Iryna Losyeva
Ivan Franko National University of Lviv
ORCID: 0000-0002-5822-538X

Structural and semantic approach to the study of political debate

Strukturalne i semantyczne podejście do stadium debaty politycznej

Abstract

The article breaks new ground in the integrated study of structural and semantic manifestations of political debate in online discourse during the period of election campaign.

The study of political debate in the presidential election campaign is considered to be of vital importance as it makes possible to analyze the evolution of political thinking as well as to find the ways of civilized political dialogue, which is extremely important for the world community. In modern international arena, political debate is viewed as a contention or dispute over political issues and controversial topics. In the article, given political debate (polemics) is regarded as a contentious argument that is intended to support a specific position through attacks on a contrary position. The paper studies the political debate as a genre of literature through the description and analysis of its semantic content in which journalistic genre, political narrative and political discourse are reflected; it also defines the role and place of political debate in architectonics and compositional organization of English political discourse.

According to the objectives, integrated linguo-stylistic analysis of the structure of modern political debate in the online discourse has been conducted as well as

lexical and semantic ranging of lingual units in the space of political debate has been highlighted.

The study has clarified new ways of arranging semantic space and explored stylistic resources of language in the political debate.

Key words: *political debate, linguistics, stylistic features, euphemisms, phraseological units, lexical-thematic group.*

Abstrakt

Artykuł przełamuje standardy przyjęte w zintegrowanych badaniach nad strukturalnymi i semantycznymi formami wyrazu obecnymi w debacie politycznej prowadzonej online jako dyskurs w okresie kampanii wyborczej.

Badanie debaty politycznej odbywającej się w prezydenckiej kampanii wyborczej uznaje się za niezwykle ważne, gdyż umożliwia ono analizę ewolucji politycznego myślenia jak również ukazuje przebieg cywilizowanego dialogu politycznego, co jest niezmiernie ważne dla światowego odbiorcy. Na współczesnej arenie międzynarodowej dialog polityczny postrzegany jest jako pojedynek na argumenty czy dysputa w kwestiach politycznych i kontrowersyjnych. W niniejszym artykule, debata polityczna (polemika) postrzegana jest jako argument zaczepny użyty w celu wzmocnienia obranego punktu widzenia w ataku na odmienny punkt widzenia. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje debatę polityczną jako gatunek literacki poprzez analizę jej treści semantycznych, które odzwierciedlają stronę dziennikarską, narrację polityczną i dyskurs polityczny; ponadto, artykuł określa rolę i miejsce debaty politycznej z punktu widzenia budowy i kompozycji angielskiego dyskursu politycznego.

Stosownie do zamierzeń, przeprowadzona została zintegrowana analiza lingwistyczno-stylistyczna struktury współczesnej debaty politycznej prowadzonej w formie dyskursu online a także ukazana została częstotliwość występowania leksykalnych i semantycznych jednostek językowych w przestrzeni debaty politycznej.

Badania sprecyzowały nowe podejście do tworzenia przestrzeni semantycznej i penetrowały materiały dotyczące stylistyki języka debaty politycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: *debata polityczna, lingwistyka, cechy stylistyczne, eufemizm, jednostki frazeologiczne, grupa leksykalno-tematyczna.*

Introduction

At the current stage of linguistic science development, the investigation of political debate in reference to its lexico-semantic, syntactically-stylistic,

communicative-pragmatic peculiarities and functional potential remains one of the primary tendencies of linguistic research. The study of political debate in the modern international arena is considered to be of vital importance as it makes possible to analyze the evolution of political thinking as well as to find the ways of civilized political dialogue, which is extremely important for the modern world community.

Due to the intensive development of political, economic and intercultural relations, and the tendency of modern society to improve the efficiency and development of human activity in all areas, especially in the political and diplomatic spheres, more and more attention is paid to the effectiveness of verbal communication.

