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Applying Discursive Psychology to ‘Fact’ Construction in Political Discourse

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Abstract

In this paper, we show how Discursive Psychology can be used to show how ‘facts’ are used rhetorically by politicians. That is, they are more than neutral reflections of an objective reality – these ‘facts’ are highly attuned to the local context of political argumentation. We draw upon examples from two studies that used discursive psychology to analyse two different political contexts: 1) Islamophobia in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attack, 2) debates over Great Britain and the European Union. In both contexts, the analysis uncovers how politicians challenge both the context and the relevance of a fact. The context of ‘facts’ are reconstructed to undermine their original argumentative strength, whereas the questioning the relevance of a ‘fact’ undermines it both as fact and as a rhetorical tool to be used in a debate. These findings show how discursive psychology can contribute to knowledge about

political communication, as well as the benefits of applying discursive psychology to political discourse.

Introduction

Much of the early research in Discursive Psychology (henceforth DP) has focused on the study of political discourse (e.g., Potter, & Wetherell, 1988; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The first aim of this paper is to reiterate this, but in the context of contemporary political issues: debates on the European Union and far-right discourse in social media. Indeed, a reiteration is needed as to this date a comprehensive account of the varied and systematic work that DP has carried out in the study of political communication is lacking. In order to begin to elucidate the usefulness of DP to the study of these areas we wish to focus on how ‘facts’ are used in a rhetorical manner – more on DP in the next section. What we mean with this is that ‘facts’ in DP are not treated as some form of objective knowledge against which to measure social psychological phenomena. Facts, instead, are treated as rhetorical accomplishments observable in interaction – they are designed to perform social actions (Edwards & Potter, 1992). One of the core features of political argumentation is the deployment of facts (Edelman, 1977). Discursive research into fact construction has a long history (for example, Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Ashmore, 1989), and the foundational text for discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992) often relies on examples of political discourse to make its illustrative points – particularly when making a case for a discursive psychological approach to fact construction. Fact construction has since featured in a number of DP works, including those looking at political topics (for example, Lynn & Lea, 2003). However, DP research that applies this to contemporary political issues – such as debating about the European Union – is still in its early stages. Demasi (2019) focused on the various strategies

that politicians use to deploy and challenge ‘facts’ when debating the relationship between Great Britain and the EU, arguing that this use of facts also has a strong argumentative dimension. Similarly, the orientation to ‘facts’ as a rhetorical resource can be observed in the work of Burke (2017).

The second aim of this paper is to demonstrate what DP has to offer to political psychology. Tileagă (2013) has argued for the importance of a critical political psychology, and in particular that DP has much to contribute. The papers discussed here are indicative of this critical political psychology, showing how qualitative methods in general and DP in particular can offer to the field of political psychology. Political psychology, although thriving, tends to focus on the more mainstream, quantitative, research methods and epistemology, usually at the expense of the more varied, non-quantitative, approaches (Tileagă, 2013). For example, Loza (2011) and Loza et al. (2011) used questionnaires to research the pervasiveness of Middle Eastern extremist ideology on religious and cultural backgrounds. It can be viewed as a prototypical example of a quantitative approach in political psychology: ideology conceptualised as a cognitive feature, language is a transparent medium to cognitions, distortions (e.g. dishonesty or social desirability bias) can be minimised for a more ‘accurate’ view, and so forth. This mainstream approach is by no means to be considered deficient, and, the usefulness of Loza’s work is in the overview it provides. However, a mainstream, cognitive, approach tends to give a one-sided view of psychology (Billig, 1996) that turns the focus of political psychology towards the individual at the expense of the social world in which the political and social psychological phenomena is made manifest. Our use of DP signals a departure from this, as our approach adopts a social constructivist approach that looks to alternate ways to exploring psychological phenomena. For a more systematic critique of mainstream psychology from a DP perspective, see, *inter alia*, Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Edwards and Potter (1992). The primary

difference is in language. It is not viewed “merely” as a window to the mind but, instead, is a medium for social action (Edwards & Potter, 1992). But to truly appreciate the nuance of the action orientation of talk – to truly appreciate what talk *does* – we must acknowledge its importance as an interactional tool.

We aim to demonstrate the points above by focusing on two rhetorical strategies observable from the works of Burke (2017) and Demasi (2016; 2019). These strategies are the challenging of the context of a fact and challenging the relevance of a fact.

