

## DISCOURSE OF THREAT AS A STRATEGY OF EMOTIONAL PERSUASION AND MANIPULATION

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### Abstract

The paper deals with the emotionalisation of contemporary media discourse, which is one of its important characteristics. It suggests that regular appeal to all sorts of threats (*terrorist threat, military threat, ecological threat, Russian threat, Chinese threat, etc.*), observed in media, evidences the emergence of a discourse of threat, which has an emotional impact on the audience, causes fear and anxiety in society. The study is limited to the notion of *Russian threat*. It explores the functioning of the word *threat*, its derivatives and synonyms in textual contexts with the focus on their pragma-discursive characteristics and functions. The material for the study was taken from newspaper articles, published in quality British and American newspapers in the period 2018-2019, which were analysed drawing on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001; Weiss & Wodak 2003, van Dijk 2006), mediallynguistics (Bryant & Zillman 2002, Richardson 2007, Dobrosklonskaya 2008, Klushina 2014; Kopytowska 2009, 2015). The study argues that the frequent use of the collocation *Russian threat* as well as the obsessive discussion of this topic in the Western media is aimed at creating a negative image of Russia and influencing public opinion. The paper evidences that emotional impact has become more aggressive and should be considered as a strategy of manipulation widely used by contemporary media, as it suppresses the ability of rational perception of information and helps to introduce certain ideas into people's minds without critical thinking. We suggest that in a broad sense the discourse of threat itself may be considered as a strategy of manipulation

**Keywords:** media discourse, persuasion, manipulation, emotional impact, strategy of fearmongering, "Russian threat", threat discourse

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Critical analysts and media theorists perceive journalistic discourse as an ideological social force, usually acting to support the interests of various economic and political elites (White 2000: 379). In the tense international situation that we have been observing, media have become an important socio-political force and is rightfully considered the fourth power. The mechanism of the functioning of the media involves not only and not so much information and a reflection of reality but what is much more important, its interpretation, commentary and evaluation, which contribute to the creation of a certain ideological background (Dobrosklonskaya 2008: 164).

Persuasion and manipulation have become the main functions of media discourse (e.g. Bryant & Zillmann 2002; Richardson 2007 et al.; Klushina 2014, Ozyumenko 2017, 2018, 2019; Larina & Ozyumenko 2017) at the expense of the information function. Considering manipulation as a form of persuasion, van Dijk (2006) specifies the main differences between them. The crucial difference, as he states, is that "in persuasion the interlocutors are free to believe or act as they please, depending on whether or not they accept the arguments of the persuader, whereas in manipulation recipients are typically assigned a more passive role: they are victims of manipulation" (van Dijk 2006: 361). This negative consequence of manipulative discourse,

as he further explains, “typically occurs when the recipients are unable to understand the real intentions or to see the full consequences of the beliefs or actions advocated by the manipulator” (ibid).

In order to manipulate the audience, a strategy of emotional impact has become widely used. The words *threat* and *fear* pervade modern political and media discourse (Kara-Murza 2005, Delanty 2008; Cap 2017, Kopytowska & Chilton 2018, Ozymenko & Larina forthcoming). Regular appeal to all sorts of threats (*ecological threat, terrorist threat, military threat, Russian threat, Chinese threat, etc.*), which are abundant in media texts, evidences the emergence of a discourse of threat. It exercises a significant impact on the emotions of the audience, causes fear and anxiety in society, and thus, in a broad sense, it can itself be considered a well-designed strategy of manipulating public opinion.

In this paper we will discuss the emotional impact of media focusing on the lexis and contents of threat in British and American newspapers talking about “Russian threat”, and show that the escalation of fear and social tension is the main feature not only of modern political discourse, as it has been stated by scholars (see Cap, 2017), but also of media discourse.

## 2. EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF MEDIA

Psychologically oriented linguistic studies have shown that emotion is an essential part of every kind of communication; it permeates all levels of the language and types of discourse and performs various functions (e.g. Wierzbicka 1999, 2018; Shakhovsky 2018; Foolen 2016, Alba-Juez & Larina 2018, Larina 2019, Mackenzie & Alba-Juez 2019, among many others). The appeal to readers’ emotions is a recognized characteristic of media discourse.

Denying a popular and common view that the direct causation of behaviour is the primary function of emotion, Baumeister and colleagues (2007) state that “[E]motion may however directly shape cognition, and cognition may have a fairly direct impact on behaviour (Baumeister et al.2007: 197). The outcome of cognitive processing can serve a valuable input into further behaviour, into decision-making and behaviour-regulation processes (ibid, p.168).

