Images of Russia in American Political Discourse: Verbal Representations

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ОБРАЗ РОССИИ В АМЕРИКАНСКОМ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОМ ДИСКУРСЕ: ВЕРБАЛЬНЫЕ РЕПРЕЗЕНТАЦИИ

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Аннотация. ***Введение.*** В статье проводится анализ качественных вербальных репрезентаций образа России в американских политических выступлениях в период с февраля 2022 по февраль 2024.

Методы. Объем изученного материала составил 200 000 знаков и включал около 50 публичных выступлений и транскрипций пресс-конференций политического и военного руководства. В исследовании использовались сравнительный, интерпретационный, концептуальный и описательный методы.

Анализ. В анализируемом материале выявлены типичные, повторяющиеся концепты, связанные с Россией, которые встречаются во всех рассматриваемых текстах; передают негативный образ России в языковом сознании американской лингвокультуры; были также выявлены новые образы, связанные с текущей политической повесткой дня.

Результаты. Авторы представляют результаты изучения манипулятивных тактик и вербальных средств их реализации в рамках репрезентации концептуального образа России в современном американском политическом дискурсе. Было определено, что средства номинации и вербальные репрезентаций детерминированы концептами «no freedom of speech», «corruption», «weak evil enemy», «appalling tyranny», «human rights violations», «authoritarian nature», «totalitarian state», «threat to democracy», «axis of evil», «inevitable defeat» также используются приемы манипулирования, включающие нивелирование фактов и противопоставления значений.

Ключевые слова: политический дискурс, концептуальные образы, образ России, вербальные репрезентации.

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IMAGES OF RUSSIA IN AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE: VERBAL REPRESENTATIONS

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Abstract. ***Introduction.*** The article analyzes qualitative verbal representations of the image of Russia in American political speeches from February 2022 to February 2024.

Methods. The volume of the studied material amounted to 200,000 characters and included about 50 public speeches and transcriptions of press conferences of the political and military leadership. The study used comparative, interpretive, conceptual and descriptive methods.

Analysis. The analyzed material reveals typical, recurring concepts associated with Russia, which are found in all the texts under consideration; convey a negative image of Russia in the linguistic consciousness of American linguistic culture; New images related to the current political agenda were also identified.

Results. The authors present the results of a study of manipulative tactics and verbal means of their implementation within the framework of the representation of the conceptual image of Russia in modern American political discourse. It was determined that the means of nomination and verbal representations are determined by the concepts “no freedom of speech”, “corruption”, “weak evil enemy”, “appalling tyranny”, “human rights violations”, “authoritarian nature”, “totalitarian state”, “threat to democracy”, “axis of evil”, “inevitable defeat”, manipulation techniques are also used, including leveling facts and contrasting meanings.

Keywords: political discourse, conceptual images, image of Russia, verbal representations.

Introduction

Studying political discourse in the context of public speeches of the leaders of US military in the period of 2022-2024 is of significance in current conditions and contributes to the development of concept studies, linguistic pragmatics, and communication theory [3], [10].

The political texts are of particular interest for the study of verbal strategies, manipulation tactics and stylistic features of creating images of some States, since their goal is not only to convey relevant information about countries, their actions but also to build certain attitudes, provoke an emotional response, and encourage a certain behavior in recipients [2].

Dynamics of linguistic and cultural features of conceptual images of Russia at the pragmatic, ideological, and information levels in the political speeches of the US leadership has particular features typical the American narrative related to an enemy state. Pragmatic specificity of political discourse is of particular interest from a linguistic and cultural point of view [9]. The texts of political discourse are aimed at persuading the addressee based on existing patterns in his ideas and linguistic means of implementation corresponding to the goals, which are correlated with contextual expectations [10]. Primarily, linguistic means of the lexical level are used to broadcast an information message, as well as to form certain key concepts in the cognitive structure of political discourse aimed at a context-determined way of interpreting information and the deployment of value settings of the message [5].

Materials and Methods

The representation of the image of Russia in American political speeches has not been sufficiently studied in current situation of special military operation from pragmatic, communicative and cognitive perspective in linguistics. The purpose of the article is to consider some linguistic and pragmatic feature of the representation of Russia in public political speeches in the English language based on the discourse of the American military leadership in 2022-2024. The authors also study the linguistic and pragmatic strategies as well as manipulative tactics used in the texts. The volume of the studied material amounted to 200,000 characters and included about 50 public speeches and transcriptions of press conferences of political and military leadership. Comparative, interpretive, conceptual, and descriptive methods were used in the study.

