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Manipulative use of economic metaphors in Bulgarian political discourse

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According to the theory of cognitive linguistics, metaphors shape not only our communication, but also the way we think, act in our everyday life, and even vote. On the other hand, economic theory is based on the use of metaphors and figurative thinking. The aim of this article is to describe the manipulative usage of metaphors in Bulgarian political discourse. The object of cognitive discourse analysis are political texts published in Bulgarian newspapers and on the Internet. Bulgarian politicians often use metaphors and figurative language not only to amuse their audiences but also to influence the unconscious mind of the people.

Keywords: *metaphors, economics, political discourse, manipulation*

1. Aim and subject of this study

This study analyses the way some economic metaphors function in political texts in Bulgarian media. It researches texts published in the printed and online media, including National Assembly (Bulgarian Parliament) minutes of meetings. It aims at proving that abstract economic concepts are presented in the political media as metaphors. On the other hand, it is evident that the usage of metaphors serves both politicians and journalists to manipulate voters. Manipulative linguistic practices are widespread in the political media discourse.

2. The manipulative potential of economic metaphors

According to Teun van Dijk, manipulation 'is a communicative and interactional practice, in which a manipulator exercises control over other people, usually against their will or against their best interests' (Van Dijk 2006, 360). Manipulation uses discourse to produce an illegitimate impact: manipulators make others believe in and do things that are in the manipulators' interest and often run contrary to their own interests.

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Manipulation has versatile features. Van Dijk offers a 'triangulated approach to manipulation as a form of social power abuse, cognitive mind control and discursive interaction' (Van Dijk 2006, 359). Manipulation is always conducted through a text and that is why it needs to be studied through a discourse analysis. Manipulation always refers to the human consciousness and that is why it needs to be analysed with cognitive analysis methods. Manipulation always entails abuse of power (political, media, etc.) and that is the reason why manipulation needs to be studied with sociological methods. 'Obviously, in order to be able to manipulate many others through text and talk, one needs to have access to some form of public discourse, such as parliamentary debates, news, opinion articles, textbooks, scientific articles, novels, TV shows, advertising, the internet, and so on. And since such access and control in turn depend on, as well as constitute, the power of a group (institution, profession, etc.), public discourse is at the same time a means of the social reproduction of such power' (Van Dijk 2006, 362).

This study focuses on the discourse features of the usage of economic metaphors in texts in Bulgarian media, yet more comprehensive research should entail an analysis of the usage of other language expressions of manipulation as well as a sociological analysis which should elaborate on the sociological features of manipulation in contemporary society.

In the last decades a far more widespread usage of metaphors in political and economic texts for the media has been observed. It is worth noting that those texts (as well as most media) tend to *entertain* rather than properly inform their audiences. Such features of the current political discourse lead to a new composition of the media audience, which now looks rather similar to an audience entertained at the football stadium (Dosev 2012) or in the circus. The usage of wordplay is one of the ways for the media and politicians to entertain their consumers. Politicians are turning into people playing with words, hell-bent on entertaining, making their audience laugh or horrifying their audiences. One needs to point out that this trend is particularly dangerous in economic texts for the media as it ultimately debases public discussions on crucial social topics.

The usage of metaphors is integral to the manipulative media discourse. According to Todor Boyadgiev, 'two different types of objects are united in the metaphor through the comparison of their images using the same feature. That's why the metaphor works semantically on two levels. It can also be defined as a hidden comparison because deep down there runs a parallel between its literal and figurative meaning' (Boyadgiev 2003, 96). Alan Cruse claims that 'metaphors involve **(i)** a source domain, usually concrete and familiar, **(ii)** a target domain, usually abstract or at least less well-structured, and **(iii)** a set of mapping relations, or correspondences. For example, the *argument is war* metaphor uses notions drawn from the domain of war, such as winning and losing, attacking and defending, destroying, and undermining, to depict what happens during an argument' (Cruse 2004, 201).