Analytical Approach

Taking a social constructionist position, DP concerns itself with analysing psychological phenomena as a situated discursive action. DP examines how psychological discourse is used and oriented to in conversation, and what people accomplish in interactions, rather than what this tells us about cognition (Edwards and Potter, 1992). DP highlights the situated and social nature of language, and that the way we talk, write, interact and so forth is highly attuned to performing social actions. These actions bring into it a number of psychological concerns: we invoke memories, emotions, attitudes, knowledge and much more to perform social actions. Our interest here is in particular with ‘fact construction’. DP examines how speakers construct their representation of realities (Taylor, 2001), and observes that truth is something that people try to accomplish through talk, rather than an objective reality. DP differs from other forms of discourse analysis, such as those inspired by the works of Foucault. The main difference is that DP focuses less on issues such as ‘power’ and more on emergent psychologically relevant phenomena brought forth in interaction – brought forth and analysed in terms of those speaking (see Potter, 1996). The focus of DP is on how issues of reality, truth, fact, and so forth are achieved *in situ*. It argues that language should be studied both in

use and as part of interaction, focusing particularly on the use of language to empower and justify actions (Augoustinos and Every, 2007), termed the “action orientation” of talk (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.2).

Introduction to the exemplar studies

We draw upon recent examples of discursive psychological analyses (Burke, 2017; Demasi, 2016; 2019) that will focus on two strategies in particular – challenging the context of a given fact and challenging the relevance of a given fact. Both strategies will be discussed in turn, but first a brief note about the works the analysis draws from.

Burke’s (2017) analysis formed a part of a wider project focusing on far-right discourse and online media. Data were collected from the Facebook pages of the far-right party Britain First, and movement English Defence League. On 17th January 2014, ten days after the Charlie Hebdo attack, Jon Snow interviewed the Dutch right-wing politician and leader of the Party for Freedom, Geert Wilders on Channel 4 news. Wilders was interviewed regarding a video blog where he stated that the Charlie Hebdo attackers were inspired by Islam. Geert Wilders focuses on the notion of peace and maintains his opposition to Islam and not Muslims. While initially the introduction revolves around the Charlie Hebdo attack, the focus of the topic turns to Wilders’ opposition to Islam, and how Snow sets up a parallel between Wilders’ party and the Nazi party in Germany. Wilders rejects this parallel and makes himself appear to be rational despite Snow’s pursuit of controversy. The main strategy used by Wilders to make himself appear reasonable is through maintaining his opposition towards Islam as a religion, and not towards Muslims as people.

Demasi’s analysis is taken from two sources – his 2016 PhD thesis and a paper (2019) that draws from one of the analytical chapters of the thesis. Both focus on broadcast political

debates where politicians argue about the relationship between Great Britain and the European Union. Data were collected between April 2012 and September 2014, consequently it covers the years leading up to, but not including, the Brexit referendum and its associated debates. The analyses focus in particular on how politicians use ‘facts’ and ‘displays of knowledge’ in political argumentation. While the wider scope of that work covers related interactional phenomena, such as laughter and overlapping talk, for the present paper we focus on factual claims and counterclaims.

Analysis

Challenging the context of a fact

The analytical approach draws from the study of epistemics in conversation analysis, that is, how speakers display ‘knowledge’, to what end, how they orient to others’ demonstrations of their knowledge, how this knowledge exchange can form a fundamental part of interaction and so forth (see Heritage, 2013). This was applied to inform how ‘knowledge’ and ‘facts’ are displayed and interacted with in talk. Demasi (2019) demonstrated how the discursive act of recontextualising a previously stated fact was designed to rhetorically undermine the original claim. Consider the example below, from an episode of *The Record Europe* hosted by Shirin Wheeler with Nigel Farage (anti-EU), Graham Watson (pro-EU) and Dan Jørgensen (absent in extract below) as guests:

Extract One

1 FAR: but=y’know this argument about what it cost British
2 people .hh whether we talk gross or net this year our net
3 contribution to the EU is gonno be <nine billion> pounds.
4 and what people see (.2) .h is (.) they see in their own
5 lives at the moment y’know the local gravedigger or sweep
6 streete- being sAcked as a result of local government (.)
7 ah cUTs and ↑what they see ↓here

(Approximately 70 lines of transcript omitted)

