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Mechanisms of Manipulation in the Information Society (linguistic aspect)

Abstract: *In today's information society, mechanisms for manipulating the mental state and behavior of individuals and the broader public are being continuously refined. Among the diverse tools of manipulation, language – the power of words – plays a central role. This article examines the appealing and persuasive power of words through an analysis of Putin's speeches delivered prior to the invasion of Ukraine. Linguistic markers, which we have termed "Putinisms," are reinforced through their interaction with vivid, memorable visuals, all of which are embedded in the emotional packaging of a falsified interpretation of cultural heritage. The culmination of these manipulative actions is the construction of a new "post-Soviet" myth centered on the Siberianization of Russia.*

Keywords: *linguistic markers; manipulative techniques; public consciousness; "Putinisms"; the birth of a new myth.*

Introduction

Knowledge and information are among the most important resources of the modern information society. Political, social, and economic development are impossible without effective information support. The process of obtaining, processing, transmitting, and using information is **closely connected** to the manipulation of public opinion **through the use of modern technologies**.

Research in social psychology convincingly demonstrates that we live in a world of pervasive manipulation: we are **systematically persuaded** what we should buy, what we should wear, what we should think, and who we should vote for. In their psychological encyclopedia, *The Age of Propaganda: The Mechanisms of Persuasion, Everyday Uses, and Abuses*, Anthony R. Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson **analyze**

the process of manipulating public opinion through the dissemination of distorted or false information, **identifying** such manipulation mechanisms as half-truths, big lies, labels, clichés, demagoguery (ad hominem arguments), emotional manipulation, and others, all aimed at shaping **a predetermined** opinion (Pratkanis, Aronson 2001).

According to the distinguished sociologist and publicist Sergei Georgievich Kara-Murza, humanity has entered **a social order** in which the manipulation of consciousness has become the primary means of domination. In his renowned bestselling nonfiction book, *Manipulation of Consciousness*, the author examines the forms and methods of programming the mental state and behavior of individuals and the public, and **describes** political myths that distort reality. Kara-Murza considers the formation of manipulative rhetoric, disseminated and replicated by public institutions and the media, to be the most important tool for manipulating public consciousness. The author supports his observations and conclusions with **numerous** historical examples, the majority of which **concern** methods of influencing the consciousness of Soviet people and myths about the Soviet system (Kara-Murza 2015).

In separate books (Kara-Murza 2013; Kara-Murza 2015), the author analyzes the speeches of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev and **exposes** the distorted and false information presented in them.

Throughout the long history of human civilization, those in power have developed various ways to manipulate public consciousness. **However**, regardless of the variety of techniques and methods used, language – the power of words – **occupies a special place** in influencing human consciousness, as Vadim Shefner emphasized in his poem *Words*:

A word can kill,
A word can save,
A word can lead regiments...
(Shefner n.d.)

The power of words, **and the linguistic markers** that have a special impact on human consciousness, have always **been of particular interest to us** as linguists. We have reflected on certain aspects of this multifaceted problem in the following publications:

We have addressed certain aspects of this multifaceted problem in our previous studies (Aroshidze, Aroshidze 2018; Aroshidze, Aroshidze 2020; Aroshidze, Aroshidze 2021).

In this article, we examine the linguistic means of manipulating public consciousness in the modern information society. The appealing and persuasive power of words is **further enhanced** by their combination with vivid, memorable visuals, all presented within the emotional packaging of **cultural heritage**.

The essence of manipulation

Psychological influence is understood as an effect on the mental state, feelings, thoughts, and behavior of others. Psychologists and sociologists distinguish different types of influence, primarily persuasion and suggestion. Persuasion is based on a conscious and organized influence on a person through their critical judgment, while suggestion, or suggestion, works by reducing or completely eliminating critical thinking about incoming information, implying unlimited trust in its sources.

