

The Specifics of Modern Political Communication in Germany: The Fight for Lexicon*

Irina S. Kashenkova, Roman Y. Kashenkov

MGIMO University

Abstract. This article highlights some aspects of modern political communication in Germany. Various linguistic and extralinguistic factors determine the relevance of the problem. The main purpose of the article is to look at the sphere of “language and politics” from the point of view of their interrelation, to demonstrate the power that the language of politics has over public opinion and the political situation in the country. To this end, the article describes the language of politics in terms of political linguistics, offers a classification of political vocabulary, and characterizes word–symbols, such as Liberty, Safety, Democracy and Terrorism as a reasonable way of expression and differentiation between words and political content. It is noted that political communication as an ideological discourse is aimed at the fight for power, while the main task of the language of politics is the fight for vocabulary, which ultimately is the fight for voters. The desire to influence the political preferences of voters in conditions of a worsening migration crisis in Germany dictates the need to consciously choose one’s words: positive words–banners, such as Peace, Fairness and Safety, to increase the importance of their position in public opinion, or to mobilize their own supporters; or negative words–labels, such as Terrorist, Islamist and Extremism, to reduce the importance of the position of the enemy or verbally attack one’s political opponent. Through the example of actual concepts of migration discourse, namely welcome culture, leading culture, farewell culture, the article examines the strategies and tactics through which political communication is a struggle for vocabulary, thus showing the correlation of language and policy.

Keywords: language of politics, political vocabulary, words–symbols, words–banners, words–stigma, term, fight for vocabulary, strategies

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A number of factors have paved the way for us to explore language as the most important means of communication in a political context: the numerous works on the relationship between language and politics; the analyses and critiques of political language; and the establishment of a new area of linguistic pragmatics, namely political linguistics. There is no doubt that language plays a special role in politics. In addition to communicating certain sociopolitical information, language both reflects and shapes objective reality, acting as a tool for creating a positive or negative attitude to political processes and social phenomena, and as a means for forming a positive or negative image of the speaker or his or her political opponents, thus determining specific political actions in everyday life.

We should note here, however, that the specific features of the language of politics prevent us from providing an unambiguous definition of it here. That notwithstanding, scholars in Russia and other countries use synonymous concepts to categorize the language used in political communication. For example, O.I. Vorobyeva defines political languages as “a kind of language code [...], the basis of which should be considered political vocabulary, which occupies a special place in the vocabulary of language” (Vorobyeva, 2011: 10). One of the most influential German researchers in the field of language and politics, Walther Dieckmann, who was more interested in the content of such language than he was in creating terminology to describe it, understands the phenomenon as “special political vocabulary” (Dieckmann, 2005: 47). He does, however, emphasize the difficulty of coming up with a practical definition of political vocabulary, since politics, from his point of view, is “not a typical field of activity, but a set of actions and functions.” (Dieckmann, 2005: 48).

In essence, the word does not carry any weight on its own. It acquires significance through active use, thanks to the speaker and through the meaning that arises in connection with its use in specific contexts. After all, political communication does not use political terms exclusively, it also uses words with varying degrees of political meaning from other areas of language use. Thus, any word that is used – and any topic that arises – in a political communication situation becomes politically coloured, and the language of politics means the use of language in a political context. The fact that almost any area of human life is discussed in political communication, from the ban on abortions (*Abtreibungsverbot*) and artificial insemination (*künstliche Befruchtung*) to the abandonment of nuclear energy (*Atomausstieg*) and environmental protection initiatives (*Umweltschutz*), means that the rate of vocabulary enrichment and change in the language of politics, including as a result of adopting professional concepts from other areas of activity, is much higher than in other sublanguages. According to Vorobyeva, “it is political vocabulary that is most subject to semantic changes” (Vorobyeva, 2011: 11).

Using the classification proposed by Dieckmann as a basis, the following elements of political vocabulary can be distinguished:

1) Institutional vocabulary (*Institutionalvokabular*), consisting of the names of individual institutions and positions (*Bundestag, Minister, Bundeskanzler*), organiza-

tions and their departments (*Fraktion, Partei, Parteivorstand*), the tasks they perform (*Verfassungsschutz, Entwicklungshilfe, Finanzpolitik*), and the processes in which they function (*Wortmeldung, Abstimmung, Tagesordnung*).

