

AMERICA PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND THE SHAPING OF THE 21ST CENTURY GEOPOLITICS

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Abstract : Language in discourse has social, political, cognitive, moral and material consequences and effects, as Norman Fairclough explains in his Critical Discourse Analysis and the Critical Language Study method which appears to be one of the most appropriate tool to analyze and understand discourse in today’s world. Discourse carries ideologies which establish, maintain and adjust social relations of power, domination and exploitation.

Public discourse has a purpose as well as unintended consequences. US rhetoric is often a tool by which international leaders, governments and organizations assess the US and its intentions. Whether US’ officials mean what they say or not, US public discourse has a performative function ; it can create international stability or destabilize. That is why a subtle and sensitive analysis of US rhetoric leads to a better understanding of the US foreign policy and of international geopolitics.

The power of the American public discourse in the 21st century is this ability to influence through a discourse that is simple in terms of vocabulary and grammar but intricate in terms of meaning and purpose; it is easy to understand, it includes key words that reflect the will of the leaders to preserve America as the greatest nation in the world, to create false humiliation impression, to stir emotions and empathy, sympathy and solidarity feelings, with the purpose to cause behaviours and to acquire consent.

The act of interpreting assertions does not mean simply decoding words from the linguistic perspective. It implies matching the features of the utterance with recognizable interpretations and common sense assumptions which are ideologically shaped by relations of power which proves that language is a means to dominate people. Discourse means exercising power through communication. Discourse is part of the unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. People live unconsciously in realities made up of discursive elements that become recognizable when produced.

Key words: Communication, discourse, geopolitics, hegemony, US foreign policy.

Language in discourse has “social, political, cognitive, moral and material consequences and effects”, as Norman Fairclough explains in his Critical Discourse Analysis and the Critical Language Study¹ method which appears to be one of the most appropriate tool to analyze and understand discourse in today’s world. Discourse carries ideologies are representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation”².

Siobhan McEnvoy Levy is another author who sees discourse as a major tool in understading action. She dedicates her entire book, “American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy – Public Diplomacy at the End of Cold War”, to the study of the rhetoric of American public speeches, or “public diplomacy”, as she calls it, because: a) rhetoric is an “analytical priority, a key tool in understanding endeavours” such as: US foreign policy, the survival and effectiveness of US Administrations, b) rhetoric is a tool in shaping opinions,

¹ Norman Fairclough, „Analysis Discourse : Textual Analysis for Social Research”, 2003, p. 9

² Ibidem.

and c) rhetoric is a means for other countries to evaluate the US and its intentions³. The importance of public discourse and especially of the Exceptionalist discourse appears as major in Siobhan McEnvoy Levy's book as she identifies discourse (public diplomacy) so powerful that it can have "unintended consequences" and create or undermine international stability:

"Public diplomacy can have unintended consequences. US rhetoric is often a primary means by which other international leaders, governments and organizations evaluate the US and its intentions. It is not possible to dismiss such rhetoric as meaningless or lacking in consequences. Regardless of whether US' officials mean what they say or not, US public diplomacy is instrumental either in creating international stability or in undermining it. This alone legitimizes a careful and sensitive analysis of US foreign policy rhetoric"⁴.

Discourse analysis provides valuable information about how America sees itself and what are the values it wants to reflect and to promote across the world:

"An examination of speeches and statements can provide information about what a given Administration identifies as the source and strength of its power and how it perceives the US' place in the world. It provides evidence of how certain US elites wish the US to be viewed either at home or abroad"⁵

Discourse analysis is a crucial tool for Siobhan McEnvoy Levy. On the one hand, in order to identify meaningful elements. She therefore stresses that "techniques from the study of linguistics – semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis – allows us to chart dialogues and contests between political actors (states, international institutions, publics)"⁶. On the other hand, to correlate these meaningful elements with the context because in many cases, the same Exceptionalist elements may be used for different purposes:

"The adaptive use of American Exceptionalism is meaningful beyond a purely strategic function. Two administrations may differ but the maintenance and recasting of the Exceptionalism theme points to the existence of enduring principles"⁷

Siobhan McEnvoy Levy makes a subtle difference between intended and unintended consequences of a discourse. The outcome of her research suggests precisely that the US

³ Siobhan McEnvoy Levy, "American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy – Public Diplomacy at the End of Cold War", 2001, Palgrave, UK

⁴ Siobhan McEnvoy Levy, "American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy – Public Diplomacy at the End of Cold War", 2001, Palgrave, UK, p.2

⁵ Siobhan McEnvoy Levy, "American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy – Public Diplomacy at the End of Cold War", 2001, Palgrave, UK, p.5