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According to the theory of cognitive linguistics, metaphor is not only a figure of speech. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson claim that 'metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature' (Lakoff, Johnson 2003: 3). It is the metaphoric mindset that actually rules our everyday life. According to Lakoff and Johnson, most abstract concepts that we deal with are deeply metaphoric in their essence. Hence, 'the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 5). Lakoff claims that we comprehend the public discourse itself through the usage of metaphors. 'Most of what we understand in public discourse is not in the words themselves, but in unconscious understanding that we bring to the words' (Lakoff 2008, 43). This unconscious understanding of words is often caused by the usage of cognitive (conceptual) metaphors, which put the words of politicians on the scales of our concepts for good and bad. George Lakoff (2008, 8) also claims the following in reference to the so-called 'political mind':

- people often vote against their personal interests;
- people often vote without any reasonable arguments;
- people often vote governed by their emotions or by the so-called cognitive unconscious.

According to Lakoff, the unconscious thought is automatic, spontaneous and uncontrollable; it is reflexive (as it gives rise to reflexes similar to the ones caused by a neurologist tapping a patient's knee). Human thoughts are mostly unconscious (98 per cent). 'As a result, your brain makes decisions for you that you are not consciously aware of' (Lakoff 2008, 9). This is how Lakoff explains why people vote and act against their own interests. According to Charteris-Black, 'metaphor is an important characteristic of persuasive discourse because it mediates between conscious and unconscious means of persuasion – between cognition and emotion – to create a moral perspective on life (or ethos). It is therefore a central strategy for legitimization in political speeches' (Charteris-Black 2006, 13). Metaphors impact on our mindset, opinions and values by using language to activate unconscious emotional associations. That is why they play a pivotal role in the manipulative discourse, connecting the conscious with the unconscious meaning and relating cognition to emotion.

On the other hand, we need to point out that the very existence of the economic theory depends to a large extent on the usage of various conceptual metaphors (wave, peak, jump, budget hole, flat tax, consumer basket, etc.). This means that economic figurative thinking itself is impossible without the usage of metaphors. This study aims at studying metaphoric constructs related to the economic terms *budget* and *recession*.

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3. Metaphoric representation of the economic term *budget*

The most characteristic metaphoric structure for the economic term *budget* is *budget is food*. This metaphorical construct is typical for the language of politicians from ruling parties as well as the opposition. In such metaphoric talk, the term *budget* is often used with the verb *eat/ eat up*. In such cases, the political storyline goes with the question: *who has eaten up the budget* or *who is going to eat up most of it*. Such metaphoric speaking puts furtively the blame on those who *eat up the budget*.
(1)

*The Cabinet has **eaten up a double budget***
(newspaper "Trud", 17.02.2012).

*VAT termites **have already eaten up** an entire national **budget***
(newspaper "Sega", 19.06.2009).

*Excise duties **have eaten up** the 13th pension*
(newspaper "Standart", 08.10.2010).

*The rumour goes that teachers are about **to eat up the budget***
(newspaper "Standart", 08. 10. 2007).

*The crisis **has** allegedly **eaten up** 1 billion levs from the municipalities*
(newspaper "Standart", 03. 11. 2010).

*PM Borissov: It wasn't GERB, it was the pensioners who **have eaten up** the reserve*
(newspaper "Sega", 12. 04. 2013).

*Protests **have eaten up** millions of money from the Interior Ministry budget*
(tv7, 31.03.2013).

Recently politicians have even started to debate what type of food the budget exactly is. When Simeon Dyankov, Minister of Finance, presented the new state budget (for 2010) at a press conference, he actually called it a small vegetarian pizza. Minister Dyankov even showed the pizza to the cameras.

(2)[2]

[2] http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=423916, accessed on September 20, 2016

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Not only was this metaphor *the budget is a pizza* shared by the other politicians, but the media also started disseminating it, and as a result it became part and parcel of any talk about the state budget.

