

FUNCTIONS OF IDIOMS IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Viktoriia Chetaikina

Ph.D., Associate Professor,

Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Ukraine;

Guest Scholar, University of Basel, Switzerland

e-mail: viktoriyachetaykina@gmail.com, orcid.org/0000-0003-0332-7925

Summary

The present paper highlights the role of idioms in Boris Johnson's speeches on the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2022. The total sample of phraseological turns identified during the analysis of the speeches of the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Boris Johnson, dedicated to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, includes 30 phraseological units. The main pragmatic function of the public speech is persuasion directed at influencing the listener or reader and shaping his views. Emotional information prevails in public speeches and relies on a wide range of language means reflecting it. Phraseological units belong to these means and their usage has its peculiarities. Since phraseological unit is one of the modes of reflecting thoughts, it is a clue to understanding speaker's values, ideas, intentions and beliefs. Johnson resorts to core usage of phraseological units, including biblical expressions, as well as violation of an idiom presented by the replacements, extension of the base form (by means of evaluative insertions), inversion of the base form and phraseological allusions. As the analysis of the data showed Boris Johnson's texts are dominated by neologisms, metaphorical comparisons, personifications, metaphors, epithets, hyperboles which are well-documented tropes in political discourse.

Key words: idiom, political discourse, public speech, violation of a phraseological unit.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.23856/6402>

1. Introduction

Language has a direct impact on the political situation in any country. According to J. Charteris-Black, in the times of all political systems, starting from autocracy and ending with democracy, leaders relied on the power of words as a means of persuasion (*Charteris-Black, 2005, p. 1*). A political speech is characterized by logic, imagery, emotionality, use of socio-political vocabulary and various types of syntactic constructions in order to persuade listeners of the speaker's political point of view. It raises an important social problem, analyzes and evaluates ways of solving it, makes generalizations and conclusions.

The main purpose of political speeches is to convince the listener, and that is why speakers use a variety of language means to achieve their goal. Rhetoric, the art of persuasion, has been known for over 2,000 years.

Political speech, as a type of socio-political rhetoric, is characterized by the specificity of methods of potential influence on the recipient of information. The effectiveness of such influence and effectiveness of manipulative strategies and tactics during the delivery of political speeches forces politicians to be balanced to relate to the content and form of the speech, first of all, to the use of linguistic and stylistic devices, design of the composition of the political speech itself.

The main **aim** of the present paper is to highlight the role of idioms in Boris Johnson's speeches on the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2022.

2. Literature review

Attention to political discourse, strengthening of the role of politics and politicians in the modern world that is on the verge of a radical redistribution of the political map of the world, the close cooperation of political structures and mass media led to the emergence and rapid development of a number of new disciplines – political science, conflict science, image science, etc. as well as the emergence of political linguistics. In a broad sense, political discourse is a kind of institutional discourse that encompasses various speech acts in the public sphere and policies combined with extralinguistic social and cultural factors (clear rules for conducting social and political activities, subjects of political communication, typical political views or ideological positions) for obtaining and maintaining political power.

Discourse is understood as a complex communicative phenomenon, which includes text, communication participants, communication situation and extra linguistic factors. Institutional discourse is determined by the types of social institutions formed in society, characterized by a number of linguistic relevant features, among which the most important are the purpose of communication, the representative communicative function of its participants and the fixed circumstances of communication. One of the types of institutional discourse is a political discourse, which is a reflection of the socio-political life of the country, contains elements of its culture, as well as features of a national character, general and national-specific cultural values and aims at gaining and maintaining political power. Political discourse has been researched by a number of scholars who proved the idea that a language bears a significant influence on politics (*van Dijk, 1991; Chilton, 1992; Wodak, 1990*). The political scholar Edelman states that “political language is political reality”. According to the scholar, language is “not simply an instrument for describing events but [is] itself a part of events” (*Edelman, 1977, p. 4*). Geis (1987) supports this statement by saying that “the language used to describe political events can influence political perceptions in a way that goes beyond its propositional content. The net effect can be a subtle, largely covert influence of language on political perceptions.” Geis (1987) provides an example of the novel “Nineteen Eighty Four”, in which the author, George Orwell, described a totalitarian society, Oceania, in which language was used as an instrument of political repression. The tyrants of Oceania took the line that only those thoughts that can be formulated in language are thinkable, and, therefore, it should be possible to restrict the range of things that are thinkable by restricting the range of things that are sayable. In an attempt to restrict the citizenry’s capacity to think politically heretical thoughts, Oceania’s tyrants restricted the English language so as to make such thoughts inexpressible (*Geis, 1987*).