2) Departmental vocabulary (*Fachsprache des verwalteten Sachgebietes*), which includes language forms that are inherent in the professional language of officials and experts in political administration (*Steuerbelastung, Wirtschaftspartner, Kulturpropaganda, Konjunktur*).

3) Ideological vocabulary (*Ideologivocabular*), which may include words that have a certain evaluative meaning in relation to the world and society (*Klassenkampf, Nation, Gemeinschaft, Familie*), political groups (*Demokratie, Opposition*), and fundamental values and practices. Since the main function of the sphere of politics is the struggle for power, the ideological component of political communication is expressed quite clearly. It is no surprise that many researchers see ideological vocabulary as truly political language.

To borrow a term from political linguistics, we can say that the core of ideological vocabulary is made up of so-called word-symbols, that is, words whose main semantic components have long been fixed in the public's consciousness and whose task it is to provide a concentrated representation of a complex reality: *Freiheit, Sicherheit, Menschenrechte, Staat, Demokratie, Terrorismus*. Word-symbols in political communication are a way of conducting a discussion and an instrument of social control, since, according to the German linguist Heiko Girnth, "they are firmly woven into the ideological system of a given society" (Girnth, 2002: 52). Word-symbols are divided into two categories: those that carry a positive connotation and those that carry a negative one, so-called *Miranda-Wörter* and *Anti-Miranda-Wörter* (to use Girnth's terminology). *Miranda-Wörter* touch upon desirable positive values, create a favourable impression, and arouse admiration, and they are designed to strengthen the sense of cohesion in society, loyalty to the state and a certain group of people: *Frieden, Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit, Sicherheit*. *Anti-Miranda-Wörter* are used to denote despicable, undesirable phenomena that must be overcome: *Krieg, Diktatur, Aggression, Ungerechtigkeit*. Politicians skillfully use word-symbols from these groups to instill their ideas in people's minds and carry out the political decisions they need.

Because of their ideological slant, word-symbols can be classified as either banner-words (*Fahnenwörter*) or label-words (*Stigmawörter*) (to use the terminology of Fritz Hermanns). Banner-words are used to praise one's own political programme and exalt their political ideas. Used as "standards" in the hands of political allies, banner-words simultaneously irritate and even provoke political opponents, "they affect the opposition like a red cape affects a bull" (Hermanns, 2007: 102). Typical examples of banner-words in the political language of Germany include *soziale Gerechtigkeit* (*Fahne der Weimarer Republik*), *Volk und Reich* (*Fahne von NS-Deutschland*), *demokratischer Sozialismus* (*Fahne der SPD*), and *soziale Marktwirtschaft* (*Fahne der CDU*). Label-words are designed to have the opposite effect. They are used to discredit political opponents, pejoratively or angrily condemn the ideas and statements of opposition figures, and

cause distrust in ideologically alien political structures. The essence of label-words, according to Vorobyeva, is in their “accusatory nature: they are used not so much to characterize or classify an object as they are to accuse that object of having properties that are dangerous to society” (Vorobyeva, 2011: 131). Good examples of label-words would be *Terrorist*, *Islamist*, *Diktator*, *Extremismus*, *Hetze*, and *Lügenpresse*. Interestingly, some word-symbols stand out for their ideological polysemy (*ideologische Polysemie*) (to use Dieckmann’s terminology). The connotations of flag- and label-words can change and even acquire the opposite meaning depending on the attitude of the political forces that are in power. Classic examples of such ideological polysemy would be words in which mutually exclusive meanings are invested with mutually exclusive meanings: *Sozialismus*, *Demokratie*, *Republik*, *System*. Word-symbols are of great importance in German political communication, because, as a reflection of the ideological positions of various political forces, they both allow politicians to expound their ideas and intentions and, by creating a certain system of word perception, help create meanings and shape public opinion.

Figuratively speaking, it can be argued that if political communication as a whole can be reduced to the struggle for power, then the language of politics is the (verbal) struggle for words. By using ideologically motivated words, openly and often consciously provoking their opponents, throwing mud at the banner-words of their competitors, imposing certain meanings and trying to influence the political preferences of society, political rivals fight for word-symbols in the struggle for the meaning of individual concepts and, ultimately, for voters. As in any other struggle, certain strategies are used in the fight to control the meaning of words, and these can be divided into three groups:

- 1) Naming concepts (*Begriffe benennen*)
- 2) Mastering concepts (*Begriffe besetzen*)
- 3) Embellishing concepts (*Begriffe beschönigen*).