The role of emotion as a means of manipulation is determined by the fact that it suppresses the ability of rational perception of information and helps to introduce certain ideas into people’s minds. Chomsky considers emotional impact among the top media manipulation strategies, which he articulated as: *Use the emotional side more than the reflection.*<sup>1</sup> He characterizes making use of the emotional aspect in media as a “classic technique for causing a short circuit on rational analysis, and finally to the critical sense of the individual” (ibid.). He further explains that the use of the emotional register opens the door to the unconscious for the implantation of grafting ideas, desires, fears and anxieties, compulsions, or inducing behaviours (ibid).

As has been shown empirically by psycholinguistic experiments and neuroimaging (e.g. Isenberg et al. 1999), words associated with danger, fear, threat have a demonstrable effect on the brain. Drawing on insights from neuroscientific research on the role of lexis in fear stimulation, scholars working in critical discourse analysis define and analyse other words as well as discursive mechanisms that stimulate fear (Kopytowska & Chilton 2018).

We limit our study to the word *threat*, its derivatives and synonyms which are frequently used in contemporary media discourse as a fear trigger. As Kara-Murza (2005) notes, threat is a universal concept for influencing an audience, since negative emotions arising in a recipient as a result of a threat act most intensively affect thoughts, feelings and behaviour and, accordingly, represent the most effective tool for influencing (Kara- Murza 2015: 214). Threats are used to impact the audience, escalating mass psychoses and turning citizens into a controlled mass.

## 3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The material was collected from quality American and British media mainly for the period 2018-2019, including The Times, The Sunday Times, The Guardian, BBC, Reuters, The Washington Post, The New York Times, CNN, etc.

The study was conducted through critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2001; Van Dijk 2006, Weiss & Wodak 2007), the main provisions of media linguistics (Bryant & Zillman 2002; Dobrosklonskaya 2008; Klushina 2008; Kopytowska 2009, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> [http://theinternationalcoalition.blogspot.com/2011/07/noam-chomsky-top-10-media-manipulation\\_08.html](http://theinternationalcoalition.blogspot.com/2011/07/noam-chomsky-top-10-media-manipulation_08.html)

We analysed functional and pragma-discursive characteristics of the words with the semantics of threat as well as strategies of fear-mongering.

#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS

The textual analysis of the data has shown that the idea of the Russian threat is expressed quite explicitly and aggressively. The word 'threat' and the phrase 'Russian threat' appear rather frequently in newspapers and information sites, which illustrates the regular use of the fear-mongering strategy. It is noteworthy that they are often used in headlines, which primarily attract readers' attention. As examples (1-4) show, they explicitly claim the presence of threats from Russia and the need to be prepared to confront these threats:

- (1) *Britain's top general warns of 'reckless' **Russia threat*** (Times of Malta, 10.11.2019)
- (2) *NATO Chief Warns of **Russia Threat**, Urges Unity in U.S. Address* (Reuters, 04.04.2019)
- (3) *Britain faces a new kind of **Russian threat*** (The Times, 10.09.2018)
- (4) ***Russia: Vladimir Putin threatens** to target US over missiles based in Europe* (The Time, 20.02.2019)

To an uncritical reader, such headlines do sound threatening despite the fact that the articles do not provide any convincing and reliable facts.

We have already paid attention to an effective manipulation tool like interrogative headings (Ozyumenko, 2017, 2019; Ozyumenko & Larina 2018; Larina et al. 2019), which enable journalists to convey to the reader any, even the most incredible idea, without fear of being held responsible. When asking a question, they do not affirm anything, on the other hand, thanks to pragmatic presupposition, the desired idea is nevertheless delivered to the addressee. Thus, in the headings (5-6), the questions of how serious (5) and credible (6) the Russian threat is, presuppose that the threat exists and there is no doubt of this fact.

- (5) *<...> how serious is Russia's missile threat to the US? <...>* (The Times, 28.02. 2019)
- (6) *Does Russia present a credible threat to the UK?* (The Guardian, 15.03. 2018)

It is not uncommon that the style of the headings is direct and unambiguous, though the article does not give any facts or details concerning the fact declared and emphasized in the title. A vivid illustration is example (7), where Russian cyberattacks are called "a real threat".