⁶ Siobhan McEnvoy Levy, "American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy – Public Diplomacy at the End of Cold War", 2001, Palgrave, UK, p. 5

⁷ Siobhan McEnvoy Levy, "American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy – Public Diplomacy at the End of Cold War", 2001, Palgrave, UK, p. 5

relies heavily on rhetoric to build consensus and to gain support, and turns official statements into “mood shapers”⁸ which confirms that discourse always has a “desired effect”⁹:

“The strategic communicator exploits knowledge of the media, human psychology, public opinion and culture to shape and target messages so that their desired effect is maximized and their unintended effects are minimized”¹⁰

In addition to being ‘mood shaper’, American public discourse proves its instrumentality in establishing relations of power and hegemony in international relations. One pronounced, it determines reactions and actions of either consensus or rejection.

“The US governmental official makes efforts to construct and maintain shared beliefs about international affairs, establish interpretative control in the rhetorical political sphere and build elite and public consensus through the use of persuasive oral communication”¹¹

“US political administrations are primarily reliant on their public diplomacy skills in two related ways. Cumulative routine rhetoric creates a climate of belief, a consensus on broad values, which supports and enables the contingent use of rhetoric for achieving specific foreign policy issue and international events” (p. 3)¹²

“Official statements are mostly mood shapers, the vehicles for explanation of values, grand strategies and overall postures – what the US stands for, its purpose and interests”¹³

The power of the public discourse in the 21st century America is precisely this ability to influence the masses through a discourse that is simple in terms of vocabulary and grammar, and easy to understand by ordinary citizens; it includes dynamiting verbs and key words reflecting the will of the leaders to preserve America as the greatest nation in the world; it creates false humiliation impression; it stirs emotions and empathy; and it creates sympathy and solidarity feelings.

The act of interpreting the assertions does not mean simply decoding the words from the linguistic perspective. It implies, as Fairclough explains, “matching features of the utterance at various levels of interpretations you have stored in your long term memory”¹⁴ (1989, p. 10), corroborated with the ability of the audience to make the difference between what is said and what is meant in case there are discrepancies, as aspect studied by pragmatics, as Fairclough puts forward¹⁵. Basically, we can agree with Fairclough’s idea that

⁸ Siobhan McEnvoy Levy, “American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy – Public Diplomacy at the End of Cold War”, 2001, Palgrave, UK, p. 3

⁹ Siobhan McEnvoy Levy, “American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy – Public Diplomacy at the End of Cold War”, 2001, Palgrave, UK, p. 3

¹⁰ Siobhan McEnvoy Levy, “American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy – Public Diplomacy at the End of Cold War”, 2001, Palgrave, UK, p. 3

¹¹ Siobhan McEnvoy Levy, “American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy – Public Diplomacy at the End of Cold War”, 2001, Palgrave, UK, p. 3

¹² Siobhan McEnvoy Levy, “American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy – Public Diplomacy at the End of Cold War”, 2001, Palgrave, UK, p. 3

¹³ Siobhan McEnvoy Levy, “American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy – Public Diplomacy at the End of Cold War”, 2001, Palgrave, UK, p. 4

¹⁴ Norman Fairclough, „Language and Power”, Longman, NY, 1989

¹⁵ Norman Fairclough, „Language and Power”, Longman, NY, 1989, p. 10 : “One of the concerns of pragmatics has been the discrepancies which exists between what is said and what is meant, and how people work out what is meant from what is said”.

“language rests on common sense assumptions”¹⁶ and these “common sense assumptions can be ideologically shaped by relations of power”¹⁷ which proves that language is a means to dominate people. Discourse means exercising power through communication.

Case studies:

Two speeches have been chosen to study the power of language exercised through public discourse:

1) Senator Marco Rubio’s address to the Brookings Institution, in Washington DC, on 25 April 2012, and entitled “is The American Order Sustainable and Necessary in the 21st century?”

2) President Barack Obama’s speech on Syria, making the case for a military strike against Syria at the White House, on 10 September 2013

I have chosen Marco Rubio’s speech because, from the point of view of the producer of the speech, Marco Rubio’s personality seemed interesting . He embodies the American Dream of fulfillment. He is the son of a Cuban working class immigrant who came to the US in the 1960s and he launched his campaign for the US Senate in 2009 and won. His entire rhetoric reflects American beliefs in the unique place that America deserves in the world.