The study of political debate on different stages of social development is a very important and urgent task. Moreover, the issue of political debate becomes more relevant in the light of the intensification of international politics and cross cultural communication. Considering the political debate as a form of political communication, it can be pointed out that it is as old and ancient as political power itself. The study of political communication dates back to the time of Aristotle. The sages throughout the centuries from Machiavelli in Italy to Thomas Jefferson in America wrote about this kind of communication. Generally, political debate or polemics is defined as one of the most common forms of arguing about very controversial topics.

Thus, the objective of the article is directed towards theoretical and practical analysis of structural-semantic aspects of English political debate as a genre of political literature through disclosure of its semantic and structural specifics according to the hierarchy of hypertext language levels. The research is based on corpus of online newspaper texts, online versions of political speeches, remarks, comments and interviews by Barack Obama, the 44th US President during the period of his second presidential election campaign.

Structure and stylistic features of political debate: euphemisms

The way politicians approach delicate or unpleasant subjects is considered to be of vital importance. It is rather challenging in politics to appear polite and sensitive, attempting to win people's favour, and at the same time attack a political opponent. Political actors tend to avoid words or expressions that may have unpleasant associations in order not to give a negative impression to their audiences. To this end, they resort to euphemism,

the process whereby a distasteful concept is stripped of its most inappropriate or offensive overtones, providing thus a "safe" way to deal with certain embarrassing topics without being politically incorrect or breaking a social convention. Within the body of research on political discourse, euphemistic strategies have received considerable attention. (González, 1992; Fraser, 2009) To define the concept of euphemism in political discourse we follow the definition suggested by K. Allan and K. Burridge, who identified euphemism as the use of mild and polite-sounding language to soften the potential face affront both to the speaker (for self-presentational purposes) and to the hearers (out of concern for their sensitivities). (Allan, 1991; Burridge, 1996, p. 42-49) As an example of language used with a social purpose, political language is a breeding ground for euphemism and, in turn, euphemism stands out as a consubstantial element in political discourse. Political euphemism responds fundamentally to a social interdiction which has, as its main aim, to preserve the politicians' image and, in this way, give a good impression of themselves and the political groups they represent. Moreover, euphemisms are distinguished at morphological, lexical and syntactic levels of language. In political debate, euphemisms are most frequently used at the lexical level of language through the use of such semantic ways of euphimisation as: periphrasis, metaphor, overstatement, metonymy, semantic ellipsis, borrowings, and terms. In the terms of syntactic methods of euphimisation in political discourse, we can find syntactic ellipsis and excessive complication of the phrase structure.

Thus, we can come to the conclusion that euphemisms in political discourse belong to the so-called tools for manipulation that are used with the aim to create and control the recipient's outlook and ideology.

In order to study the use of euphemisms in the political discourse and analyze them as a verbal strategy in political language, we follow the classification widely used among researchers and suggested by V. Panin. (Panin, 2005, p. 78-79) Thus, having analyzed corpus materials the following groups of euphemisms have been revealed:

1) the group of euphemisms directly exclude racial and ethnic discrimination:
   – *It doesn't matter whether you're* **black** *or white or Hispanic or Asian or* **Native American** *or young or old or rich or poor, abled,* **disabled**, *gay or* **straight**. (*The New York Times...*)
   – *When you put on that uniform, it doesn't matter if you're* **black** *or white;* **Asian** *or* **Latino**; *conservative or liberal; rich or poor; gay or straight.* (*President Obama's...*)

2) the group of euphemisms that contribute to avoidance of discrimination on the gender affiliation and euphemisms against discrimination based on health status and those that exclude age discrimination:
   – *You'll hear the deep patriotism in the voice of **a military spouse** who's working the phones late at night to make sure that no one who fights for this country ever has to fight for a job or a roof over their head when they come home.*
   – *… eliminating health insurance for millions of poor and **elderly** and **disabled** Americans on Medicaid.*
   – *Millions of **seniors** who are seeing their prescription drug prices lower because it was the right thing to do. (Remarks by the President at Campaign Event, 2012)*