77 WAT: where Nigel's argument falls down is he's said it's
78 terrible that the UK is paying nine billion .h every year
79 to to- in net to the European Union which will be case
80 next year. .h ↑but↓ what he doesn't point out is that
81 we're paying sixty billion a year for health .h we're
82 paying a hundred and thirty two billion a year for social
83 security and b[enefits]
84 X: [(coughs)]
85 WAT: ↑for nine billion↓ it's all that's costing us we're
86 ↑getting a fantastic deal↓ from the European Union

Graham Watson on lines 77-83, rather than challenge the factuality of Farage's claim of the cost of being in the European Union (lines 1-3) treats his claim as correct but puts it in a different context. Where Farage spoke of a cost, a burden, to the British citizens of being in the EU, Graham puts this cost in a different context. Instead of £9 billion being a burden to Britain, it is now framed as a relatively gentle cost in comparison to the annual costs of £60 billion for "health" and £132 billion for social security and benefits. The argument here is not about the facts per se, but about what they mean – it is a battle of context. What takes place here is a battle between the discursive practices of categorisation and particularisation (Billig, 1996). For Farage, the isolated, particular, cost is an undue burden that needs to be dropped. For Watson the cost is a relatively minor one (especially when compared against notably higher expenses), which, especially when categorised alongside costs that are arguably "essential", is worth the price.

Snow begins by setting up a prefaced question to Gilders in an oppositional manner:

Extract Two

1 SNO: And do you accept that as an elected politician saying
2 the things that you're doing that (.) (exactly) stokes
3 the fires of hatred and brings about precisely the civil
4 war that you claim is already under way↓
5 WIL: Both is not true (.) I have nothing with hate you might
6 (.) not like it but we are the biggest party in all the

7 polls in the Netherlands for already half a year >erm<
8 you are very far away from the reality at least↑ in the
9 Netherlands sir I don't blame you for that but people
10 don't like hate people don't like war I want peace but I
11 want it on my own terms and I want it with less Islam as
12 possible
13 SNO: Geert Wilders (.) the National Socialist party in Germany
14 was the most popular party in Germany and what did that
15 bring us but th-the desecration of Jews the hatred of
16 Jews and eventually the gassing↑ of Jews↓ and that surely
17 is the kind of parallel in Europe we need to steer clear
18 of

The prefaced “and” at the start of Snow’s question (Heritage and Sorjonen, 1994), indicates that this loaded question is being set up in anticipation of an argument. Snow makes a presumption of being correct through using the term “do you accept that” (1) along with the anticipation that Wilders’ response will not be of strong protest. Snow uses the subject position¹ of an “elected politician” to give Wilders more stake to manage and make it more difficult for Wilders to be accountable for what he is saying.

Wilders begins by contrasting Snow’s claims (5). Wilders engages with Snow whilst denying Snow’s ideas, setting up his account as merely a difference of opinion between himself and Snow. Wilders states that he does not blame Snow for his views (9), which shows understanding towards Snow whilst still maintaining that he is correct. Wilders is attempting to pull out Snow’s credentials from beneath him and position himself as the expert on the matter. Wilders constructs Snow as ignorant of the situation in the Netherlands (which he describes in a vague manner) and thus removed from the context, providing subtle caveats about the situation of terrorism in the Netherlands.

Wilders draws upon polls as evidence of his popularity (7), a strategy of positive self-presentation (i.e. presenting positive information about an ‘us’ social group, van Dijk, 1992), which in turn presents Snow’s claims as unfair. His use of “half a year” (7) emphasises that

¹ Presenting something as rooted in the subjective view or opinion of a speaker as opposed to being an objective feature (see Edwards & Potter, 2017).

the party's success began before the Charlie Hebdo attack and thus is not related to the event, which makes his party seem more credible and defends his own anti-Islamic stance. Wilders is acting on behalf of others as well as himself, indicating that he has the support of his followers, and therefore can distance himself from what he is saying. Wilders also makes a disclaimer on lines 10-11 (see Hewitt & Stokes, 1975) of wanting peace, but peace on his terms, orienting to a controversial dictator-like position. This allows Wilders' controversial statements to be taken as acceptable and attempts to sound reasonable through the use of "as possible" (11-12).