The authors of the "Great Psychological Dictionary," edited by Boris Guryevich Meshcheryakov and Vladimir Petrovich Zinchenko, interpret these terms as follows:

"Manipulation (from the Latin *manipulus* - handful, *manus* - hand) - 1. Manual operation, manual action, in particular the demonstration of a trick based on sleight of hand. 2. Fraud, deception, fraud, swindle. 3. Communicative influence that leads to the actualization of certain motivational states in the object of influence, prompting them to behave in a manner desirable (beneficial) to the subject of the influence" (Meshcheryakov, Zinchenko 2002: 245).

"Beliefs (English: persuasion) are ideas, knowledge, and beliefs that motivate human behavior and determine their attitude toward various spheres of reality; components of a person's worldview" (Meshcheryakov, Zinchenko 2002: 501).

"Suggestion (English: suggestion) is a type of targeted communicative influence on the behavior and consciousness of a person (or group of people), as a result of which a person (group of people), contrary to available factual information (perceived, retrieved from memory), recognizes the existence of something that does not actually exist, or does something contrary to their intentions or habits" (Meshcheryakov, Zinchenko 2002: 70).

In fact, suggestion is contrasted with persuasion as an unreasoned influence versus a reasoned one. A person under suggestion has either a complete lack of control or a minimal amount of criticism regarding

the information they receive. Psychologists emphasize verbal and mental suggestion, although, even with developed figurative thinking, in our opinion, the primary channel for receiving the next suggested "dose" is still verbal.

Different authors also include emotional contagion, imitation, fashion as a means of standardizing mass behavior, and so on among other means of manipulation. The essence of these different styles of manipulation is the same: a hidden influence on public consciousness.

In dictionaries of European languages, the word is defined as handling objects with specific intentions and goals (for example, manual control, a doctor examining a patient using hands, etc.). This implies that such actions require dexterity and skill. In technology, specialized devices for controlling mechanisms that act as extensions of the hands (levers, handles) are called manipulators. This explains the metaphorical meaning of this word – the deft handling of people as objects. Merriam-Webster defines manipulation as the act of influencing or controlling others in a skillful or calculated manner, often for one's own advantage and typically without the awareness of those being influenced. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d.)

The Role of Language in Manipulating Public Consciousness

We share the view of Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, who believes that it was language that allowed *Homo sapiens* to distinguish itself from at least six other human species:

"Of all the ancient humanoids, *Homo sapiens* was able to conquer the world because it possessed such a unique tool as language. The uniqueness of language lies not in its ability to transmit information, but in its ability to communicate things we have never seen, heard, or smelled – that is, to create an imaginary world. It is not surprising that legends, myths, gods, and religions emerged as a result of the cognitive revolution" (Harari 2003).

We live not in a world of realities, but in a linguistic and cultural reality that, contrary to the common formula, does not simply "reflect the world around us," but actively shapes, structures, and evaluates it, recording these evaluations in linguistic markers and cultural connotations. It would seem that cultural heritage consists primarily of facts; however, the same fact is presented and interpreted in radically different ways in different socio-political contexts.

Research into cultural memory conducted by a large consortium of scholars within the European research project MEMORYROW

(2011–2015) has confirmed an important thesis: cultural memory is not a given, but a socio-cultural construct, comparable to an architectural building that is frequently rebuilt, expanded, and whose façade is updated, although the load-bearing walls impose certain limitations on change. Once again, mechanisms of manipulation intervene in the construction of the surrounding world: the powers that be decide what should be brought to the forefront, partially transformed, and what should be consigned to oblivion, silence, or denial.

The material support of cultural memory takes various forms – objects, architectural structures, works of fine art, and others – but the universal means of memorializing any important event in the life of a people is language, a specific semiotic system that performs functions fundamental to every human community. Language not only ensures communication; it is also a means of developing thought, transmitting cultural and historical traditions from generation to generation, and a crucial condition for the preservation of ethnic identity.

