

## Techniques of manipulation in political discourse

Elena Cristina BERARIU<sup>1</sup>, Andrea PETERLICEAN<sup>2</sup>

*Political discourses have always been part of the daily lives of those directly involved in the process of governing, be it on paper, on air or online. These days, however, they have become part of everybody's life. The recent overwhelming events such as the Covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine now, have glued people to the screens, eager for information, reassurance, or guidance. More often than ever, political discourses are spread throughout the media trying to either give comfort or incite people to action. Some discourses provide answers to the questions raised by other discourses, others offer explanations in a desperate attempt to communicate efficiently in what looks like a gapped conversation with various interruptions. Most discourses are accompanied by pictures, either representing the speaker or the topic. The aim of this paper is to analyse such discourses caused by the outbreak of war in Eastern Europe with a focus on pictures and to show how much can be said without actually saying it, how the perceptions related to culture and stereotypes can be manipulated. The paper starts from the premises that the techniques of manipulation in discourses have always been the same, irrespective of the type of discourse (advertising discourse, medical discourse, political discourse, etc.). However, the political and social context greatly influence the structure and content of a discourse thus reflecting the very beliefs of the people who write or deliver them. In other words, this paper aims to show how cultural and political ideologies are deeply rooted in political discourses, both reflecting and being a reflection of the society that produces them.*

Keywords: *political discourse, manipulation techniques, ideologies, social context*

### 1. Introduction

This paper conducts an empirical analysis of president Zelensky's pictures accompanying articles on BBC from February to September 2022 which will be followed by a quantitative analysis in further studies to validate our results, probably in the format of questionnaires applied to students from "Dimitrie Cantemir" University and "Sapientia" University of Târgu Mureş.

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<sup>1</sup> Dimitrie Cantemir University of Târgu-Mureş, [cristina.berariu@gmail.com](mailto:cristina.berariu@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, [andrea.peterlicean@ms.sapientia.ro](mailto:andrea.peterlicean@ms.sapientia.ro)

While collecting the data for the study, we realized there are many similarities with advertisements. On the BBC site, before you click to see the whole article, you first see a picture (or a still image from a video) and a headline, which is the typical structure of most advertisements, therefore we decided to give this study a rather unusual approach. We intended to portray president Zelensky by closely analysing his pictures accompanying articles on the BBC website. In our previous studies (Berariu 2020; Berariu, Pop, Nemeş 2015; Berariu, Moraru, Peterlicean 2010) we dealt with advertising as a type of discourse in an attempt to show how advertisements are glimpses of the society we live in, both influencing and being influenced by our social and cultural beliefs.

The critical discourse approach (Fairclough 1995; Jaworsky, Coupland 1999; Fairclough 1989; Johnstone 2000), generally applied to the study of language, as in our last study (Berariu, Peterlicean 2021) is largely used when studying the language of advertisements, which are a specific type of discourse, although quite a lot of attention is generally directed to pictures. In this article we also focus on pictures, given its 'superiority effect', its power to create a fictional world (Nelson 1976). A picture can stick to our minds for a long period of time, it is easily remembered, can compress a whole story and has a greater emotional impact than words do, therefore 'a picture is worth a thousand words'. However, just like words, pictures need decoding. We are active participants in the communication process (Leech 1974), addressees who need to break the code (language, pictures, music) to get to the message sent by the addresser via a channel (oral/written) in a certain context. According to critical discourse analysts, the larger context is our society, van Dijk's macro level (2000) and the message is a reflection of its practices and beliefs, which it can further influence and perpetuate (Richardson 2007).

Our study aims to show the power that lies in the encrypted message due to certain techniques of encoding meanings, either social or political. We approached this study from the critical discourse analyst's point of view, considering our data as political discourse. Therefore, the power of a picture in our study is threefold: it catches a glimpse of the world, it manipulates the feelings of the receiver, it creates and imposes political and cultural models. One headline comprises it all: "The making of a president". The portrayal of president Zelensky is a glimpse of the world today, a world at war, troubled, distressed yet firm and dignified. The stereotype of a president is broken, feelings of sympathy and support arise while new political approaches emerge.