(3)

> *Simeon Dyankov: The 2010 budget is a small pizza*
>
> *(newspaper "Monitor", 29.10. 2009).*
>
> *Dyankov garnished the pizza with 1.8 billion*
>
> *(newspaper "Standart", 04.10.2012).*
>
> *The Bulgarian Socialist Party: We are right now eating Dyankov's farewell pizza*
>
> *(newspaper "Standart", 14.10.2012).*

Politicians use the metaphor *the budget is a pizza* even in the National Assembly (Bulgarian Parliament) – especially when the National Assembly sessions are broadcast live. Debates[3] on voting on the 2010 state budget went hand in hand with the question what type of food the budget was. Politicians went to great lengths to name different types of food to present the budget to their audiences.

[3] National Assembly stenogramm, dated November 09, 2009

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(4)

Simeon Dyankov (minister of finance): A small vegetarian pizza.
Snezhana Dukova (member of the political party GERB): A pie that is not particularly nourishing.
Veselin Metodiev (member of the political party DSB): Just some round bread.
Rumen Ovcharov (member of the political party BSP): Not a pizza, it is absolutely yucky.

Obviously, in this way politicians who use food metaphors share their opinions of the budget, but they also demonstrate their own language originality. On the one hand, politicians entertain their audiences by using those metaphors. On the other hand, politicians send a clear message to the collective unconscious of their constituencies. The metaphor *the budget is food* assigns the following roles to politicians:

- they provide food;
- they cook food (pizza, pie, or some yucky stuff);
- they fend off food (from termites, the crisis, pensioners, teachers);
- they share food fairly.

Hence, voters are given the task to find and elect the politician who provides most food, protects it for the people and ultimately shares it fairly with the people. Economic analysts have also noted how politicians seek to speak of the state budget in terms of food metaphors. Boyan Durankev (professor of economics) commented on the 2015 state budget: 'when a budget is deeply wrong, one can observe a clear transition from a thin pizza to vegetable potato soup. Currently some sort of vegetable soup is being cooked. Even the bottom of the casserole is visible'*(newspaper "Standart", 09. 12. 2014).*

According to Georgi Ganev though, it is not appropriate to speak of the budget in terms of food metaphors. In his article '*The budget as something to eat*', he claims that 'it may be exciting that the budget exists in some sort of form fit to feed all. In fact this is a very Keynesian idea – you plunge into recession, you climb out of it; you start running a huge budget deficit; people eat their fill and all ends well'[4]. Ganev writes further: 'if you have spent the budget on food, then once processed, you flush it, but the debt is still there and it needs to be paid. Whether you pay up your debts with real austerity measures, or with humiliations and with a loss of honour and a tarnished reputation, or both, the consequences are all the same – you remain poverty-stricken'.

[4] http://www.cls-sofia.org/blog/?p=220 , accessed on September 20, 2016

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4. Metaphoric representation of the economic term *recession*

The economic theory itself defines the term *recession* using metaphors. Hence, economic recession entails a considerable *slowdown* of the economy that goes on for at least several months. During this period the GDP experiences a *reduction*, unemployment *growth* and a drop in production and sales. One can assume that a country's economy is in recession when a negative economic growth is experienced in two consecutive quarters.

This research studies the following constructs related to the term *recession:*

- Recession is a living creature (a mythical one, an enemy);
- Recession is a (contagious) disease.

Often the media present recession as a living creature that moves into a direction of its own choice. Recessions are described as either looming threats or as threats that are going away.

(4)

*Greenspan: A recession is **looming**, but it might be a mild one*
(investor.bg, 27. 05. 2008)[5]

*5 signs to acknowledge that the recession **has gone***
(investor.bg, 28. 02. 2011) [6]

The new recession is already in Bulgaria
(newspaper "Sega", 25. 04. 2012)

Metaphors that relate to this construct are also the ones that present recession as a mythical creature that *eats up* what people yield, it *hits* and *beats*, etc. People need to *combat* this creature.

(5)

*Reuters: **The recession has struck a heavy blow** on PM Borissov.*
(dnesplus.bg, 01.02.2011)[7].

*Borissov and Dyankov **are combating recession** with 59 anti-crisis measures*
(newspaper "19 min.", 31.03.2010).

