

MAJA N. VOLODINA (Hrsg.):

Mediensprache und Medienkommunikation im interdisziplinären und interkulturellen Vergleich

Mit einem einleitenden Beitrag
von Ludwig M. Eichinger

INSTITUT FÜR DEUTSCHE SPRACHE



Tatiana Dobroslonskaya

Media linguistics: a new paradigm in the study of media language

Under the conditions of an emerging information society, the study of mass media language has become particularly important. Until recently, the research of language functioning in mass media has been conducted by representatives of practically all branches of linguistics: sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, cognitive linguistics, etc. Nowadays the situation is such that there are all necessary preconditions for uniting all these different approaches under one academic discipline – media linguistics.

The term ‘media linguistics’ has been formed by analogy with the whole set of similar terms, used to denote new academic disciplines formed at the junction of several fields of research such as sociolinguistics, ethnolinguistics, media psychology, media economics etc. The term ‘media linguistics’ was introduced relatively recently to Russian academic discourse (in the year 2000), when it was used for the first time in Tatiana Dobroslonskaya’s doctoral thesis, “Theory and Methods of Media Linguistics” (Dobroslonskaya 2000a). Two years earlier the English variant of the term ‘media linguistics’ could be found in the work of some British scholars, for example, in the article “The Scope of Media Linguistics”, by John Corner, presented as a talk at the British Association of Applied Linguistics Conference in 1998 (Corner 1998).

As it proceeds from the term itself, based on the combination of two key components ‘media’ and ‘linguistics’, the subject of this new discipline is the study of language functioning in the sphere of mass communication. In other words, media linguistics deals with the overall complex research of a particular social field of language usage – the production of speech in mass media. The emergence of media linguistics as a new branch of language studies is fully justified, taking into consideration a crucial role that mass media have been playing in society for the past 30 years. Rapid development of print as well as electronic media, quick growth of virtual communications and the Internet have changed people’s lives enormously, giving stimuli for the development of a whole range of information society theories. Nowadays the biggest part of everyday speech practices is implemented in the sphere of mass communication – in newspapers, radio, television and the Internet. Continuous development of information communication technologies (ICT) results in the rapid

growth of the total volume of texts transmitted by media channels in different national languages in the world information space. It should also be noted that media linguistics is not the only discipline that was singled out as the study of a particular area of language usage, the same principle was used to form one more new direction of linguistic research – political linguistics, focusing on the study of speech production in political communications (Chudinov 2006).

Objective preconditions for the emerging of media linguistics shaped in the 1970s, when in Russia and Europe various publications specifically dealing with language functioning in mass communication began to appear on a regular basis. The authors of those papers analyzed media texts within the framework of various academic traditions, including sociolinguistics, functional stylistics and pragmatics, discourse theory, content analysis, cognitive linguistics and rhetorical criticism. The attention was focused on a wide range of issues: from defining the status of media language in terms of functional stylistics and methods of describing different types of media texts to the impact of socio-cultural factors and language techniques of media influence on mass and individual consciousness.

A considerable contribution to forming the basis of media linguistics was made by the following Russian scholars: S. Bernstein, D. Shmelyev, Vitaly Kostomarov, Jurij Rozhdestvenskiy, Grigorij J. Solganik, S. Treskova, Irina P. Lysakova, B. Krivenko, and Alena Vasilyeva. The English language tradition is represented by Teun van Deijk, Martin Montgomery, Allan Bell, Norman Fairclough, Robert Fowler and others.¹ The study of these scholars' works allows us to conclude that by the end of the 20th century, all necessary preconditions for transforming the existing knowledge and experience into a full-fledged separate academic discipline ‘media linguistics’ had been formed. In other words, the total volume of research in media language functioning had reached its ‘critical mass’, which made it possible to transfer the studies of the given sphere onto a new level of the separate discipline ‘media linguistics’,