## **2. Case study**

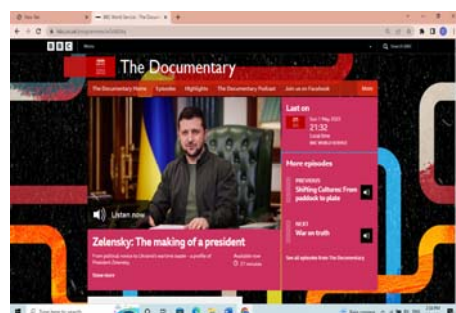
Whether we like to admit it or not, we still appear to live in a patriarchal society where both men and women are assigned roles according to old stereotypes: men

are likely to work outside their home while women, although frequently involved in activities outside their homes, are still absorbed in the home environment. Traditionally, men have been assigned to the area of politics. There have always been exceptions, such as the late Queen Elisabeth II in UK, Indira Gandhi in India, or Angela Merkel in Germany. However, the political arena belongs mostly to men. Men who look powerful, elegant, firm, trustworthy, reliable, especially leaders or presidents. One could even talk about a worldwide stereotyped image of a president, an image of a man in a black suit, always wearing a tie, always boasting a neat haircut, restrained in gestures and speech. Boris Johnson breaks the pattern of a perfect English gentleman, of a calm and elegant leader. Yet, he is admired. President Zelensky breaks all stereotypes and catches the attention of the whole world: he is admired, respected and followed into battles. People are ready to die for him and what he appears to be standing for: freedom. How has he managed to generate such a reaction from the world? Could it be through his words and actions alone? How has he managed to generate such powerful feelings of sympathy and respect from the world?

In this paper, we are trying to provide the answer to these questions by analysing the changes in the image of president Zelensky due to the outbreak of war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, which generated a campaign for humanitarian and military help that has shaken the whole world. Similarly to an advertising campaign, the success of his campaign relies on both the message and its channel of distribution. And just like in an advertising campaign, if you want to attract attention and keep it, you break some rules. You manipulate people's attention and turn it toward what is important to you and gradually, through repetition, make it important to everybody. Moreover, your feelings will become the feelings of those who receive your message. President Zelensky's image used to be similar to the image of all the other presidents: an appropriate appearance and body language (suit and tie, a smiley face, a friendly handshake), meeting fellow presidents in official contexts, outside important institutions or in large halls.



**Figure 1.** Image of president Zelensky before the war



**Figure 2.** Image of president Zelensky during the war

The message conveyed by such pictures relates to trust, reliability, and determination. Throughout the years, the perception of the audience regarding men in suits has been gradually manipulated towards feelings of trust, power and security. Soon after the war started, he dropped the suit and chose the military outfit, khaki trousers, T-shirt and jacket, identifying himself with the country at war and, thus, reinforcing the message he sent out to the world: we are fighters, we are determined, we are strong. From that moment on, due to persuasive marketing techniques, the image of president Zelensky has spread throughout the world. His pictures, videos that feature him and his words and actions are everywhere: he is on TV, the internet, he attends conferences, meetings, etc., using the latest technology (an almost life large 3D projection) to make himself present wherever he wants, without actually leaving his country. He has become the most widely spread advertisement against the war while, at the same time, being the image of war itself.

Like in the case of any good advertisement, great emphasis was placed on pictures, especially on the participants but the setting also carries weight. More often than not, president Zelensky appears in the company of others, sometimes politicians or the military, sometimes famous interviewers or well-known actors. Unlike regular advertisements, where the focus is mostly on the sex-appeal of participants rather than on the product advertised, pictures representing president Zelensky focus on the idea of strength and determination. While people appearing in pictures carry most of the weight (their appearance, body language, facial expression, etc.), the shooting style and colours used in the pictures are important manipulative techniques. It is because images don't just tell a story, they have the power to make the audience participate in the story. When we communicate face to face, we follow rules and thus we can have polite conversations, establish and maintain social positions, etc. (Austin 1962; Searle 1969; Grice 1975). We build social relationships and adapt to a communicative context, respecting social distance. Leech (1983) mentions four types of distance:

- Intimate distance - when participants can actually touch each other
- Personal distance - friendly but formal relationships;
- Social distance - more formal business relationship
- Public distance - relationship between people unlikely to meet

Social distance does not only exist in face-to-face communication; it can be found in a picture as well. President Zelensky's pictures cover all types of distance. There is public distance when he addresses students at university, there is social distance when meeting fellow politicians, personal distance when about to shake hands with a guest (Fig. 4) or an interviewer, and there is intimate distance when he sits at the table with soldiers for a cup of tea (Fig. 3). All these instances portray president Zelensky as a firm, solid man, deeply concerned with the problems a war

entails, eager to maintain diplomatic relations, eager to help and receive help. Therefore, the choice of distance indirectly influences the way people perceive president Zelensky by gradually building on their feelings of sympathy towards a man who, although in a position of power, is just a man like any other, in need of company, offering and receiving support.