Political developments and language are ambiguous because aspects of the events, leaders, and policies affect final decisions. Even when there is a reasonable consensus on what happened or what was said, there are contradictory hypotheses about the causes of events and the consequences of courses of actions (*Dramnescu, 2007, p. 47*).

Political discourse is a central term of political linguistics – a branch of linguistics that appeared at the intersection of linguistics and political science, and is closely connected with other disciplines, especially with pragmalinguistics, communicative and cognitive linguistics. The main task of linguistic analysis of political discourse lies in disclosing the mechanism of complex relations between language, government/power and society. Political linguistics research facilitates understanding of modern political processes as well as enables to see the real message of public leaders’ speeches and their methods of manipulation. (*Chilton & Ilyin, 1993*).

There is no single definition of political discourse at present; it can be treated as a narrow or a broad notion. In its broad meaning, political discourse is focused on participants, objects,

conditions, context, time, actions etc. Chilton defines political discourse as the use of language in ways that humans, being political animals, tend to recognize as political. According to the scholar, people can try to separate out aspects of language (structure and lexicon) that are frequently or typically found in association with what we, again as political animals, interpret as particular types of political behavior. The scholar also points out the significance of politeness phenomenon in political discourse since issues of power are present in the public sphere to a larger extent than in civil or private one (*Chilton, 1993, p. 39–41*). The notions of face-threatening acts and of mitigation are important in order to comprehend the practices of political talk (forms of evasion/solidarity/exclusion, euphemizing strategies and devices of persuasion) (*Chilton 1993, p. 40*).

In contrast, van Dijk (1996) follows a narrow definition of political discourse stating that “it is a class of genres restricted to a social area, namely politics. Political discussions, parliamentary debates, party programs, speeches of politicians are the genres of political area. Political discourse is the discourse of politicians. The scholar restricts political discourse to politics, activities of politicians, he notes that political discourse is at the same time the form of institutional discourse. Therefore, discourses of politicians are the discourses that arise in such institutional settings as governmental meetings, parliamentary sessions, political parties, congresses. Thus, discourse becomes a political one when it accompanies a political act in the political environment (*van Dijk, 1996*). In this work preference is given to the latter understanding of the given term.

As it is well known, the main pragmatic function of the public speech is persuasion directed at influencing the listener or reader and shaping his views. Consequently, we find in public speeches ‘a blend of rigorous logical reasoning, reflecting the objective state of things, and a strong subjectivity reflecting the author’s personal feelings and emotions towards the discussed subject’ (*Kukharensko 2000, p. 118*). Emotional information prevails in public speeches and relies on a wide range of language means reflecting it.

Usually, analyzing the speeches of political leaders in the framework of political linguistics, scholars describe the speech behavior of a politician, study the rhetorical strategies of their political activities, reconstruct their linguistic personality. The linguopoetological approach to the study of texts is used in this study according to which political discourse involves the detection of stylistically marked elements of the language system (political vocabulary, highly specialized terms, words characteristic of a certain functional language style, neologisms, phraseological units, stylistic devices and techniques, stable word combinations) and emotional and expressive content components inherent in them (special connotations and associations) in terms of their relationship with the relevant value system of the target audience.

Since phraseological unit is one of the modes of reflecting thoughts, it is a clue to understanding speaker’s values, ideas, intentions and beliefs. Phraseological unit presents ‘speakers’ reflection in a communicative situation’ (*Selivanova 2006, p. 642*), as the speaker correlates his emotional and evaluative attitude as well as values with the phraseological unit.

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3. Materials and methods

The research is focused on the speeches by the former Prime Minister of Great Britain Boris Johnson, who is considered to be one of the most devoted friends of Ukraine and is extremely popular among Ukrainian people. During the first 100 days of the war, Prime Minister Boris Johnson made 20 speeches devoted to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. He addressed the House of Commons, the Ukrainian Parliament, appealed to the people of the UK, Ukraine and Russia, and made statements at official events and meetings. These speeches are part of the public sphere and open access.