¹ See, in particular, the following publications: Шмелёв, Д.Н. (1977): Русский язык в его функциональных разновидностях. Москва; Бернштейн, С.И. (1977): Язык радио. Москва; Костомаров, В.Г. (1971): Русский язык на газетной полосе. Москва; Языковой вкус эпохи (1994). Москва; Васильева, А.Н. (1982): Газетно-публицистический стиль речи. Москва; Рождественский (1997); Солганик, Г.Я. (1981): Лексика газеты:функциональный аспект. Москва; Трекова, С.И. (1989): Социолингвистические проблемы массовой коммуникации. Москва; Лысакова, И.П. (1989): Тип газеты и стиль публикации. Санкт-Петербург; Кривенко, Б.В. (1993): Язык массовой коммуникации:лексико-семиотический аспект. Воронеж; Fowler (2001); Fairclough (1989); Bell (1991); Тейун ван Дейк (1989): Язык. Познание. Коммуникация. Москва; Montgomery (1992).

offering a systematic overall approach to the analysis of mass media language practices.

As it is commonly known, every establishment of a new branch of academic knowledge as a separate discipline should conform to certain conditions and requirements, such as: 1) the existence of a thoroughly developed theory that would serve as a solid basis for further research in the given field; 2) a more or less stable inner thematic structure; 3) methodology or a set of techniques and methods of analysis; 4) terminology. Let us dwell on all these components as applied to media linguistics.

Undoubtedly the most important theoretical component of media linguistics is comprised by **the concept of media text**, which is actually mentioned in all studies devoted to speech production in mass communication. The essence of this concept could be summed up as follows: a traditional for linguistics definition of a text as a “coherent and integral stretch of language either spoken or written” (Carter 1993), when taken to the sphere of mass communication, considerably expands its meaning. In mass media the concept of a text goes beyond the formal boundaries of a verbal sign system, and approaches its semiotic interpretation, when a ‘text’ refers to a stretch of any type of signs, not necessarily verbal. Most researchers agree that the level of mass communication adds new aspects of meaning to the text concept, determined by media qualities and characteristics of the respective mass communication channel. Thus, media texts on television are not restricted to verbal manifestation only, they incorporate several functional levels: verbal text proper, video (in journalistic terms ‘footing’) and audio, which includes all possible effects perceived by ear, from voice qualities to music. Texts on the radio and in print media are also characterized by a certain combination of a verbal level with a set of special media qualities, determined by technological peculiarities of the respective media channel, like sound effects on the radio or a newspaper layout and colorful illustrations in press. So we may assume that media texts can be regarded as multi-level and poly-dimensional phenomena.

This salient feature of media texts is stressed, in particular, by many British scholars, who describe media texts as an integral combination of the verbal and media characteristics. Thus, a well-known researcher of the media language, Alan Bell, writes in his book “Approaches to Media Discourse”:

Definitions of media texts have moved far away from the traditional view of text as words printed in ink on pieces of paper to take on a far broader definition to include speech, music and sound effects, image and so on [...] Media texts, then, reflect the technology that is available for producing them [...]. (Bell 1998, p. 3)

A significant component of media linguistics' theory is comprised by a set of parameters specially designed for a thorough and coherent description of all possible types of medial texts. So the central concept of a media text is supported by a stable system of parameters, which allow us to describe and classify all texts functioning in mass media in terms of their production, distribution, verbal, and media characteristics. This system includes the following parameters (Dobrosklonskaya 2000a):

1. Authorship (the text could be produced either by an individual or a collective);
2. Type of production (oral – written);
3. Type of presentation (oral – written);
4. Media channel used for transmitting: both print and electronic media, Internet;
5. Functional type or text genre: news, comment and analysis, features, advertising;
6. Topical affiliation (politics, business, culture, education, sport, and other universal media topics forming the content structure of everyday information flow).