***The recession has eaten up** 4.4% of the European economy*
(newspaper "Dnevnik", 15. 05. 2009).

[5] http://www.investor.bg/novini/130/a/griinspan-recesiiata-idva-no-shte-byde-leka-64480/, accessed September 20, 2016

[6] http://www.investor.bg/analizi/91/a/pet-pokazatelia-spored-koito-krizata-si-e-otishla-113163/, accessed September 20, 2016

[7] http://www.dnesplus.bg/News.aspx?n=519477 , accessed September 20, 2016

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Another typical construct for the term *recession* is the contagious disease metaphor. Recession is portrayed in it as a disease that contaminates other economies and states.
(6)

*The Eurozone **has contaminated** the entire EU with **recession***
(newspaper "Trud"; 07.11.2012).

*Reuters: **BG is slowly recovering from recession***
(newspaper "Klassa"; 01.12.2010).

This metaphoric structure clearly exemplifies the subconscious message that government, politicians, and business elites cannot be held accountable for the recession. Recession is not a consequence of our mistakes but it rather spreads like a contagious disease.

'How has Bulgaria contracted 'imported' economic diseases?', Garabed Minassian (professor of Economics) asks in a "Sega" newspaper article. If we acknowledge this comparison of the economic crisis with a disease, then we also need to specify that this country's media discourse implies that this disease is contagious and we have contracted it. Prof. Minassian goes further: 'The government elite has a very convenient universal explanation for the economic and financial crisis in this country, they simply claim it is 'imported'? Whenever the question 'Are there any other domestic factors and causes? is raised, the arrogant and rather insolent answer is always: 'No, there are not.' (newspaper "Sega", 23.4.2009). Minassian also reaches a very important 'medical' conclusion drawn as a subheading: 'The ruling elite have failed to understand that wrong diagnosis leads to wrong treatment.'

The financial analyst Emil Hirsev shares a similar opinion: 'Now government officials may take a break because recession has become a convenient excuse for all political failures. Government propaganda has repeatedly described recession as the ultimate power; recession is being compared to an act of God, a natural disaster, rather than described for what it is - an obvious failure of economic policies. Now every PM can shrug their shoulders saying: man proposes, God disposes! And then the prime minister could ask their subjects for more suffering, sweat, and tears and for more taxes so that the prime minister, the saviour, could protect the business and the whole nation from this dreadful disaster. Then one can easily claim that no person at the helm of the state is to be held accountable for the crisis. However, they become a hero if they manage to 'pull the country out of recession' and 'lead the economy out of recession' (newspaper "Sega", 03.12.2012).

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5. Conclusions

Several groups of conclusions can be summarized on the grounds of the conclusions reached in the examples above:

5.1. Abstract economic concepts in the media are often presented with metaphors. Not all people are familiar with the academic understanding of those terms. Metaphors are then used as cognitive devices to illustrate those abstract terms so that we can easily perceive and understand them. Metaphors are used to juxtapose an abstract term with a term we recognize in our everyday life. We use metaphors to categorize concepts. Cognitive semantics argues that people tend to categorize concepts based on their experience rather than pure logic. This experience to a large extent is embedded in our physical bodies, that is, in the neuron structures of our brains. As a result, we categorize abstract concepts using our experience of motion (back and forth; up and down), fear, disease, physical fighting, food, etc.

5.2. Metaphoric representation of abstract economic terms serves to manipulate public consciousness. Metaphors are applied to surreptitiously make a reference to certain concepts and this reference is often purely manipulative. Whenever economic metaphors are used, the implication is that government, politicians and multinationals cannot be held accountable for any economic trouble.

5.3. It might be the case that any discussion of economic issues is deliberately debased through the usage of metaphors. Thus any expert discussion of the economy in the media is ruled out. Metaphors that are intended to spread panic and fear or entertain audiences blur any reasonable arguments. Then it is no longer possible to have a proper discourse on the economy.

5.4. Obviously, the usage of metaphors in the political media also intends to entertain audiences. Metaphors are part of the word play even in economic texts. It is often the play-on-words that conceals a direct attempt to manipulate public opinion.

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