We rely on the application of contextual-interpretation method which is aimed at revealing the development of the main idea and the concept of the text in definite contexts of different language units' usage. This method also implies interpretation of the author's ideas and his influence strategies. The main focus of our attention in the given article is the analysis of the functions of idioms in the analyzed speeches.

4. Results and discussion

It should be noted that at the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine to cover the chronicle of the war, in the English-language media discourse only the word combination "Russia-Ukraine crisis" was used. Subsequently, after widespread publicity regarding the numerous victims of the Russian aggression, in the media discourse, such nominators as "Russia-Ukraine war", "Russian's invasion", "Russian's occupation", "Russian's attack", which, in our opinion, more adequately reflect the military-political situation in Ukraine.

In contrast, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has stated many times in his speeches that Russian started the war against Ukraine, against a peaceful country. Russia, namely Putin and his government, are to blame for breaking the foundations of the peace on the European continent – 'to launch assault', 'to launch onslaught', 'to launch war', 'to bring war', 'to unleash war'.

As the analysis of the data showed Boris Johnson's texts are dominated by neologisms, metaphorical comparisons, personifications, metaphors, epithets, hyperboles which are well-documented tropes in political discourse.

The British politician often resorts to metaphors, among which the most famous one is: *How can you negotiate with a crocodile when it has your leg in its jaws, that is the difficulty that Ukrainians face*. The metaphor "negotiate with a crocodile" implies a personification: the "crocodile" refers to the president of Russia, with whom any negotiation is dangerous. The object held in its jaw is the Ukrainian people. This metaphor therefore conveys the military-political situation in Ukraine and emphasizes the futility of any negotiations with the aggressor (it is impossible to negotiate with someone who wants to kill you).

Let us give an example of a metaphorical comparison as shown in (1): Boris Johnson compares the Ukrainian people with the bravery of a lion in the final sentence, expressing in this way his deep respect for Ukrainians, because the lion traditionally symbolizes the king beast that is not afraid of anything. In the continuation of the sentence "roar like a lion" emphasizes the power of the political influence of President Zelensky as the leader of a strong nation on the world stage. The phraseological allusions, in our opinion, 'the courage of lion' and the 'the roar of the lion' have their roots in biblical expressions in which the lion is associated with the bravery and boldness (as bold as a lion) (Idioms dictionary):

(1) *When I was here just a few weeks ago and we were in another room I think in your palace, the defence intelligence we had suggested Russia thought Ukraine could be engulfed in a matter of days and that Kyiv would fall in hours to their armies. And how wrong they were. I think that the Ukrainians have shown **the courage of a lion**, and you Volodymyr have given **the roar of that lion**.*

According to Johnson in (2) the Ukrainians' bravery impresses the whole world and moved everybody's hearts – 'to move the heart'. The base form of the phraseological unit 'to touch one's heart' was replaced into '*moved the hearts*', which presents the violation of an idiom.

(2) *In a great European capital, now within range of Russian guns, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is standing firm for democracy and freedom, in his righteous defiance I believe he has **moved the hearts** of everybody in this House.*

Let us consider example (3).

(3) *I will do everything in my power to starve Putin's war machine. We are stepping up our sanctions and military support, as well as bolstering our humanitarian support package to help those in need on the ground.*

Here the politician uses metonymy, describing Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a military war machine. He shows his negative attitude towards the war in general and emphasizes that while Russia wants half of the world to starve, blocking Ukrainian transportation grain in the ports, the world will starve its military machine with economic sanctions and military support for Ukraine.

In Boris Johnson's opinion, Russian troops commit many crimes on the territory of Ukraine against civilians and Russian government denies it. Russian war machine is numerous, but not always successful – 'war machine', 'war crimes', 'to commit war crimes', 'stain on the honour'.