Let us dwell on each of the parameters in some detail. The first parameter ‘authorship’ allows one to describe any media text in terms of its authorship as either individual or collective, depending on whether it was created by an individual or by a group. In media language practices the category of authorship acquires a particular importance: the use of by-lines, identifying the journalist who has produced the text, often becomes the trademark of style and quality of the relevant publication. “The Economist” has made the absence of by-lines its editorial policy, promoting the unique analytical style of the publication which distinguishes “The Economist” from any other political and business magazines. There are also other editions which do the same. Collective authorship is mainly associated with news texts and materials prepared by information and news agencies operating worldwide, such as Reuters, BBC, ITAR - TASS, etc. Such short news texts can be easily found in the “News in brief” section present in practically every newspaper or magazine, and comprise the skeleton of the world information flow.

As it transpires from the adduced list of parameters, the second and third ones, ‘type of production’ and ‘type of presentation’, are based on the same dichotomy: oral vs. written text. This reflects the salience of speech production in mass media as the sphere of human activity, characterized by increasingly blurred boundaries between oral and written forms of a language. The matter

is that in mass communication many texts which are initially produced in the oral form reach their audience in the print version, and the other way round, the texts first produced in writing then are presented orally. Take, for example, interviews, which emerge as a result of a conversation between a journalist and the interviewee and are then published in newspapers and magazines, thus acquiring a written form. A similar transformation takes place when a news anchor reads texts with news items addressing mass audience or a TV commentator reads the text from the screen, imitating unprepared spontaneous speech. The use of the parameters ‘type of production’ and ‘type of representation’ allows us to take into account this subtle correlation of oral and written factors, and draw a distinct line between originally oral texts meant for publishing and initially written texts meant for oral presentation. Thus, an interview published in the print media can be described as text, oral by production and written by representation, while the speech of a newsreader can be described the other way round – written by production and oral by presentation.

No less significant is the next parameter – the media channel that carries the text to mass audience. Since the famous statement by Marshall McLuhan, “the medium is the message”, the huge impact of technological or media component proper on the information distributed through means of mass communication has been recognized by all media scholars. Each media channel – the press, radio, television, and the Internet, is characterized by a certain set of media qualities, determined by the technology used and the nature of the respective media itself. These media qualities play a crucial role in shaping concrete media texts, which by definition, are based on an integral unity of verbal and media components. In addition, the perception of media texts depends to a great extent on how the verbal and the media parts are integrated. Thus, in newspapers and magazines a verbal text is often supported by artwork and illustrations, which could add special meaning and expressiveness. Texts on the radio extensively use voice qualities and qualifications, such as timbre, intonation, pace, different accents, and a whole range of sound effects and music. Television gives a greater extension to a verbal content, adding visual dimension with bright colours, moving image, and video footage. Technical characteristics of the Internet have made it possible to enjoy multimedia texts, combining media qualities of all traditional means of mass communication: the World Wide Web provides access to online versions of practically all print and electronic media, and also offers unlimited opportunities for downloading required content.

The fifth parameter ‘functional type and genre of the media text’ comprises a significant element of the typological description of an unceasing flow of media messages. Typological description, based on stylistic and genre classifica-

tion, has always presented a challenge for the study of language functioning in mass communication. This is determined by the following two factors: content of the genre concept itself and the increasingly dynamic language usage in the given sphere. Both Russian and European scholars note that the traditional definition of genre as “the recognized paradigmatic set into which the total output of the given medium (film, television, writing) is classified” (O’Sullivan/Montgomery/Fiske (eds.) 1994, p. 127) does not allow to adequately classify constantly growing media flow. Indeed,

it is hard to isolate the precise characteristics of a given genre, and arrive at a finite list of all the different genres (whether of one particular medium or across them all). Further, you can't isolate what kind of characteristics indicate distinctions between genres – it's not just subject matter, nor just style, nor is it simply the establishment of distinct conventions appropriate to each genre. It is all of these. (*ibid.*, p. 128)

Besides, a high level of stylistic diversity of the media speech makes the application of a genre system extremely problematic.

The theoretical framework of media linguistics helps to solve this problem by offering a universal typological classification, encompassing the whole variety of media texts and overcoming the challenge of the constant speech flexibility factor. This classification is based on the functional stylistic classification formulated by an outstanding Russian linguist, Viktor Vinogradov, and allows us to single out the following four types of media texts:

1. news,
2. comment and analysis,
3. features,
4. advertising.