Language not only records the most important events in a people's life; it also contains their evaluation. It is no wonder that the popular saying goes, "What's written with a pen can't be undone with an axe." Although quills have long since fallen out of use, we have been able to observe the validity of this statement firsthand. In 2001, Slavic students from Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University took a Russian language course led by professors from the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia. In addition to Russian language and literature, we were also prepared for an exam in Russian history. When the lecturer described Yermak's campaigns, he repeatedly emphasized the "annexation of Siberia." As linguists, we countered that Siberia was not annexed, but "conquered" by Yermak. The most important evidence of this lies in the numerous titles of cultural works: Vasily Surikov's famous painting *The Conquest of Siberia by Yermak*; the Russian ethnographer P. I. Nebolsin's scientific and historical essays *The Conquest of Siberia* (1848) and *A Brief Essay on the Conquest of Siberia* (1872); and even the school textbook *Literary Reading* for the 4th grade includes *The Legend of Yermak's Conquest of Siberia*. The semantics of the words *нокорение* (conquest) and *приисоединение* (annexation), together with their evaluative connotations, are so different that they cannot be interchanged in this context. In response, we were told that Russian historiography is undergoing a reinterpretation of the nominations of certain historical events. Here, manipulation is evident.

In our previous research, we analyzed changes in language policy in Georgia as a means of manipulating cultural memory, using urban “palimpsests” (the renaming of streets and squares), changes to the official holiday calendar, censorship and propaganda, the two-faced Janus that filters out objectionable material while propagating new realities and desirable personalities, and so on. In this article, however, we focus on the revision of the textual narrative concerning a specific historical period and on the creation of new school and university textbooks.

Censorship and propaganda, as highly effective manipulative techniques, **extend far beyond** the media; **strict control is exercised** at all levels of the education system. For example, in 2023, new unified Russian history textbooks for grades 10 and 11 were introduced. The author of the article, **Candidate of Historical Sciences** Yuri Borisenok, reports on the phased updating of history textbooks in schools of the Russian Federation (**with the release of new textbooks for grades 5–9 planned for 2025**) and notes: “The new unified textbooks are the result of the intensive work of a team of authors, experts, and methodologists, including Vladimir Medinsky, aide to the President of the Russian Federation, and academicians of the Russian Academy of Sciences Alexander Chubaryan and Anatoly Torkunov” (Borisenok 2023).

How do these textbooks differ from previous ones? The author of the article believes that the new textbook does not offer “**an unconditional apology for the Soviet project**,” nor does it contain the anti-Soviet bias **characteristic of** the 1990s, nor does it glorify the autocratic monarchy or the White movement. Instead, it is presented as a “**comprehensive source of information reflecting the current state-approved viewpoint**” on the complex processes of Russian history in the first half of the twentieth century. **As a result**, individual historical events are renamed (for example, *Великая российская революция* (the *Great Russian Revolution*) instead of *Великая октябрьская социалистическая революция* (the *Great October Socialist Revolution*), and there is a noticeable shift in emphasis in the presentation of facts. **However**, the main manipulative factor here is the omission and downplaying of certain “**undesirable**” episodes and facts.

The most important means of manipulating cultural heritage during the renewal of the socio-political structure – censorship and propaganda, a near-monopoly on the media, the dualistic mechanism of “**memory/forgetting**,” control at all levels of the education system, the circulation of new personalities, and others – are aimed at shaping the system of values **deemed “necessary”** by the authorities. Particularly

effective in this regard are outdoor advertising texts (posters, placards) with a mixed semiotic texture, which combine verbal and non-verbal means of expressing information.

The annexation of Crimea to Russia is reflected in propaganda posters such as:

The History of the Incorporation of New Regions into Russia. A. Pollegenko, TASS.

Poster: **ОДНА СТРАНА! ОДНА СЕМЬЯ! ОДНА РОССИЯ!**

(ONE COUNTRY! ONE FAMILY! ONE RUSSIA!)

(TASS 2024).

Particularly striking linguistic manipulators are contained in the **speeches** of Putin and the “**Putinists**” who unleashed the war in Ukraine.