(4) *Putin's **war machine** will not succeed in holding down Ukraine. I think what Putin has done in places like Bucha and Irpin, his **war crimes** have permanently polluted his reputation and the reputation of his government. Russia's despicable attacks against innocent civilians in Irpin and Bucha are yet more evidence that Putin and his army are **committing war crimes** in Ukraine. And he knows they are **a stain on the honour** of Russia itself.*

The Russian war machine is destroying Ukraine as it ruins civilian infrastructure, levels with the ground towns and villages in Ukraine – 'to lay waste', 'to grind into dust' (biblical expressions), 'to tighten the vice', 'to bite off chunks', 'to vent fury on', 'to unleash fury'.

In (5) the phraseological unit 'it's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog', meaning that stamina, passion, motivation in the battle is much more important than the size of the battler, emphasizes the courage of little Ukraine fighting enormous Russia. These words are considered to belong to American writer Mark Twain.

(5) *You have proved the old saying – **it's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog** – which is an old English saying, I'm not sure how well that translates in Ukrainian but you get what I'm trying to say.*

Boris Johnson's public speeches abound in phraseological units emphasizing the solidarity with Ukraine, profound support and readiness to help. In (6) Boris Johnson argues that at first, the UK together with the USA and other countries warned Ukraine of the approaching war and tried to settle the disagreements between Russia and Ukraine by negotiating, but it was in vain – 'to try one's utmost', 'to sound the alarm', 'to explore every avenue', 'to be in vain'.

(6) *From the beginning, we have all **tried our utmost**, we've all tried, to find a peaceful way through this crisis. Together we have **explored every avenue** and given Putin every*

opportunity to pursue his aims by negotiation and diplomacy. And it is because we suspected as much that the UK and our allies repeatedly **sounded the alarm** about a possible new invasion, and we disclosed much of what we knew about Russia's military build-up. Unless the situation changes, the best efforts of the United States, of this country, France, Germany, and other allies to avoid conflict through patient diplomacy may **be in vain**.

Prime minister Boris Johnson states in numerous texts (see (7)) that the UK and other countries are ready to stand together with Ukraine at difficult times, he promises utmost support and assistance – 'to stand shoulder-to-shoulder', 'to work shoulder-to-shoulder', 'side by side', 'to stand side-by-side', 'to work side-by-side', 'to stand with Ukraine', 'to stand with Ukrainian brothers and sisters', 'to be on one's side'.

(7) *During the excellent meetings we have had today we reaffirmed that our three countries **stand shoulder-to-shoulder** against Russia's barbaric invasion of Ukraine. We are united in our abhorrence to the evil actions of Putin's regime and **stand side-by-side** on the international stage as we deplore its aggression in the strongest possible terms. ... and I say to the Ukrainians in this moment of agony we are with you we are praying for you and your families and we are **on your side**. ... and I say to the British people and all who have heard the threats from Putin against those who **stand with Ukraine** we will of course do everything to keep our country safe.*

We should mention that the base forms of the above mentioned phraseological units are 'to stand shoulder-to-shoulder', 'to stand side-by-side', 'to stand with one' and the replacement 'to work shoulder-to-shoulder', 'to work side-by-side' or extension 'to stand with *Ukrainian brothers and sisters*' are the examples of violation of the phraseological units.

Unfortunately, the war in Ukraine continues and there's no end to it, so Johnson argues that the UK should be ready to give support to Ukraine for a long time – 'in the long term', 'for (in) the long run'.

(8) *This is just the beginning. We must support a free and democratic Ukraine **in the long term**. This is a fellow European democracy fighting a war of national defence. I made clear today that the United Kingdom stands unwaveringly with them in this ongoing fight, and we are in it **for the long run**.*

The phraseological unit 'to open one's heart' in Boris Johnson's speech has the insertion, which creates zeugma – 'open one's *homes* and hearts', so we again deal with the instantial stylistic use.

(9) *The Polish **people have opened their homes and their hearts** to welcome the greatest share of Ukrainian refugees, hosting over 1.8 million Ukrainians.*

5. Conclusions

The total sample of phraseological turns identified during the analysis of 20 speeches of the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Boris Johnson, dedicated to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, includes 30 phraseological units. Summing up, we can state that the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson resorts to core usage of phraseological units, including biblical expressions, as well as violation of an idiom presented by the replacements, extension of the base form (by means of evaluative insertions), inversion of the base form and phraseological allusions.

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