Let us look at each of these strategies in greater detail and provide examples of how they have been employed in relation to the discourse on migration.

1) *Begriffe benennen*

In terms of the social impact of the use of the language of politics, the ability to “correctly” name things and give life to certain concepts – and thus certain moods – is extremely important. Someone who interprets concepts in a certain way according to his or her point of view, who has *Miranda*- or *Anti-Miranda*- *Wörter* at their disposal, exploits the positive or negative connotations of words, argues more convincingly, creates a new reality, gives hope or destroys illusions, and thus achieves what they set out to achieve. From a tactical perspective, this strategy is manifested in the creation of neologisms which, due to their unusualness or compelling new meaning, provide food for thought and contribute to new positive or negative associative series. For example, in the early 2000s, Germany’s immigration policy continued to be shaped by the desire to overcome the painful legacy of the Nazi past, to “redeem” the country and create a social opposite to the Third Reich in the form of a multicultural space.

Germany opened its borders to refugees from North Africa and the Middle East, shaping an immigration policy based on the principle of tolerance. In order to promote the government's position and awaken a special sensitivity in the population to the plight of refugees, the concept of a "welcoming culture" (*Willkommenskultur*) was created. This neologism is a composite created from two nouns: *Willkomm* (a warm welcome, a greeting to guests) and *die Kultur* (culture). The concept was used to denote the practice of accepting refugees that the state authorities (the country was run at the time by a coalition government consisting of the Christian Democratic Union / Christian Social Union and the Social Democratic Party) wanted to develop. Thanks to the positive associations of *Miranda-Wörter* and the active use of this neologism in combination with the adjectives "new" and "real," the determiner "not enough" and forms of the verbs "to develop" and "to be in need of," the idea that help should be offered to people in difficult life situation started to take root in the public consciousness and created a positive attitude in the country towards refugees: *"In Berlin wollen wir [...] eine neue Willkommenskultur entwickeln. Wir wollen [...] eine Einbürgerungskampagne starten"* (Rede im Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin am 11.11. 2004); *"Es ist in unserem ureigensten Interesse [...] als Einwanderungsland Deutschland eine Willkommenskultur [...] gegenüber den Einwanderern an den Tag zu legen"* (Rede im Landtag Nordrhein-Westfalen am 08.10.2009). This concept has since become so firmly entrenched in the language that it was even included in the first dictionary of German neologisms created after 1990 (www.idsmannheim.de), and the 24th edition of the Duden dictionary (*Zeit Online*, 07.08.2017).

2) Begriffe besetzen

As mentioned above, one and the same word can evoke different associations depending on the meaning imbued in it. Politicians strive to take possession of concepts by appropriating the banner-words of their opponents, filling them with other (one's own) meanings, or by discrediting it altogether, depriving it of its positive meaning and turning it into a label-word. To illustrate, as migration to Germany became more and more chaotic and the principle of multiculturalism started to waver, the term "leading culture" (*Leitkultur*) increasingly found its way into political communication. The concept was coined back in 1998 by German political scientist of Syrian descent Bassam Tibi in his book *Europa ohne Identität? Die Krise der multikulturellen Gesellschaft* to describe a social consensus based on European democratic values that should serve as a link between the indigenous population of Europe and migrants: "If Germans want to integrate migrants into their cultural space, they need to define a leading culture: a leading culture is a component of any identity! [...] Peaceful coexistence is impossible without a leading culture" (Tibi, 1998: 189). This concept was subsequently weaponized in German political communication and became the subject of fierce discussions. The first difficulties appeared in the early 2000s after the government passed a law on the liberalization of citizenship and forced representatives of the conservative Christian parties (the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union) to use the concept of *Leitkultur* to demand that migration policy be carried out not in the