The advantages of this classification proceed from the fact that it allows us to adequately reflect the actual combination of two language functions – the function of information and the function of impact. If we try to describe the four above types in terms of the implementation of these functions, then news texts realize the information function to the highest degree, the materials that belong to the category ‘comment and analysis’ combine information function with impact due to the increasing use of evaluative components, like, for example, in the abstract from “The Daily Telegraph” adduced below:

Yesterday the Foreign Minister apologized effusively: he wished he could “un-say” what he said to the BBC. But the remarkable and encouraging feature of this whole episode is how few people believe it will derail the much-vaunted peace train.

The definition of a feature as “a special article in a newspaper or magazine about a particular subject; or a part of a television or radio broadcast that deals with a particular subject” (Cambridge International Dictionary of English) makes it possible to include in this category a wide spectrum of media texts, devoted to diverse topics regularly covered by the media: from technology and education to culture and sport. Feature texts are always marked in terms of authorship, which makes the implementation of the impact function more important as compared with the news and information analysis category. It should also be noted that in feature texts, the realization of the impact function becomes increasingly linked to its esthetic manifestation, similar to fiction writing. And finally, the fourth category ‘advertising’ combines the implementation of the impact function on language level, with extensive use of different means of stylistic expression (metaphors, tropes, similes, etc.), and its realization on mass media level involving the whole arsenal of concrete media effects and technologies.

So it may be concluded that the descriptive potential of ‘the four text types’ classification, offered by media linguistics, is optimal, hence it allows us to analyze the whole diversity of media texts both in terms of its format characteristics, and in terms of implementation of language and media functions.

One more significant parameter for the analysis of media texts: ‘dominant topic’ uses as the main criteria the content factor, or belonging of text to a certain theme regularly covered in mass media. The study of everyday media speech flow demonstrates that seemingly chaotic media content is a well structured continuum, naturally organized around stable thematic structures. It may be assumed that mass media structure permanently changes the information picture of the world, organizing an incessant flux of media messages with the help of fixed regularly reproduced themes, or media topics, which include politics, business, education, sport, culture, technology, weather, etc. Such lists of traditional media topics can be found in any printed newspaper with its thematic division of pages, or in the newspaper’s Internet version, providing an even more specified list of covered subjects.

Analyzing media texts in terms of their topical structure presupposes taking into consideration the so called ‘linguo-cultural factor’. The matter is that in mass media the information picture of the world is processed through the filters of national language and culture, which is naturally manifested in the choice of culture-specific media topics regularly covered by the media of the relevant country. For instance, one of such topics of regular coverage in the British media is undoubtedly the life of the Royal family, particularly of the young

princes William and Harry, scandals connected with top level politicians and immigration, while in the Russian media landscape one can always find texts dealing with criminality and corruption cases among civil servants. Culture-specific topics, regularly covered by the media, can be called, by analogy with the term buzz-word, “buzz-topics”,² because they invite the keen interest of the wide public and reflect the cultural salience of the national media landscape.

A great significance for media linguistics' theory represents a statement concerning the mechanisms of texts perception that runs as follows: “correctness of text perception is determined not only by the choice of language units and their cohesion, but also relies on the shared background knowledge, or **communicative context**”.³ When applied to mass communication, the concept of communicative context is primarily understood as the whole set of conditions and prerequisites involved in media text production, transmission and perception, in other words, the sum total of all extralinguistic⁴ factors standing behind the verbal part of a media text. Hence the concept of communicative context includes a wide range of phenomena: from the socially and culturally determined reconstruction of events and politically biased interpretations to the category of ideological modality, the notion of meta-message and the whole spectrum of factors that influence the perception of media consumers. Thus, the concept of communicative context becomes closely linked with the general concept of discourse, integrating all components of a text as a final product of human communication: verbal part proper and nonverbal, including the whole variety of social, cultural, situational, and contextual factors. Defining discourse as a complex phenomenon emerging as the result of human communication, reflecting specific qualities of all basic components of a communication model – sender/receiver, media channel, message, encoding/decoding, an outstanding Dutch linguist, Teun van Dijk, attaches special importance to the extended interpretation of the contextual discourse perspective, which becomes particularly significant in the analysis of media texts.