3) the group of euphemisms that are used in order to distract the attention of audience from the negative economic factors:
   – *…no matter what you look like – whether you own a factory or **you work on the factory floor** – We all know families **making deep sacrifices** just to get by… that you can live a good, **solid, middle-class life**… We're fighting to rebuild an economy that restores security for the middle class and renews opportunity for folks trying **to get into the middle class**. (Remarks by the President on the American Jobs Act, 2011)*

In the speech addressed to the American people called the American Jobs Act, the President, focusing his attention on social inequality, avoids calling a spade – spade, so as not to offend those people and those families who can not belong to the middle-class society because of social and financial aspects. In the examples given, the function of euphemisms is to facilitate the perception of negative state of things.

4) the group of euphemisms aimed to expose wrong decisions and actions taken by the opponents:
   – *The way he talks about them, it seems as if he thinks these are **a bunch of nameless government bureaucrats** that we need to cut back on. (Obama, 2017, p. 1263)*

Due to the end of the war, the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the desire to emphasize the State's contribution to solving the conflict, a considerable number of euphemisms was recorded in the statements of the US President dedicated to armed conflicts and their consequences:

5) the group of euphemisms connected with armed conflicts and their consequences:
   – *…he's visiting with **our brave men and women in uniform**, thanking them for their service. (Obama, 2015, p. 1483)*

The research has revealed the main reasons for using euphemisms in political discourse of Barack Obama among which we distinguish the necessity to keep to rules of the cultural and political correctness that exist in society as well as to avoid publicity and mass dissatisfactions. The motives for the usage of euphemisms in public speeches by Barack Obama vary, depending on the area of social political life, which makes possible to differentiate political euphemisms in special spheres of economics, domestic and foreign policy, armed conflicts and in the area of political correctness. Besides that, we have come to the conclusion that the majority of euphemisms in Obama's speeches are directed to highlight the multinational aspect of the citizens as well as their equal rights regardless of their income, social status, physical disability, colour of the skin and origin. Most of them play moderating and conspiratorial functions which convey those ideas that have become a social taboo and are too embarrassing to mention directly.

Typical methods of the use of idioms in political debate

The study of idioms' functioning and the ways of their usage in a political discourse was conducted through the analysis of phraseological units in B. Obama's pre-election speeches. The study of phraseology in general and idiomatic units in particular has always been the subject of a great number of linguistic researches, which is reflected in the works of such scholars as: Ch. Bally, O. Potebnya, V. Vinogradov, V. Telia, M. Shanskyy, A Taranenko, D. Barannyk, V. Mokiyenko, V. Kostomarov, B. Kovalenko, and others. Despite a great number of researches on this topic, a great ambiguity of the terms phraseology and idioms which are also widely accepted, is observed. Opinions differ as to how this part of the vocabulary should be defined, classified, described and analyzed, and even the terminology the researchers keep to has become the issue for debate. A.V. Kunin lays the stress on the structural separateness of the elements in a phraseological unit, on the change of meaning in the whole as compared with its elements taken separately and on a certain minimum stability. (Kunin, 1996) In English and American linguistics, the situation is very different. No special branch of study exists, and the term "phraseology" is a stylistic one. The word "idiom" is more polysemantic. The English use it to denote a mode of expression peculiar to a language, without differentiating between the grammatical and lexical levels. It may also mean a group of words whose meaning is difficult or impossible to understand while translating each word separately.

To analyze the structural peculiarities of idioms in the research we follow the classification by A. V. Kunin, who strongly believes that phraseology must be developed as an independent linguistic science and not as a part of lexicology, and who introduced classification of phraseological units based on the functions the units fulfill in speech. They may be nominating, interjectional, communicative or nominating-communicative. Further classification into subclasses depends on whether the units are changeable more generally, on the interdependence between the meaning of the elements and the meaning of the set expression. The researcher suggests formal and functional classification based on the fact that a set expression functioning in speech is in distribution similar to definite classes of words. According to this approach, set expressions are distinguished as nominal phrases, verbal and adjectival phrases, adverbial and prepositional phrases, conjunctional and interjectional phrases, as well.