interests of migrants, but rather in the interests of native Germans, taking the existence of free and democratic leading German culture in the country into account: “*Zuwanderer, die auf Dauer hier leben wollen, müssten sich einer freiheitlichen deutschen Leitkultur anpassen*” (Friedrich Merz, *Vorsitzender der Bundestagsfraktion der CDU/CSU am 16.10.2000*). The concept of “leading German culture” was met with strong criticism from the CDU’s political opponents, namely members of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the Greens (*Die Grünen*) and the Left (*Die Linke*), who reproached them for using dangerous “nationalistic vocabulary” and discriminatory “ethnic exclusivity” and proclaiming the superiority of one’s own culture in relation to others. By evoking the negative associations with the Nazi lexicon in the public mind, the opponents of the Christian Democrats were able to get the people to reject this concept and thus turn it into a label-word. The leading German published PONS even named *Leitkultur* its anti-word of the year (*Tagesspiegel. de, 15.11.2000*), and it was unofficially banished from political communication for a long time. As the migration crisis developed, and the first wave of terror attacks carried out by German Muslims of foreign origin shook the country, public opinion began to sway back towards the Christian Democrats. The Christian Democrats were thus able to once again imbue the concept of *deutsche Leitkultur* with positive meaning, declaring it to mean a “mandatory framework culture” that contributes to the formation of a sense of belonging to a single state and preserving the traditional values of European culture of the Enlightenment and the “Christian roots of German cultural identity” (Piniugina, 2014: 254): «Wer das christliche Menschenbild nicht akzeptiert, der ist bei uns fehl am Platze» (Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel, *Spiegel.de, 15.10.2010*). German nationalists and right-wing nationalists then took advantage of the controversy caused by the concept. Against the backdrop of the fear and hysteria caused by the surge in illegal migration in the late 2000s and the increased number of attacks against Germans by migrants, these groups started to demand that migrants be forced to adapt to German leading culture and German values as a way to ensure that foreigners would not gain dominance in Germany and as a way to protect the country from Islamist terror and encroachments on German identity. In 2016, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party also resorted to using the concept of *deutsche Leitkultur* as a banner-word in its programme, reducing its meaning to that of “Germanness” and framing it as the only alternative to “the threat of the collapse of German identity and the destruction of the country [...] a guarantee of the preservation of social peace and the nation as a cultural unit” (www.afd-thl.de).

3) *Begriffe beschönigen*

In order to mask one’s true motives or to soften the negative impact of certain words, it is often useful to replace expressions that are deemed inappropriate, taboo or indecent with politically correct statements. Tactically embellishing reality in order to create desired images through the use of metaphors and euphemisms is also possible. These figures of speech thrive because their meaning is hidden behind a more beautiful turn of phrase that has an emotional appeal and is able to penetrate into

public consciousness, thus being ideologically programmed. For example, in a speech at the Bundestag, CDU deputy Armin Schuster called for the immediate expulsion of migrants who had not received permission to stay in Germany, noting: “what we now need is a farewell culture” (*Abschiedskultur*) (*zeit.de*, 26.07.2016). On the one hand, this is a nod to the policy of welcoming refugees (*Willkommenskultur*) proclaimed by the Chancellor that had objectively failed. On the other hand, it is a reference to the existing culture in Germany of saying goodbye to terminally ill people, which serves as a practical guide for dealing with those who are dying. By borrowing this concept from the field of medicine and healthcare and applying it to a completely unrelated issue, Schuster evoked an image that everyone could understand, forcing them to make the distinction in their minds between sick and healthy people: refugees are sick people who are unable to express their feelings and need to be isolated as quickly as possible. The so-called farewell culture is a new concept of the security of “healthy” people that can successfully protect the country against constant attacks from the outside (only in this case, the attacks are carried out by refugees, not viruses). When it comes to health protection, we typically rely on the opinions of experts – in this case, it would be the opinions of politicians, rather than doctors and psychologists. And politicians who claim *Abschiedskultur* draw attention to the fact that bidding “farewell” to almost 200,000 people is an eminently achievable task, and one that can be done peacefully, rather than through forced expulsion (*die Vertreibung*) or “deportation” (*die Abschiebung*), a word that truly grates on the ears.

What all the strategies in the struggle for vocabulary clearly have in common is the need to increase the significance of one’s own position in public opinion while at the same time reducing the significance of the opponent’s position. Politicians choose their words carefully and deliberately, they mask their true motives, exploit interpersonal feelings and channel human impulses, and in doing so, the language they use – the language of politics – poisons the public mindset. A word once spoken later becomes a model for imitation and provides a clue to the political beliefs and actions of politicians. After all, language as a way of thinking is both an instrument of politics and a condition for its existence.

About the Authors:

Irina S. Kashenкова – Cand. Sci. (Pedagogy), Associate Professor, Department of German Language, MGIMO University. 76 prospect Vernadskogo, Moscow, 119454, Russia. Email: ikashenkova@yandex.ru

Roman Y. Kashenkov – Fourth-year BA student, School of International Journalism, MGIMO University. 76 prospect Vernadskogo, Moscow, 119454, Russia. Email: kashenkov.roma@yandex.ru

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