields, on the beaches, in the cities and villages, in the streets, we shall fight in the hills ... And I want to add: we shall fight on the spoil tips, on the banks of the Kalmius and the Dnieper! And we shall not surrender!

The prototypical status of Churchill’s speech is so evident to the public that the Ukrainian president does not need to refer to Britain’s wartime leader. In addition to its prototypicality the passage (21) refers to two other concepts. They are the nation’s unity indicated by the pronoun “we” and BLOCKAGE evoked by the constructions “shall not give up”, “shall not lose”, “shall fight”, “shall defend” etc.

The concluding part of the address draws on the concepts of assistance and support as contributors to Ukraine’s safety renewal:

(22) Of course, with your help, with the help of the civilization of great countries. With your support, for which we are grateful and on which we rely. <...>

(23) Increase sanctions against the terrorist state. Recognize it as a terrorist state finally. Find a way to make our Ukrainian sky safe. Do what you can. Do what you have to. Do what the greatness of your state and your people obliges to.

The concept of assistance is named by the constructions “with your help” (22), “with the help of the civilization of great countries” (22) which globalise belongingness. The concept of support is evoked by the word combination “with your support” (22) and the imperative constructions “increase sanctions”, “recognize it as a terrorist state”, “find a way”, “do what you can”/“what you have to”/“ what

the greatness of your state and your people obliges to” (23).

To sum up, the text body progresses from appeal to safety deficiency evoked by the 13 days concept constructed by perspectivising the BLOCKAGE schema with further appeal to the deficiency of the physiological need triggered by reference to human deaths and lack of water. The proof section combines appeal to belongingness to Britain and safety while the conclusions foreshadow Ukraine’s safety renewal by reference to concepts of help and support.

Conclusion

The cognitive rhetorical approach reveals that President Zelensky’s speech incorporates the concepts of Ukraine and its fight into the British worldview combining belongingness and safety needs in several steps. The introduction refers to the concept of Britain prototypical for the target audience with a subsequent shift to that of Ukraine and the shared destiny of the two states. The narration section appeals to safety constructing the 13 days concept, describing Ukrainians’ fight against the enemy threatening the nation’s existence. The proof section incorporates the concept into the British worldview by reference to the Shakespearean “To be or not to be?” question emphasising the idea of Ukraine’s survival and to Churchill’s iconic wartime speech to stress the common destiny of the two nations. The conclusion of the speech appeals to Ukraine’s safety renewal through reference to the concepts of help and support. The pattern of appeal to prototypical national concepts serves as the basis for President Zelensky’s subsequent addresses to national parliaments.

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