Analysis

The addressee's ideas are part of certain linguistic reality, therefore the effectiveness of the impact of the transmitted message is determined by the choice of linguistic means that translate or rely on existing patterns in the consciousness [1], [5]. Thus, in order to determine the most significant concepts and semantic components for the recipient, verbalized by language units in the type of text under study, it is necessary to study the context and pattern of use of some language units, their synonymous series, compatibility options, taking into account the functional orientation of the broadcast message.

The image of a state in political speeches impacts public perception, cultural superstructures and ideas. The study of public political speeches in the context of the images of states they form in different time periods acquires significance in current conditions and contributes to the development of communication theory, and rhetoric.

Relations between the US and Russian are characterized by conflicting political interests, Cold War history; over the past few years, tensions have intensified, which is reflected in the conceptual images of Russia broadcast in political discourse and the linguistic means applied. The reflection of topics related to Russia in political speeches and the image being formed are associated with certain stereotypical ideas, implemented at the formal level with the help of cultural associative ties.

According to E. I. Sheigal, when implementing social institutional interaction, two directions of communication can be distinguished: from institution to society and from society to institution [11], [6].

This study examines the first direction through the prism of examining the emerging conceptual images of Russia in public political speeches in American foreign policy. This type of communication is aimed at an internal loyal audience with similar values to form, maintain or change conceptual ideas about Russia in order to satisfy existing or newly emerging needs and requests [7], [11].

Research outcome

It should be noted that the verbal representation of Russia in the political discourse of the American leadership during the entire period under review from the beginning of 2022 to 2024 is carried out in an exclusively negative manner. In the analyzed material, typical, repeating concepts associated with Russia were identified which are found in all the texts under consideration; they convey a negative image of Russia in the linguistic consciousness of American linguistic culture; new images related to the current political agenda were also identified.

As a result of the study, the following concepts can be attributed to the first linguistic and cultural category of conceptual images of formed with the help of associative verbal fields: *no freedom of speech* – 24 cases ("Ukraine will never be victories for Russia, for free people refuse to live in a world of hopelessness and darkness". "Russian efforts to suppress freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are a matter of deep concern to us and the international community". "Russian and Belarusian nationals complicit in hindering the work of independent media"), *corruption* – 14 cases ("They share the corrupt gains of the Kremlin policies and should share in the pain as well". "Russia and its 'corrupt billionaires'". "Share in the corrupt gains of Russian policies"); *human rights violations* – 18 cases ("Russia has engaged in activities which are – we believe are contrary to international norms". "Inquiry investigates Russia's violations and abuses of human rights in Ukraine". "Russia has shamelessly violated the core tenets of the United Nations charter..."); *authoritarian nature* – 12 cases ("China and Russia represent the central axis of expansive authoritarianism", "autocrat" Vladimir Putin was right to say that relations were at their lowest point", "coordinate policy changes that can contain rampant authoritarian aggression"); *totalitarian state* – 14 cases ("Our ally democracies are under attack from terrorists, from tyrants, from totalitarianism". "US seeks to counter the authoritarian pull of Russia", "…totalitarian mindset inherited from the Soviet Union", "reasonable these days to describe Russia as a totalitarian state"); *threat to global democracy* – 13 cases ("We must act now to fight terror, protect civilians, and maintain democracy in Israel, Gaza, Ukraine, and Taiwan" "...threats from Russia, Iran, North Korea, and to stand up for democracy and human rights", "to defend their homelands, and to safeguard democratic ideals"); *axis of evil* – 11 cases ("There's an axis of evil in the world: China, Russia, North Korea". "China has engaged in activities that Russia and many other activities that – that others have engaged in in terms of intimidation and dealing with other countries"); *inevitable defeat* – 11 cases ("Putin has already lost this war". "Russia will never defeat Ukraine". "There is "no possibility" of Russian President Vladimir Putin winning the war in Ukraine". "Russia has already lost. It cannot meet its original objective which it stated. It's not possible").

It should also be noted the following conceptual images of Russia, which were found in the general array of political speeches no more than twice: *despotism, excessive centralization, unaccountable management system, opaque state, low tolerance to the opposition, propaganda*. Thus, the described concepts associated with Russia are universal for American political discourse and are found in all the texts studied.

The type of concepts demonstrates a reactionary view of Russia as an autocracy, legitimizes the identity of the United States as a leader of democracy and freedom in opposition to a repressive and undemocratic Russia, and reflects concerns about militarism and the strengthening of statehood. Russia is portrayed as a mirror image of the American system in a significantly simplified and unfavorable form. It should be noted that the concepts partially coincide with the ideas of the Cold War, which are relevant for a significant part of American linguistic culture.