In the research conducted, we focused our attention and have analyzed two types of structural units: phraseological units with the structure of a phrase and those with the structure of a sentence. The analysis of corpus materials has led us to the conclusion that most numerous class of phraseological units with the structure of a phrase is a verbal word combination treated as idiomatic expressions functionally correlated with the verb. Having classified idiomatic expressions in political speeches, we are able to identify the following most commonly used structural models:

- **Noun + Verb** – *to leave a shore; to turn a page; to hit the bottom; to ship jobs; to fill the shoes; to need a bridge;*
- **Verb + Article + Noun** – *to have a huge stake; to play a long game; to be a fiscal hawk;*
- **Verb + Preposition + Noun** – *to lay out a blueprint; to lay off teachers; to play by the rules; to dig into a pocket; cut through the maze; to be on the ropes; to wind down the war; to be on the hook; to dig into a pocket;*
- **Verb + Noun + Preposition** – *to give a leg up;*
- **Verb + Noun + and + Noun** – *to get pomp and circumstances;*
- **Verb + Preposition + (Article) + Noun** – *to take on illegal immigration; to cry over spilled milk; to cut out the middle man;*
- **Verb + Preposition + one's + Noun** – *to look over one's shoulder; to roll up one's sleeve;*
- **Verb + Noun + Preposition + Noun** – *to put boots on the border; to pour education into an ear;*

Another group of structural models represents the nominal combinations where the main word that conveys the meaning of the expression is a noun:

- **Adjective + Noun** – *red tape; huge stake;*
- **Noun + and + Noun** – *pomp and circumstances;*
- **Noun + Preposition + Noun** – *a house of cards;*
- **Adjective + Noun + Noun** – *blue chip company; a blue-collar worker;*

It should be mentioned that the semiological approach that involves a detailed study of idiomatic expressions and their denotative meaning and connection with the situation of communication can be the methodological basis for the study of structural and semantic characteristics of idiomatic expressions in political debate. According to this approach, we distinguish the following groups of expressions:

- the group, indicating the financial difficulties in the country: *to leave smb holding a bag; to dig into a pocket; to make ends meet; to be wiped out;*
- the group, indicating problems related to employment and unemployment issues: *to ship jobs overseas; to lay off teachers;*
- the group, indicating the problems connected with illegal crossing of border and migration: *to take on illegal immigration; to put more boots on the border;*
- the group, indicating a decline in the level of economic development: *to hit bottom; to back down; to be on the ropes; to tear down regulations;*
- the group, indicating fair rules of the political game: *a fair play; to play the same set of rules; to play the long game; to play by the rules;*
- the group, indicating the positive aspects of political and economic development of the state: *to fire on all cylinders; to feel fired up; to right the ship; to pan out; to become the next Steve Jobs;*

In the corpus of the material analyzed, idiomatic expressions with a negative connotation prevail. To some extent, such tendency can be explained by the very subject of the issues taking the first position in the election programs of politicians, since such issues are usually dedicated to economic problems, problems of social security of the population, unemployment and crisis in different spheres of social and economic life.

Thus, we can come to the conclusion that idiomatic units possess all essential features and characteristics required for political discourse and mass media; they are vivid, accurate and expressive.

Content analysis and description of lexical-thematic groups

Barack Obama's rhetoric is characterized by clarity and accessibility of information to the audience, which is one of the main means of achieving success.

As the researchers point out, the political discourse of the politician has a polycode structure, and it is proved by a significant number of semiotic systems which transmit information to the recipient. One of the tasks to deal with is to describe and analyze the lexical-thematic groups in the political discourse of US President Barack Obama through the classification of lexical units accordingly to thematic groups, and through the analysis of lexical means used by the politician.