America’s position as the global leader in the 21st century and its exceptional qualities unparalleled by other countries are reflected in an exceptionalist discourse by Senator Marco Rubio, in his address to the Brookings Institution, in Washington DC, on 25 April 2012, and entitled “is The American Order Sustainable and Necessary in the 21st century?”. In a persuasive style, Senator Marco Rubio positions America as the leader in the 20th century, based on its messianic role successfully accomplished in the world after WW II, and therefore entitled to preserve this position unchallenged in the 21st century. Moreover, Senator Marco Rubio suggests that it is not America that wants to impose its rules but the world requests American values because they are the best to ensure progress. Key words that are usually associated with America’s exceptional image are repeated several times in his speech: “leadership”, “democracy”, “free market”, and “prosperity”:

„What world order might have existed from the end of World War II until the present if America -- absent American leadership. Could we say for certain that it would look anything like America’s vision of an increasingly freer and more open international system where catastrophic conflicts between great powers were avoided? Democracy and free market capitalism flourished? Where prosperity spread wider and wider, and billions of people emerged from poverty? Would it have occurred, if after the war, America had minded its own business and left the world to sort out its affairs without our leadership? Almost surely not”.

„The purpose of the institutions we established, from the United Nations to the World Bank and the IMF, was to spread peace and prosperity, not to certain narrow American interests. Other nations consented to our leadership because they saw what the economic and political values of the American worldview had achieved for us and they wanted the same for themselves. They followed us because they

¹⁶ Norman Fairclough, „Language and Power”, Longman, NY , 1989, p. 4

¹⁷ Norman Fairclough, „Language and Power”, Longman, NY , 1989, p. 4

believed that our way, the American way, the principals of free people and free markets, was the best way to advance their societies”.

Senator Rubio also includes a reference to religion to give his discourse an unquestionable dimension:

“America has ushered in the Biblical promise of a new Heaven and a new Earth, let’s stop and remember that the world America made is better, but it is not perfect. But it is vastly more peaceful and prosperous than any other age in recorded history. So, this is the world America made.”

America’s destiny is presented as ineluctably and closely interconnected with the world but from the position of the leader that does not allow others to lead and does not accept the position of equal partner. One reference is made to China, felt as a rising power and comparable to America but considered not “as benignly disposed to the political and economic aspirations of other nations as we are”. Senator Marco Rubio creates a negative image for China. He makes an antithetical comparison between America and China from a superior position, placing China lower by describing it in negative terms and associating it with rogue states which annuls all chances to be taken into account as a world’s leader. His linguistic technique is to describe by denying the opposite: “China is not benignly disposed ...”; “curtain of secrecy that veils the Chinese state...” ; “we must deal with the China we know today”, “it would be foolish to be confident in the idea that China can be counted on”. However, Senator Rubio accepts that China is a leading power in today’s world but he totally rejects the idea that China, or any other power described as “world order”, may become a leader in the foreseeable future because of the lack of values that the world needs and can only be found in America:

“would a world order -- or China, at least as we know China right now, as the leading power, be as benignly disposed to the political and economic aspirations of other nations as we are? I still have hope that behind the curtain of secrecy that veils the Chinese state that there are voices that advocate for the peaceful and responsible rise of that nation, voices that reject the idea of a global power as a zero-sum game. We hold out hope for a new China of tomorrow, but for now we must deal with the China we know today, a China which enjoys its closest relationships with countries like North Korea and Iran. So at least for now, it would be foolish to be confident in the idea that China can be counted on to defend and support global, economic, and political freedom or to take up the cause of human rights”¹⁸.

China is definitely seen as a potential competitor. Senator Rubio mentions several times China in his speech, each time with a negative image. For instance, criticism to China’s human rights, trade practices and interference of the state in business:

„The United States, Europe and East Asia represent 71 percent of the world’s economy. That’s a lot of leverage and we should use it to address problems, such as China’s disregard for intellectual property rights, gross human rights violations, its

¹⁸ http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2012/4/25%20rubio/20120425_rubio.pdf, p . 8

unfair trade practices, its currency manipulation, and the looming presence of China state-owned industries”¹⁹

Senator Rubio stresses several times in his speech America’s right to leadership:

“Everywhere we look, we are presented with opportunities for American leadership to help shape a better world in this new century”²⁰

Interestingly, Senator Rubio has a very direct manner to express America’s intention to fulfill its interests across the world through the channels of aid and humanitarian projects:

„In every region of the world, we should always search for ways to use US aid and humanitarian assistance to strengthen our influence, the effectiveness of our leadership, and the service of our interests and ideals. When done so effectively, in partnership with the private sector, with faith-based organizations and with our allies, foreign aid is a very cost-effective way, not only to export our values and our example, but to advance our security and our economic interests”²¹

This straightforward and explicit manner to express the intention to achieve American economic and geopolitical interests appears to be recurrent in American public speeches.