Snow uses what Wilders says about his party being successful in polls against him to set up the parallel between Wilders' party and the Nazi party. Snow switches "biggest party" to the term "popular" (6). Snow uses this to make a comparison with the Nazi party, who were also the most popular party in their own country, as an illustrative example to emphasise his argument about the consequences of Wilders' anti-Islamic stance. Both are drawing upon the same factual evidence to make their accounts credible, but the implications of what it means to be popular differs among the two speakers, with Snow's use of the word having negative connotations.

Using the term "nationalist socialist party" (13) somewhat normalises the accusation in order to make the parallel between Wilders and the Nazi party more realistic. Snow also compares the parties only, rather than a more personal comparison between Wilders and Hitler. Snow forms a collective identity and constructs Europe as also affected by using the term "us" (15), despite Wilders keeping the account about the Netherlands only.

Here we have argued that one way of challenging 'facts' is to recontextualise them. Strictly speaking, this does not contest the fact in and of itself. What is resisted is the rhetorical force of these facts, and this is done by casting them in a different light. Reformulating nine billion

pounds as a relatively small cost undermines its rhetorical part in arguing against the EU. In the same manner, associating the Nazi party with popularity is designed to undermine Wilders' construction of his political credibility based on popular, democratic, support without undermining the facticity of this popularity.

Challenging the relevance of a fact

Often when faced with a rhetorically challenging claim, a politician, aside from the strategy described above, will have to resort to creative means of resisting or providing a counterclaim. One such way is to argue that the essence of the matter lies elsewhere (see Billig, 1996), which provides a way for the challenged politician to resist a claim and avoid being held accountable for it. Consider the extract below, it follows immediately from extract two above after Jon Snow's challenge of Wilders.

Extract Three

1 WIL: Well that's a very sick (.) parallel which is totally not
2 eh valid here I have a problem with Islam not with
3 Muslims I told you already if people abide by our rule of
4 la:w and by our civil society they are welcome to stay
5 but I don't want no more Islam we have even more mosques
6 almost in the Netherlands than churches I don't want that
7 we have our own our own culture which is based on
8 Christianity and Judaism on Humanism and we are not
9 Islamic countries

Wilders explicitly denies Snow's comparison of his party being similar to the Nazi party, the criticism of Snow's parallel (and refusal to accept) is shown through a "well" preface (1). Wilders' denial is a standard discursive strategy for dealing with a negative accusation, particularly in situations related to accusations of racism or prejudice (Wetherell and Potter, 1992; van Dijk, 1992). Wilders presents this parallel of being in the same category as Nazis

as offensive, emphasised through his use of the term “sick parallel” (1). Wilders presents his opposition to Islam as downgraded, in the form of a “problem” (2), this is a passive word in comparison to Snow’s descriptions of the opposition to Jews as “desecration”. However, Wilders’ position shifts, as earlier in the previous extract (11-12) he says he wants as least Islam as possible, whereas here he upgrades to state that he wants no more Islam (5).

Wilders also switches Snow’s account about Europe and turns the situation back onto the Netherlands (4). Wilders manages to make his account reasonable and resist accusations of prejudice by separating and constructing his opposition to Islam and not Muslims on lines 2-3 (suggesting that he is accepting of Muslims as long as they do not practise Islam). The distinction of Islam as an extremist ideology and a Muslim as a person is an important strategy to enable Wilders to disguise his anti-Islamic ideology to be able to appear as rational (Verkuyten, 2013; see also Goodman & Johnson, 2013).

Wilders keeps this construction consistent in two ways; firstly, through emphasising that he is repeating his reference of being in opposition to Islam a second time-this also constructs Wilders as being somewhat victimised as he is not being listened to, secondly by referring to the religions Christianity, Judaism and Humanism and not the people who practise the religions. Wilders refers to “people” abiding by laws (3-4), rather than referring to any religious groups. This is an attempt to make himself appear not anti-Islamic; although Muslims are implied as he immediately switches back to talking about his opposition to Islam. This is a similar strategy to constructing Islam as a political ideology rather than a world religion (Carr, 2006). Wilders refers to a “civil society” (4) emphasising his position as a respectable and democratic politician.