“Putinisms” – linguistic markers of the manipulation of public consciousness

We analyze linguistic markers of the manipulation of public consciousness using materials from President Vladimir Putin’s addresses to the citizens of Russia on February 21, 2022 (Putin 2022a) and February 24, 2022 (Putin 2022b).

The first speech begins with a so-called “historical” reference to the Ukrainian state as an “artificial creation of the communist era,” while asserting that some of its territory is “originally Russian.” A classic manipulative tactic is the construction of an enemy image that allegedly plans, in the future, to “weaken, divide, and ultimately destroy our country.” This main enemy is identified as the West, which supposedly controls “Ukrainian neo-Nazis” and supports the Ukrainian regime. Consequently, Russia is presented as being forced to take “urgent steps” to protect its sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity. In practice, this step takes the form of an invasion of Ukraine.

An invasion of a sovereign state is certainly a war. However, during World War II – or, more precisely, its segment known as the Great Patriotic War – the symbol of a “sacred,” just war in defense of the Fatherland, the Motherland, and the native land emerged. Those who unleashed that war were defined as invaders, Nazis, and usurpers. Accordingly, Putin replaces the word “war” with the term “special operation.” This “Putinism” becomes the most important linguistic marker for manipulating public opinion.

These addresses contain a full range of manipulative techniques – half-truths, lies, falsifications, simulations of a terrifying future, and

others – the impact of which on listeners is intensified by emotionally expressive language:

Ukraine, backed by the West: *неонацисты, антироссийский плацдарм, тотальная русофobia, агрессивная политика западных элит, террористические акты против мирных жителей, режим репрессий, геноцид, наследники бандеровцев и нацистских караокей* (neo-Nazis, an anti-Russian stronghold, total Russophobia, aggressive policies of Western elites, terrorist attacks against civilians, a regime of repression, genocide, the heirs of Banderites and Nazi punitive forces), etc.

Russia: *наша великая Родина, большая историческая Россия, настоящие патриоты встали на защиту интересов России* (our great Motherland, great historical Russia, true patriots rising to defend Russia's interests), etc.

Thus, on February 21, a massive verbal bombardment of Ukraine began, and on February 24, “Putinists” were compelled to “defend the integrity of Russia” through a “preemptive” invasion of Ukrainian territory: “In this regard, the decision to launch a preemptive military operation was absolutely necessary and the only possible one.” In the president’s second speech, delivered on the day of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, linguistic markers of manipulation are superimposed with a dense layer of evaluative vocabulary: *фундаментальные угрозы, безответственные политики, грубо и бесцеремонно, циничный обман, наплевательское, пренебрежительное отношение* (fundamental threats, irresponsible politicians, rude and unceremonious behavior, cynical deception, a dismissive and contemptuous attitude).

In an effort to emphasize the supposed closeness between the ruling elite and the masses, Putin resorts to colloquial language such as *хамски, шуллерское поведение, сломали хребет международному терроризму* (boorish, cheating behavior; broke the back of international terrorism) and even jargon like *Несогласных ломают через колено: ... обманули, а выражаясь народным языком просто кинули* (dissenters are forced to bend the knee; deceived, and in common parlance, simply “screwed”).

Particularly expressive is the series of prefixed verb forms used to expose the mythical enemy that allegedly contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union and is said to plan, in the near future, to *дожсать* (grind down), *добить* (finish off), and *разрушить уже окончательно* (annihilate completely). The use of the subjunctive mood and future tense forms when listing threats deserves special attention. How could

this not justify a preemptive strike? With only a few linguistic markers, the cultural past of a people who defended their country from fascist invaders is manipulated: Ukrainian government officials are declared direct descendants of Nazis (“neo-Nazis”), while those initiating a so-called special operation on the territory of a sovereign foreign state are proclaimed defenders of the Fatherland.

Even representatives of the Orthodox Church were mobilized to shape the public opinion desired by the Russian authorities. After the war began, Patriarch Kirill, in his statements, endorsed the military actions in Ukraine, praising Russian soldiers as “peace-loving and modest people” who are portrayed as determining Russia’s future.