We understand that America unilaterally decides to preserve the privilege to shape global order although it shares burdens and opportunities. The speech does not reflect arrogance but it builds up on the Exceptionalist heritage of American public discourses. By using a communication strategy of questions and answers - asking questions and then answering with America’s achievements, his goal is to reject any doubt that America may be replaced by another country as global leader:

„But what is the role for America now? Is now finally the time for us to mind our own business? Is now the time to allow others to lead? Is now the time for us to play the role of equal partner? Well, I always start by reminding people that what happens all over the world is our business. Every aspect of our lives is directly impacted by global events. The security of our cities is connected to the security of small hamlets in Afghanistan and Pakistan and Yemen and Somalia. Our cost of living, the safety of our food, the value of the things we invent, make, and sell are just a few examples of everyday aspects of our lives that are directly related to events abroad and make it impossible for us to focus only on our issues here at home. The next question I’m asked then, is why doesn’t someone else lead for a change? Why do we always have to be taking care of the problems of the world? Isn’t it time for someone else to step up? And I always begin my answer to that question with a question of my own. If we start doing less, who’s going to do more? For example, would a world order -- or China, at least as we know China right now, as the leading power, be as benignly disposed to the political and economic aspirations of other nations as we are?”²²

¹⁹ http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2012/4/25%20rubio/20120425_rubio.pdf, p.16

²⁰ http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2012/4/25%20rubio/20120425_rubio.pdf, p. 10

²¹ http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2012/4/25%20rubio/20120425_rubio.pdf, p. 17

²² http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2012/4/25%20rubio/20120425_rubio.pdf, p. 8

The right of the US to unilateral decisions is further more stressed by the reference to the UN Security Council which does not always agree with the US on security issues. The US boldly defines other countries' national interests as "narrow" and proclaims itself the only country with the messianic duty to secure international peace.

"We can't always rely on the UN Security Council to achieve consensus on major threats to international peace and security. As we've seen on North Korea, on Syria, on Iran, China and Russia simply will not join that consensus when they do not perceive the problem as a threat to their narrow national interests".

Exceptionalist tinges in Senator Rubio' speech appear in his references to some of America's unique qualities such as innovation, as well as America's resilience and ability to re-invent itself:

„Millions of people have been the catalyst of democratic change in their own countries, but they never would have been able to connect with each other if an American had not invented Twitter. The atrocities of Joseph Kony would be largely unknown, but in fact, millions of people know about it because an American made a film and distributed it on another American innovation, YouTube"²³

„there's absolutely no reason why America cannot remain a global super power in this new century, as well. We have a huge head start in dealing with the challenges of transforming; we have the advantage of concentrating more of our energies, resources, productivity and innovation on figuring out the future"²⁴.

The 2nd speech I have chosen is interesting because it is produced by the President of the United States of America at a sensitive moment for international relations.

On 10 September 2013 President Barack Obama gave a long speech on Syria, making the case for a military strike against Syria at the White House²⁵. In a combination of argumentative and persuasive style, impregnated by Exceptionalist elements and using recurrent themes that come along the tradition of American public speeches, President Obama tries to gain consent for a very targeted military intervention in Syria meant to deter the use of chemical weapons and to degrade Assad's capabilities, in a context that does not project America in a favourable position and many voices are against more military interventions. The president himself admits: "One man wrote to me that we are "still recovering from our involvement in Iraq. A veteran put it more bluntly: "This nation is sick and tired of war". And finally, several people wrote to me, "We should not be the world's policeman."

President Obama started by creating an apocalyptic image about gassed people, with strong images meant to stir emotions. He delivered this speech before the UN report on this issue was made public. Two weeks later, the confirmation of the use of chemical weapons by the UN did not specify that the sarin gas had been used on 21 August 2013 on the rebel-held

²³ http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2012/4/25%20rubio/20120425_rubio.pdf , p . 19

²⁴ http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2012/4/25%20rubio/20120425_rubio.pdf , p . 22

²⁵ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/10/remarks-president-address-nation-syria>

Damascus suburb of Ghouta by the Syrian government. However, before knowing the findings, President Obama suggested that the user was the Syrian government:

“The images from this massacre are sickening: Men, women, children lying in rows, killed by poison gas. Others foaming at the mouth, gasping for breath. A father clutching his dead children, imploring them to get up and walk. On that terrible night, the world saw in gruesome detail the terrible nature of chemical weapons”.