**Figure 3.** President Zelensky visiting his troops



**Figure 4.** President Zelensky receiving actor Ben Stiller

Other factors such as focus, shooting angle, lighting and cropping points must be considered (Kraft 1987; Mandell and Shaw 1973; Tiemens 1970). These are choices/ techniques that have meanings, just like perspective, which refers to the angle of the shot and the position of the objects/ people in the photo (foreground, which suggests importance, or background - less significant, on the horizontal or vertical axis). All these techniques represent the involvement of people in the story told by the image. In Fig. 3, it is the food and the drinks on a table that are in the foreground, they are the reason for the gathering; the soldiers are sitting at an oval table, president Zelensky is wearing military outfit and sitting among them. He is one of the many, a fighter for freedom. The angle of the shot, high on the horizontal axis, emphasizes the same idea, as it makes the people look small, equal and less important.

In most pictures portraying president Zelensky, the focus is on his face, therefore the facial expressions are clearly observed, ranging from sadness to anger; he almost always looks concerned and determined, again breaking the pattern of the stereotyped smiling politician. The focus can show how much we should engage with the subject. The world is urged to be completely shaken by the idea of war in Europe, by the suffering, by its horrors. The close-up shots express trust and intimacy (Fig. 5). We should believe the presidents' words as they are

sincere and come from the heart. Additionally, the angle at eye level suggests a personal relationship with the viewer. President Zelensky is addressing each and every one of us, creating an intimate distance without touching.



**Figure 5.** President Zelensky addressing BBC audience



**Figure 6.** President Zelensky's sideways look

Direct gaze shows high engagement, when the reader is looked directly in the eye. It is a powerful image, having direct visual contact with the audience: it is an aggressive technique, as is the use of imperatives in language. The selfies or videos recorded by the president himself have a huge impact as the audience is completely taken in by such a direct and intimate approach (Fig. 5). When the gaze is directed to the side, we have an offer image, the participant offering himself for contemplation: a less aggressive technique that tries not to impose itself, allowing one's own opinion. The oblique perspective can be considered an indirect technique because it is not imposed and it is more detached (Fig. 6). The close-up shots and the direct gaze have a great and immediate impact on the feelings of the audience, because of the direct connection. Sadness can be seen in the eyes, anger or despise can be easily perceived in the corner of the mouth or in a crease of the forehead.

The light and the colours can add to the meaning conveyed by the people in the pictures. A great number of the pictures representing president Zelensky are taken inside, either in an office or a large room, the background sometimes blurred, to emphasize on the president, yet the hues are the same: neutral colours, shades of brown, khaki and grey, just like the president's usual outfit colours. They represent oppression, sadness but also strength and determination. Sometimes the bright colours of the Ukrainian flag stand out as a reminder of what the president stands for, the bright blue could be strength and durability, the yellow could be the fertility of the land, richness.

When the picture is taken outside, the setting is mostly desolate, showing the devastating effects of the war. The various shades of black, grey, blue and white could be, in this case, desolation, social distance, depression. However, there are pictures with green vegetation in the background, which could suggest hope, revival. When the focus is on the scenery, medium shooting angles are used. People in this type of image are cut off at the knees or waist, suggesting personal distance (Figures 1 and 2). The setting is formal, suitable for official meetings, suggesting feelings of trust and reliability. The audience is thus led to believe that important people take important and appropriate decisions while being closely watched, so they should be trusted.

A similar shooting angle and cut off can, however, easily extend to intimate distance when people share a feeling of joy as in Fig. 7. These are rare moments when the Ukrainian army recapture a city, the president is smiling and selfies are being taken (Fig. 7). The soldiers' happiness should be shared by the audience as well, it is the taste of victory and confidence that connects people and brings hope.