The Birth of a New Myth

The highest form of manipulative use of language is the creation of political and ideological myths. The great social experiment of building socialism, which was intended to evolve into communism, was based on a number of attractive political myths: the myth of the “most humane society” and that of the “friendly family of equal peoples.” A special symbolic universe was constructed to sustain these myths, employing a wide range of sign systems that ultimately formed the cultural code of *Homo Sovieticus* (Aroshidze 2018).

In analyzing the role of language in myth creation as a socio-cultural phenomenon, we also demonstrated the dynamics of myth destruction, facilitated by texts of a destructive nature: satirical texts criticizing the existing order (anecdotes, cartoons, parodies, political fables, etc.); texts containing reliable information that broke the “information vacuum” in which the builders of socialism existed (photographic documents, archival materials, autobiographies, etc.); and highly artistic texts with a particularly strong impact, including the works of Mikhail Bulgakov, Vladimir Vysotsky, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Igor Guberman, and others.

Old myths have been destroyed, but the process of myth-making continues. New myths are being constructed and readily accepted by naive users of the information society. At present, a new myth is taking shape – the so-called “Siberianization of Russia” – with renewed emphasis on linguistic manipulators. Sergey Karaganov, Distinguished Professor and Academic Director of the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, is the author of the article “Siberization: Russia’s Second Turn to the East Lies ‘Beyond the Stone’” (Karaganov 2024).

The author discusses Russia's strategic future, arguing that the war "provoked and unleashed by the West in Ukraine should not distract us from moving south and east – where the center of human development is shifting." One cannot help recalling the "cultural center of the world," Vasyuki, from Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov's *The Twelve Chairs* (1928).

According to this logic, Russia must return home from its "more than three-hundred-year European journey," which has allegedly exhausted its usefulness. "For these three centuries, we have half-forgotten the eastern roots of our state and people. The Mongols plundered, but they also contributed to development." Once again, the motif of the "conquest" of Siberia is activated, presented as the force that transformed ancient Rus', the Russian kingdom, into a great Russia. Particularly revealing are the linguistic constructions used to describe a single, supra-ethnic community – the Soviet people under new geopolitical conditions:

"Siberia was developed by people of dozens of nationalities, intertwined with the local population. And, of course, collectivism – survival and the conquest of space and the elements were impossible without mutual assistance. This is how the Siberian was formed – a concentration of the best in the Russian person – Russian Russian, Russian Tatar, Russian Buryat, Russian Yakut, Russian Chechen, and so on down the list."

The foundations of a new myth have thus already been laid. The author presents himself as a witness – and even a midwife – to the birth of a new world, while all that remains is to repel the final attack of the retreating West, allegedly seeking to defeat Russia on the battlefields of Ukraine. Consequently, this battle must be won by the most brutal means. Finally, as the culmination of this manipulative strategy, a concealed threat is articulated: "This is necessary not only for the country's victory, but also to prevent the world from sliding into World War III."

Conclusions

The main resource of the modern information society is knowledge and information; therefore, manipulating public consciousness is, first and foremost, a matter of manipulating information and, through it, diminishing a people's cultural heritage.

The most important means of manipulating public consciousness include censorship and propaganda, a near-complete monopoly on the media, the dualistic mechanism of "memory/forgetting," control over

all levels of the educational system, and the influence of the press, television, the film industry, and literature, which together shape the “desired” value systems within mass consciousness.

The highest manifestation of manipulation is the creation of ideological myths – multistructured symbolic universes in which language and so-called linguistic manipulators (metaphorization, theatricalization) play a central role. At the same time, language also functions as a means of exposing and debunking myths.

As a result of myth-making, a complex symbolic universe is formed in which all means of persuasion and suggestion, both verbal and visual, are employed and packaged in an emotional, often pathetic wrapper that does not always successfully conceal half-truths and falsifications.

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