- (7) *Russian cyberattacks are a real threat* (USA Today, 06.07.2019)

The analysis of adjectives used with the noun *threat* shows that the threat from Russia appears as an increasing and dangerous process which has a permanent character: *big threat, bigger threat, biggest threat, greatest threat, major threat, grave threat*, etc:

- (8) *These nations [China and Russia] have been identified as the **biggest threat** to the western alliance for many decades* (The Times, 31.01. 2019)
- (9) *Russia possesses **a grave threat** to our national security* (USA Today, Jan. 2018).
- (10) *Lawmakers said jointly in a statement Friday, pointing to recent reports about Facebook's efforts to discredit its political opponents and slowness to identify Russia as **a major threat*** (The Washington Post, 23.11.2018).

It is presented as a *rising, ongoing, escalating, evolving* process that is in a constantly dynamic state. As example (12) shows, its scale is truly impressive: it goes far beyond the well-known report of Mueller, with a volume of 448 pages:

- (11) *Britain and France must take their military alliance "to the next level" to combat **escalating threats**, the chief of the defence staff has said* (The Times, 24.09.2018)
- (12) *...the filing also sheds light on how the Justice Department views the ongoing threat of Russian attempts to influence American politics and goes well beyond what Mueller's team was able to say in its 448-page report* (POLITICO, 23.4.2019)

In addition to the noun *threat*, the verb *threaten* is also frequently used as well as a number of its synonyms expressing particular shades of threat: *intimidate, jeopardise, frighten, scare, terrify, endanger, put at risk*, etc.

- (13) *Putin **threatens** to scrap Obama-era nuclear deal* (The Times, 07.07 2019)

(14) *America's top general in Europe has warned that President Erdogan's purchase of a Russian missile defence system could **jeopardise** Nato security and lead to new US sanctions on Turkey (The Times, 07.03.2019)*

In (14) it is not so clear if the goal of the journalist is to indicate the Russian threat to NATO or to threaten Turkey with the possibility of sanctions on this country.

The Western media highlight the idea of the spread of Russian threat around the world with surprising persistence. Let us take as an example the threat of interference in elections. Judging by the headlines of leading British newspapers, Russia again intends to intervene in the 2020 election of the American president (15) and general elections in the UK (16), plans to bring discord in the elections to the European Parliament (17), and even to influence the elections in South Africa (18):

(15) *Trump not doing enough to thwart Russian 2020 meddling, experts say (The Guardian, 27.05.2019)*

(16) *The British government is under growing pressure to release a report into the threat posed by Russian election hacking ahead of December's general election... (The Independent, 2.11.2019)*

(17) *Russia 'will sow dissent during European parliament elections' (The Times, 18.03.2019)*

(18) *Documents **suggest** Russian plan to sway South Africa election (The Guardian, 08.05.2019)*

Despite the fact that Russia's interference in the US presidential election in 2016 has never been proven, the Guardian claims that Moscow can try to influence the 2020 elections by launching cyber-attacks, misinformation in social networks, operations of secret agents and other "active measures", as it did in the 2016 elections (19):

(19) *Moscow **may seek** to influence the 2020 elections by launching cyber-attacks, social media disinformation, covert agent operations and other "active measures" as it did in the 2016 election (The Guardian, 27.05.2019)*

Regarding Russian intervention in the European Parliament elections, the Sunday Times clarifies that Germany is the main goal of Russian intervention in the European parliamentary elections (20) and expresses analysts' fear that the regime of President Putin views the European Parliament elections as a chance to sow political discord on the whole continent before a possible invasion of Belarus or the Baltic states (21):

(20) *Germany is a prime target for Russian meddling in the European parliamentary elections in May (The Sunday Times, 18.03.2019)*

(21) *The agency's analysts fear that President Putin's regime regards the elections as a chance to sow political dissension across the continent before a **possible** invasion of Belarus or the Baltic (The Sunday Times, 18.03.2019)*

Although the above examples contain some means of epistemic modality (*may seek to influence, possible invasion*), they do not reduce the perlocutionary effect of these statements on the readers, who usually do not pay attention to such shades of modality. After reading (19–21) they will most likely keep in their memory *Moscow, influence on elections, cyber-attacks, disinformation, covert agent, invasion of Belarus and the Baltic states*. This kind becomes real thanks to the simple fact of their publication in the newspaper.