**Figure 7.** President Zelenskyy fraternizing with his troops

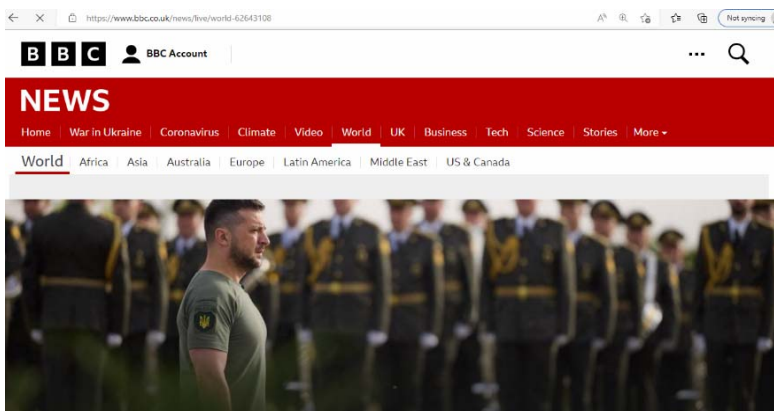


**Figure 8.** President Zelenskyy's 3D projection

In advertisements, the emphasis is usually on the body of the participants, sometimes the whole body, sometimes just parts of it, such as hands, feet, fingers. Political campaigns, on the other hand, even if they do not focus on sex appeal to get to the audience, they do focus on appearance: neat, elegant, smiling people. President Zelenskyy's campaign, however, presents a less than perfect image of a man caught in the middle of a war, dressed as if he were ready to take action at any time. In addition, he has a serious face, often frowning, a grown beard as if there were no time for shaving. Yet, his beard is carefully trimmed, his soldier-like haircut is very neat. The close-up shots are very relevant in this respect, but so are

the middle shots or full body exposures because the president's image is very compact and strong.

Full body exposure generally corresponds to social distancing. If we also add the low shot angle, we obtain more social distance, while the sharp focus suggests that the person is unattainable. The 3D projection of president Zelensky attending a conference does more than that. The still image presented on the BBC website may suggest social distance but the technology that brought the president in front of his audience actually reduces the social distance through the emotional impact of images (Fig. 8). The audience can both see and hear the message as if it were face-to-face, empathy is at its highest, the audience is greatly touched by the feelings the president shares.



**Figure 9.** President Zelensky celebrating the Independence Day of Ukraine

Public distance is also associated with photographing the subject from far away. In this case, the whole body of the person appears in the image, sometimes together with other people. It could mean that these people are not accessible to everyone. In such instances, president Zelensky is accompanied by the military who offer him protection. However, this is not the case in Fig. 9. Although blurred, the setting of this picture shows the military in official uniforms celebrating an important event, the Independence Day of Ukraine. The angle of shot and the focus on the president make him stand out, strong and undeterred, just like the soldiers in the background. The Ukrainians should be overwhelmed with pride while the rest of the world should feel respect and admiration. The president is one of the many fighters for freedom, yet he is clearly a leader, no longer the comedian president of earlier days.



### 3. Conclusions

This paper has aimed to present the power of pictures in catching a glimpse of the world, manipulating the feelings of those who receive them, in creating and imposing political and cultural models. We have emphasized the idea that meanings are encoded into pictures by various manipulative techniques, such as breaking the rules, shooting style and colour code. The shooting style can bring a person closer to the audience through close-up shots creating an intimate distance or it can maintain the social distance through medium shooting angles. We showed that the appearance of the people in the pictures, their clothing, hairstyle or body language also convey meanings, building on feelings of trust, strength and determination while colours intensify the atmosphere already created by people or shooting style.

We have pointed out that president Zelensky has broken the rules and expectations of people as regards the classic, stereotyped image of a president, with a black suit and tie, always with a smile, always friendly. His campaign against war has created a new image of a president, a model to follow, closer to his people and country, identifying with the many, suffering together with his people, fighting for his people, strong and determined to win. He has become a warrior president, strong and undeterred, appealing to the whole world for humanitarian aid and support, attracting the sympathy of foreigners and the love of his countrymen. He is today, the image of a true leader.

One cannot help but consider the following: is he a media construct? Would his cry for help have had a similar impact, if it had not been for the media coverage? No matter the answer, president Zelensky's campaign against the war is quite remarkable.

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