The final extract is from the first of the two debates between Nigel Farage, leader of UKIP at the time, and Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats and deputy Prime Minister at the

time, held on 26th March and 2nd April 2014 respectively. The moderator for the debate in the extract below was Nick Ferrari:

Extract Four

1 CLE: let's bear down on the loopholes let's make sure people
2 do play by the rules but let's not scare peopleby [by]
3 FAR: [()]
4 CLE: claiming things that are not true which would ↑have the
5 CLE: consequen[ce↓]
6 FAR [(alright)]
7 CLE: of making us poorer and putting more people out of work
8 FAR: [[yeah you didn't]
9 CLE: [[t h a t surely cannot be right.
10 FAR: =you [↑didn't answer the question did you↓]
11 FER: [() Nigel Nigel Farage]
12 FAR: [[you didn't answer the question
13 FER: [[Nigel Farage]
14 FAR: you try to do trickery with the twenty nine million
15 saying there aren't twenty nine you know why cos ↑two
16 million have left ↑already↓
17 AUD: {((laughter)
18 FAR: {.h ↑um they've gone
19 AUD: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX x x x x x x x x x x x} x x
20 FAR: and they've gone to Italy and to ↑Spain↓}
21 FAR: =Nick you didn't answer the basic question
22 (.2)
23 FAR: .h I'm not claiming twenty ni:ne million people (.) have
24 the right to come to Britain.

The extract begins with Clegg arguing for the benefits of immigration and the risks of scaremongering (lines 1-2, 4-5, 7). While Clegg talks, Farage begins to overlap (lines 8, 10, 12) and challenge the relevance of Clegg's talk. Shortly prior to this extract Clegg had claimed that an UKIP flyer has mis-reported population figures from Romania and Bulgaria, allegedly mistaking their combined population to be 29 million. While the factual veracity of this claim is contested by both sides of the debate, for the extract above this is a tangential point. Instead Farage's overlapping talk is designed to question Clegg's claims on a broader scale, without homing in on any particular aspect. What allows Farage to do so is by positioning himself, in interactional terms, as "more knowing" than Clegg: the use of

negative interrogatives (designed to be an assertion in the form of a question, Heritage, 2002), unmitigated assessments (displaying a lack of an otherwise typical ‘hedging’ of displays of knowledge in mundane interaction, Heritage & Raymond, 2005), and extreme case formulations (a description with any categorical ambiguity removed, Pomerantz, 1986). By challenging Clegg on a broad scale, Farage avoids being made explicitly accountable for the specific figure of 29 million being right or wrong. The fact goes relatively unchallenged (though see lines 14-16), but, crucially, in rhetorical terms the challenging of their relevance is an attempt at neutralising the fact’s argumentative force. Thus, in this instance the accusation of having spoken an untruth is left relatively untouched and the debate goes on.

This section has given an overview of how people can argue against a ‘fact’ by stating that it is not relevant to the matter. In the case of Wilders and Snow, the former argued against the comparison to the Nazi party as irrelevant to the topic at hand. In the case of Farage and Clegg the former argues that Clegg’s critique of Farage did not answer the question posed by the moderator. Both instances serve to sidestep the issue of critique by way of resisting their relevance and, as such, topics not worthy of a proper response.

Discussion

These studies have demonstrated that DP can provide significant contributions to contemporary understanding of political communication. We focused on two studies that analyse political discourse in current contexts: political debates on the European Union, a highly politicised point of debate in the UK, and far-right discourse, focusing on how politicians achieve discursive ‘othering’ of Muslims in the aftermath of a terrorist attack (see also Burke, 2018).

We discussed two rhetorical strategies in relation to our work; challenging the context of a fact and challenging the relevance of a fact. In the case of the former we saw how politicians will resist factual claims by putting to question their relevance to the debate at hand. This enabled them to avoid addressing the factual claims and, by implication, resisting their rhetorical work. In the case of the former we saw politicians accept the initial factual claim but changing the context in order for these factual claims to come across in a different light. The factual claims were addressed, and, in re-contextualising, their rhetorical force was undermined.

In this paper, we have argued that DP has much to say in the study of political discourse, especially when it comes to analysing issues such as ‘facts’. However, we do not suggest that the examples discussed here are the only ways of how ‘facts’ are used in a rhetorical manner, but, rather, to highlight how issues of ‘fact’, ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ can be used in a highly argumentative manner. Our argument is that one needs to recognise the rhetorical nature of what may come across as “pure fact” in the era of post-truth politics (Demasi, 2019). Indeed, the point is to call attention to *what* makes these ‘facts’ come across *as* facts.

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