Another group of ideas about Russia is implemented at the formal level with the help of linguistic and cultural associations with the current political agenda and vary over different periods of time. Previously, one of the main associative images of Russia in the political discourse of the US leadership was *cyber threat* and *interference in the American elections*. However, in the studied material those issues were seldom mentioned ("Russia's aggressive actions – interfering with our elections, cyber-attacks, poisoning its citizens – are over". "The budget helps us counter the belligerence we see from Russia, particularly in the cyber realm"). The topic was replaced with new perspective of *threat to economy* of the Nord Stream ("this pipeline is a Russian geopolitical project intended to divide Europe and weaken European energy security").

Thus, in 2022–2024, the following conceptual images of Russia can be attributed to this group of linguistic and cultural categories*: unprovoked aggressor, weak evil enemy, and appalling tyranny*.

Based on the principle of frequency, in the American political discourse of 2022–2024, associative-verbal fields of the conceptual image of *an inept weak enemy* were identified, which we also divided into two groups. The first group included images that describe the current situation: *significant military casualties – significant military losses* – 29 cases, *failed offensive* – 17 cases, *zero probability of Russian victory* – 31 cases, *lost war* – 14 cases, *indiscriminate shelling* – 7 cases. The second group includes negative descriptions of the general state of the Russian army: *poorly trained and equipped* – 27 cases, *low discipline and moral* – 22 cases, *lack in leadership* – 19 cases, *poor defense industry* – 9 cases.

Linguistic means at the lexical and grammatical level are highly emotional due to repetitions ("So the troops that are manning those Russian lines are poorly trained, poorly equipped"), epithets ("...the Russians lack in leadership, they lack will, the morale is poor, and their discipline is eroding... but Russian leadership miscalculated"), paraphrases ("Russia right now is on its back"), hyperbole ("Russia has made one of the greatest strategic errors Russia's ever made").

To achieve the established pragmatic objectives of creating an image of weakness and ineptitude, manipulative techniques are widely applied including *levelling facts* ("…the Russians have failed every single time". "Ukraine repels Russian aerial attacks". "Russia achieving its strategic objectives of conquering Ukraine…"). Another manipulative tactics is the *distortion and omissions of*

information (“So the Russian situation is not very good, even though they’ve been fighting a fight because of the minefields. …demoralized the Russian military”), *opposition of “democracy – tyranny”* (“liberate their country’s sovereign territory from Russian occupation”. “Russia has been waging a cruel and reckless war of choice against its peaceful and democratic neighbor. Ukraine is defending freedom against Russian tyranny”).

Qualitative verbal representations and means of nomination of various population groups are expressed through the opposition of concepts, including lexical oppositions (the wars we see in Israel and Ukraine are part of an existential struggle between fascism and freedom, despotism and democracy, might and right; dictator can wake up one day and decide to annex the property of his peaceful neighbor; Russia's illegal and immoral invasion seeks to subjugate an independent nation and oppress a free people; Ukraine is defending freedom against Russian tyranny; Russia has been waging a cruel and reckless war of choice against its peaceful and democratic neighbor. The use of the antithesis technique in the given examples allows us to qualitatively contrast the essential characteristics of population groups whose verbal representations are built on the mutually exclusive meanings of the concepts of *freedom and despotism, peace and war, law and lawlessness, democracy and terror*. By creating an emotional image through the use of units with the meaning of opposition, confrontation, the addresser emphasizes the conflict, contradiction of the characterized groups and the described events.

Conclusion

The speeches of the American political leadership are determined by the pragmatic goals of achieving loyalty in the domestic arena through an active foreign policy position, as well as promoting a sound foreign policy. The representation of the image of Russia at the end of 2022 is carried out exclusively in a negative way on the basis of dehumanization; manipulative tactics of exaggeration, distortion, leveling of facts, agonistic and mixed speech strategies, evaluative verbal means are used, constructing the image of an aggressor professing values opposed to the Western audience, as well as significant military threats – in the early 2024 in terms of discussion and answers to questions from political leaders.

Prospects for further research of the topic include identifying a broader list of verbal representations, as well as systematizing the manipulative tactics used and verbal means of their implementation in American political discourse; carrying out an in-depth comparison of quantitative and qualitative indicators, involving the identification of a wider list and subsequent classification of the linguistic means used to designate different groups in different chronological periods.

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