Recurrent themes appear in the speech, such as: a) The comparison with the Nazi and WW II, present in American public speeches when the definition of the 21st century enemy is given as a justification for overseas military action: “In World War II, the Nazis used gas to inflict the horror of the Holocaust”; b) The mentioning of Israel as a strong ally in the Middle East and America’s support for Israel, and of Iran of a potential nuclear threat:

“If fighting spills beyond Syria’s borders, these weapons could threaten allies like Turkey, Jordan, and Israel. And a failure to stand against the use of chemical weapons would weaken prohibitions against other weapons of mass destruction, and embolden Assad’s ally, Iran -- which must decide whether to ignore international law by building a nuclear weapon, or to take a more peaceful path”.

“...our ally, Israel, can defend itself with overwhelming force, as well as the unshakeable support of the United States of America”.

Exceptionalist tones appear at times throughout President Obama’s speech. He positions America as the saviour of the world, the global leader, thus imposing a relation of authority and power. He describes the US with a metaphor: “the anchor of global security” and stresses that “The burdens of leadership are often heavy, but the world is a better place because we have borne them”.

The audience’s perception is that the Syrian issue is a matter of “national security” much more than a matter of international or regional security, and America cannot tolerate this situation. By using key words such as: “to make clear to the world” , “we will not tolerate”, “our leadership”, President Obama expresses authority and domination:

“...after careful deliberation, I determined that it is in the national security interests of the United States to respond to the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons through a targeted military strike. The purpose of this strike would be to deter Assad from using chemical weapons, to degrade his regime’s ability to use them, and to make clear to the world that we will not tolerate their use”.

“Our ideals and principles, as well as our national security, are at stake in Syria, along with our leadership of a world where we seek to ensure that the worst weapons will never be used”.

President Obama ends his speech in an apotheosis that places under no doubt America’s exceptional qualities and unique position. He makes a skillful association of the words “humility” and “resolve” which reflect at the same time the intention of multilateral approach, it suggests compliance with international decisions but also America’s intention to preserve its leadership:

“America is not the world’s policeman. Terrible things happen across the globe, and it is beyond our means to right every wrong. But when, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death, and thereby make our own children safer over the long run, I believe we should act. That’s what makes America different. That’s what makes us exceptional. With humility, but with resolve, let us never lose sight of that essential truth”.

It is to note that, for the first time, unlike George Bush, Margaret Albright, and other producers of more bellicose speeches for military intervention in the past, the tone of a presidential speech making the case for a military intervention sounds balanced between unilateral and multilateral decision. President Obama makes a balance between the bellicose tone and a parental tone. While previous military interventions were based on unilateral decisions, President Obama clearly states this time that he will wait for the diplomatic outcome and take into account the international opinion. Moreover, he mentions consultations with other countries among which Russia and China, two world powers that have been traditionally placed in opposition to the US:

“I have, therefore, asked the leaders of Congress to postpone a vote to authorize the use of force while we pursue this diplomatic path. I’m sending Secretary of State John Kerry to meet his Russian counterpart on Thursday, and I will continue my own discussions with President Putin. I’ve spoken to the leaders of two of our closest allies, France and the United Kingdom, and we will work together in consultation with Russia and China to put forward a resolution at the U.N. Security Council requiring Assad to give up his chemical weapons, and to ultimately destroy them under international control. We’ll also give U.N. inspectors the opportunity to report their findings about what happened on August 21st. And we will continue to rally support from allies from Europe to the Americas -- from Asia to the Middle East -- who agree on the need for action”.

President Obama speech must be interpreted at two levels: at the declarative level, it continues the Exceptionalist discourse, it includes communication strategies that create power relations and it reflects America’s desire to remain the hegemon; in between the lines, it betrays for the first time a reserve in taking unilateral decisions, and the involvement of other countries in the decision-taking process that are accepted to express their points of view may cause amendments in America’s strategies about approaching international issues. The authority of the global leader is felt in the statement “We’ll give U.N. inspectors the opportunity to report”. President Obama expresses thereby the relation of power, inherent in the American Exceptionalist discourse, by which he implies that America’s hegemony is unquestionable. Since it cannot be corroborated with actions that prove the contrary, this speech is not susceptible to be viewed as a “double discourse”²⁶ although it may contain unuttered intentions.

²⁶ James Petras, „Obama’s Double Discourse”, article on <http://www.globalresearch.ca/obamas-double-discourse-talking-peace-while-making-war/5353886>

Conclusion:

The act of interpreting assertions does not mean simply decoding words from the linguistic perspective. It implies matching the features of the utterance with recognizable interpretations and common sense assumptions which are ideologically shaped by relations of power which proves that language is a means to dominate people. Discourse means exercising power through communication. Discourse is part of the unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. People live unconsciously in realities made up of discursive elements that become recognizable when produced.

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