The goal of reports on the spread of the Russian threat around the world, from the Baltic to South Africa, is to show that although Russia is far away, the danger posed by it knows no boundaries; it can easily and quickly come to your country, and even to your home, as happened in Salisbury. The Salisbury incident and the endless anti-Russian rhetoric that followed it is a pre-meditated application of the proximization strategy (Cap 2017).

Western media regularly emphasize that Russia and "Putinism" as a combination of the socio-economic and political structure of modern Russia, pose a completely new threat to peace, which differs significantly from the threats emanating from previous dictatorial regimes, and this is seen as its special danger (22). In addition, threats from Russia are constantly changing and appearing in new forms (23):

(22) *Putinism represents a **new threat** to the world, one very different in fundamental ways from those of earlier imperial dictatorships (USA Today, 17.02.2019)*

(23) *Meister was one of the first analysts in Berlin to raise the alarm of a **new Russian threat** (The New York Times Magazine, 25.7.2019)*

In our material, not only Russia but also its president is an object of demonization. For this purpose, expressive lexis with negative evaluative connotations is used. As in examples (31-33), where Putin is called a *dangerous psychopath*, a *cruel tyrant* and *despot*:

(24) *President Putin is a **dangerous psychopath** – reason is not going to work with him* (Independent, Feb 2, 2018)

(25) *President Vladimir Putin's **cruel tyranny** is driven by **paranoia*** (The Telegraph, 31.07.2018)

(26) *Vladimir Putin: The Making of a **Despot*** (NEWSMAX, 28.03.2018)

In the article under headline (34), the author claims that Putin is absorbed in the idea of destabilizing the West with militaristic, social, and cultural means:

(27) *He [Putin] is fully engaged in a plan to destabilize the West through militaristic, social, and cultural means* (NEWSMAX, 28.03.2018)

This is another example of the tactic of generalization and unsubstantiated accusations, which are not supported by any specific facts or even assumptions. There is no indication what means Putin is going to use.

To enhance the emotional impact on the addressee, journalists and politicians use various expressive means such as idioms, metaphors, well-known cultural images, animalistic symbols, etc. In our material, more than once the word 'bear' (animalistic symbol of Russia) was used in the texts about Russia and its president. For example, The Telegraph in the heading of its article warns that a wounded bear is very dangerous and Russia could hit back hard after inept spies have been exposed (35). Member of the European Parliament Anders Vistisen, who is afraid of possible Russian aggression, is also wary of a wounded bear (36):

(28) *Beware the **wounded bear**: Russia could hit back hard after inept spies exposed* (The Telegraph, 06.10.2018)

(29) *"We are very concerned about Russian aggression. A **wounded bear is dangerous**," MEP Anders Vistisen, of the Danish People's party said last month in Milan, on the sidelines of Salvini's nationalist coalition launch* (The Guardian, 17.05. 2019)

In addition to verbal means, a variety of multimodal means (Ponton 2016) are used in the media for the realization of intimidation strategies aimed at achieving an emotional impact on the audience, e.g. heading size, font, colour, photographs, drawings, caricatures, etc.

Interestingly, in cartoons about Russia, according to our observations, the image of a bear is frequently used (see e.g. Ozyumenko 2017, Ozyumenko & Larina forthcoming).

The Russian president can also be seen among subjects of cartoons, where he is portrayed in a frightening and threatening manner as the embodiment of evil. Examples of this can easily be found on the websites of many western publications. It is worth mentioning that western leaders are not without the attention of cartoonists either. However, in Russia, due to cultural characteristics and a more respectful attitude to the authorities (Larina et al. 2017), such a derogatory depiction of state leaders, both one's own and others, is considered inappropriate.

Thus, in media texts we can observe the use of various means of emotional influence, including ideological modality, which gives the text an ideological colouring that corresponds to certain socio-political views and attitudes. The strategy of scare-mongering is combined with other strategies, such as ideological polarization, labeling and proximation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The paper critically explored the use of threat lexis and threat content in British and American quality newspapers. The findings showed the regular use of the lexemes *threat*, *threaten*, their derivatives and synonyms, as well as the obsessive mentioning and discussion of 'Russian threat'. These might evidence that their goal is to instill this idea into the audience's mind and generate fear.

The findings show that the emotional impact of media on the audience is becoming more aggressive and the escalation of fear has become a main feature of media discourse.

Although further and deeper research is needed, we suggest that, in a broad sense, the discourse of threat itself may be considered a strategy of manipulation.

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