Obviously, the extended notion of discourse, when referring to a whole communicative event, may well also feature other (visual, gestural) dimensions of communication and interaction, sometimes closely intertwined with the verbal aspect, as is the case in spoken movies and advertising. (van Dijk 1998a, p. 197)

² The term “buzz-topic” as applied to the analysis of the media content was first introduced in Dobrosklonskaya (2000b).

³ Translated from “Дингвистический энциклопедический словарь”, Moscow 1990.

⁴ In Russian academic discourse “extralinguistic” means “not pertaining to a language”.

The next factor that allows us to regard media linguistics as a separate academic discipline is the emergence of a relatively stable content structure. Though the list of issues shaping the content of media linguistics remains open, it is still possible to single out some more or less fixed topics that form the skeleton of this new branch of knowledge. It may be said that nowadays all media linguistics research is organized around the following six topics:

1. Defining the status of media language within the framework of contemporary linguistic studies, and its description in terms of a basic paradigm: language – speech, text – discourse.
2. Functional stylistic differentiation of media discourse, classification of media texts on the basis of different sets of criteria: implementation of language functions, media channel (print media, radio, television, and Internet).
3. Media speech typology, the spectrum of the media texts' types and genres, the description of the main types of media texts: news, comment and analysis, features and advertising.
4. Lexical, syntactic, and stylistic analysis of the language of media texts.
5. Discourse analysis of the media texts, including their production, transmission, perception, social and cultural context, ideological and political factors, interpretative potential of the media speech practices, and culture-specific traits.
6. Manipulative potential of the media language, verbal and media techniques used for persuasion in advertising, propaganda, public relations, and information management.

As far as components obligatory for every academic discipline such as methodology and terminology are concerned, media linguistics, being an interdisciplinary field of study, has successfully integrated some basic terms and methods used in humanities. The methodology applied for the study of media texts incorporates the whole range of techniques used in textual analysis: from traditional systematic and content analysis to stylistic, discursive, linguo-cultural, pragmatic, ideological, and sociolinguistic. It may be assumed that practically every academic school of language and media studies has made its contribution to the development of media linguistics' methodology. Today media texts are studied and described with the help of techniques developed by cognitive linguistics, discourse analysis, critical linguistics, functional stylistics, pragmatics, and rhetorical criticism. This multidisciplinary methodological apparatus determines the novelty of media linguistics' approach to the analy-

sis of mass communication speech practices, because on the basis of integration of the existing methods it provides a systematic multidimensional framework for the study of media texts.

The terminological system of media linguistics also reflects its multidisciplinary nature and includes terms borrowed from other fields of humanities: linguistics, sociology, psychology, media, and cultural studies. In spite of the fact that the terminological apparatus of media linguistics is still emerging, it is possible to identify several generally accepted terms, widely used for the description of language functioning in mass communication. These are mainly words and word combinations, formed on the basis of the lexical unit ‘media’, for instance: media text, media speech, media landscape, language and media qualities and characteristics, linguo-media persuasion techniques, etc.

Thus, it may be stated that the analysis of major components of media linguistics – theory, content structure, methodology, and terminology – allows us to conclude that this branch of language studies possesses all qualities and characteristics necessary for regarding it as a new academic discipline. It should also be noted that like other similar disciplines developed at a junction of two different directions of knowledge, media linguistics naturally combines features of its both comprising parts: on the one hand, it rests on the theoretical basis of modern linguistics, on the other, it incorporates recent achievements of media studies, thus integrating into a general framework of medialogy (*Medienwissenschaft*) – a new field of academic research specifically dealing with the overall complex study of mass media.

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