As a result of the study and the analysis of lexical content of political discourse, all lexical units can be divided into six vocabulary categories: political and economic vocabulary, social, scientific and technical vocabulary, military vocabulary and vocabulary to describe ways of developing and reforming education. Such approach is considered to be effective due to its specific character and wide thematical range of B. Obama's discourse which aims to cover all areas of development and functioning of the state, from the political sphere to the technical one. The category of political vocabulary is found to be the largest of the total analyzed and is divided into the following groups:

– general political vocabulary to describe political positions and participants of political process: *United States Senator, governor, congresswoman, the White House, the Supreme Court, the Congress, Republicans, Democrats, U.S. Senate candidate, congressional candidates, opponent in the election, government bureaucrats, conservatives, liberals, CEO Chief executive officer, the mayor of Washington, D.C., Secretary of Education, Commander-in-Chief, State Treasurer, Attorney General, campaign co-chairs*;
– vocabulary to describe official visits, international organizations, governmental documents and projects, the names of funds and government agencies: *delegation, MCC Mortgage credit certificate, OPIC Overseas Private Investment Corporation, a free trade agreement, Department of Education, Department of Agriculture, the Constitution, HRC Human Rights Campaign, DOMA Defence of Marriage Act, the American Jobs Act*;
– vocabulary to describe government activity: *to strengthen trade relations, to block the bill, to lead with diplomacy, strong bilateral relationship productive bilateral talks, pass a bill.*

The second lexical-thematic group covers economic terminology. Within this group, we identified the following subgroups:

- lexical units related to the material welfare of voters and the state: *effective free market system, to pay off, to measure prosperity, to cut taxes, the highest job growth, falling unemployment rate, to create jobs, to lower deficit, to end tax breaks, to cut oil imports, to control own energy, to increase oil production, a good wage, low tax rates, an escape from poverty, to save the job*;
- lexical units which indicate material anti-values: *high tax rates, reckless bets with folks' money, higher fees for gas, to collapse, to go bankrupt, unemployment, economic crisis, to work an extra shift, burdened by debt*;
- lexical units to describe economic concepts and realities: *to invest, corporate balance sheets, quarterly profit reports, mortgage lenders, financial institutions, outsource jobs, small business owners, taxpayers, student loans, sustainable economy, to sell goods and services*.

The third group combines social vocabulary and is divided it into the following subgroups:

- nomination to denote social classes and groups and their representatives: *middle class, millionaires, billionaires, the wealthiest families, minorities, second-class citizens*;
- nomination to describe processes of organization or disorganization of social life: *reforms, health insurance, Social Security, campaign, rule of law, fair and free elections, reelection, national competition, high standards, deep patriotism, weakened up by inequality, threatened by the destructive power, a retirement system, to stop discrimination*;
- nomination related to state-territorial structure, characters and symbols of Ukraine: *sovereign and democratic country, the core of the nation, the model of democracy, to pledge to the flag*;
- nomination to describe the ways of health care system reform: *insurance company, health care, health care law, Medicare*.

The fourth lexical-thematic group distinguished here, includes lexical units describing the achievements of science and technology and is divided as follows:

- vocabulary to describe the functioning aspects of the Internet: *Barack Obama.com/plans, to register online, go to the website GottaRegister.com, Facebook, Twitter, to launch a website, put up an online database*;
- vocabulary to describe innovations, discoveries and achievements in various fields of science: *research, medical breakthroughs, new technologies, fuel-efficient cars, fuel-efficiency standards, long-lasting batteries*

and wind turbines and solar panels, to make investments in science and technology, technological ascendancy.

The fifth group includes lexical units denoting strategies and tactics of military operations, military personnel involved in these operations, and the actions of government in this direction:

– *defense, security, Navy SEALs, NATO, ISAF, casualties, to end the war, terrorists, veterans, to serve,to fights for the country, to bring home troops, military spouse, the strongest military on earth, to re-enlist.*

Finally, in the sixth lexical-thematic group we combined those lexical units that aim to describe ways of development and reform of education:

– *to educate, to recruit teachers, tuition, lifelong learning, classroom matters, school supplies, a bunch of great teachers, crowded classrooms, canceled programs for preschoolers, class size, to hire teachers, to start the career, best-educated, highly skilled, educators, to cut investment in education, Head Start, grants and loans for college students, education system, to raise standards for teaching, to get diplomas, the cost of college, to double grant aid to students, to rise cost of tuition, have a perfect score, upgrade the skills, public school, private school, charter school, extra-curricular activities, PTA (Parent Teacher Association) meeting.*

Thus, the analysis shows that the category of political vocabulary and the category indicating the ways of development and reforming education prevail and can be rated as those that prevail in B. Obama's speeches as the politician pays a great attention to the issues of education as well as the issues related to economic development. The research shows that B. Obama employs a large number of political terminology and he also uses many social and public terms, besides that his speeches comprise scientific vocabulary and vocabulary, describing the functioning of the Internet, which indicates the versatility of his political activities.

Conclusions

The analysis of the linguistic and stylistic means carried out on the functional and structural-semantic ground assumes that these means are not studied as ordinary forms and structures but as bearers of valuable information defined by the author, as bearers of certain ideas, relations, and communicative intentions. In the course of the analysis, it became clear that the orator uses various stylistic devices to produce a deep impression on the audien-

ce. Due to them, Obama concentrates people's attention on the necessary semantic elements and thus makes up the rhythmical trajectory of speech. The latter makes the speech easy to understand and interpret. As a result, the politician can easily put the accent on his vision of the political situation and persuades the electorate to vote for him.

The study has clarified new ways of arranging semantic space based on pragmatic factors of speech situation and explored stylistic resources of language in the political debate. As a result of investigation, the communicative and pragmatic peculiarities of lexical and stylistic figures of political speeches have been exposed.

Thus, the political debate is a complex of mental processes both individual and collective. Communicative-pragmatic functions are aimed at sending messages and cover a wide range of pragmatic tasks. The politicians introduce facts, events or figures in order to be able to express their own attitude to the described events, evaluate them and motivate the recipients to come up with conclusions. The information received modifies people's consciousness and encourages them to take certain actions.

Bibliography

Allan, K. (1991). *Euphemism and Dysphemism. Language used as shield and Weapon.* New York.

Burridge, K. (1991). "Political correctness: euphemism with attitude". In: *English Today*, vol. 12, no. 3.

Fraser, N. (2009). "Social justice in the age of identity politics". In: *Geographic Thought: A Praxis Perspective.* Routledge.

González, R. (1992). "Euphemism and political language". In: *UEA Papers in Linguistics*, vol. 33.

Kunin, A. (1996). *Course of phraseology of modern English.* Moscow: High School.

Obama, B. (2015). *Public Papers of the President of The United States*, B. II. Washington: United States Government Publishing Office.

Obama, B. (2017). *Public Papers of the President of The United States*, B. II. Washington: United States Government Publishing Office.

Panin, V. (2005). "Political correctness as a cultural-behavioral and linguistic category". In: *Abstract of a Thesis of the Candidate in Philological Sciences*, Tyumen.

President Obama's State of the Union Speech 2012, An America Built to Last. http://www.ibtimes.com/state-union-2012-obamas-speech-full-text-400180, 24.01.2012.

Remarks by the President at Campaign Event. (2012). https://www.white-house.gov/ the-press-office/2012/ 05/23/remarks-president-campaign-event, 23.05.2012.

Remarks by the President on the American Jobs Act. (2011). https://oba-mawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the-press-office/2011/11/30/ remarks-president-american-jobs-act, (07.07.2020).

The New York Times. Transcript of President Obama's Election Night Speech. www.nytimes.com/2012/11/07/us/politics/transcript-of-president-obamas-election-night-peech, 07.11.2012.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Dr. Iryna Losyeva, Associate Professor – Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (Ukraine).
E-mail: ilosyeva@yahoo.com