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## THE REPRESENTATION OF MIGRATION IN ONLINE ENGLISH LANGUAGE NEWS TEXTS

**ABSTRACT:** *The news consumers' perception of reality depends on the way and on the language in which the media cover the events. As it is known from strategic communication, business communication, and political discourse analysis, the choice of words and phrases determines what cognitive scenarios are triggered in the minds of the news consumers. These are culture dependent, deeply rooted in communities, and shape the attitudes of the public. The study summarises some typical features of the reports on global news websites at the peak of the migration crisis in Europe from mid-August, 2015 to late October, 2015, and points out the impact of the model of reality presented by the news texts on the political management of the crisis. The analysis also focuses on which aspects are covered extensively and which ones are dismissed as insignificant or ignored since these may provide possible clues to a better understanding of the background of the crisis.*

**KEYWORDS:** *cognitive scenarios, discourse analysis, implicit content, news texts, strategic communication*

### THE NEWS ITEM AS A NARRATIVE

Studies on news texts find that the structure of a news item in the print media is partly or completely identical with that of a narrative.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, with the appearance of the interactive online newspapers and news websites the events are no longer described in single news texts with a closed structure, rather, in loosely structured, lengthy, soap-opera-like flows of news, which rewrite and recycle earlier news texts.

Seemingly, online news is not only up-to-date, but also up-to-minute. It imposes even tighter deadlines on the journalists' work, changing both the work methods and the product — the news text. News consumers have the impression that they are informed about events in real time. Correspondents deliver reports in video messages while they are standing on the location of the events, as if in front of the scenery. The people who are staying in the vicinity of the happening are invited to upload their own photos and video footage on the website of the online newspaper, while news consumers are writing comments. Apparently, news consumers get to know reality better than in the era of the conventional media. However, the devices of narration are still language, and visual information. As earlier, both offer opportunity for influencing the recipients of the messages, that is, for strategic communication or propaganda.

<sup>1</sup> For instance: Van Dijk, T. A. *News As Discourse*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 1988.; McQuail, D. *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2000. Hungarian edition: *A tömegkommunikáció elmélete*. Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2003.; Andok, M. *A hírek története*. Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2013.

Extensive sources are available for the study of news texts in social and political context as a result of the findings of the branch of applied linguistics termed political or critical discourse analysis. Its origins can be traced back as far as content analysis and propaganda analysis.<sup>2</sup> The analysis of news texts may be used to describe political interrelationships which can be detected in their implicit content but which are not stated explicitly.

The Internet homepages of BBC and of CNN devoted great attention to the surge of migration towards Europe from the spring of 2015 to October 2015, when the launch of Russian military operations in Syria was reported by the global media. When trying to analyse and interpret the events, the study of what information the two influential news producers covered with what linguistic devices may offer some clues. Taking the needs of the news consumer into consideration, the answers to the following questions should be searched for: 1. Who arrives in Europe? 2. Why do they set out? 3. What is their aim? 4. What is the policy of the European countries about them? It is worth investigating what conceptual framework was used when the phenomenon was reported on, what information was repeated a number of times and what was not covered; in addition, which techniques of persuasion were applied by the combination of news texts, photos, video footages, and user generated content.

Although I made statistics during the research of the texts, for example, concerning the frequency of the words *migrant* and *refugee*, qualitative analysis, that is, the detection of linguistic and visual manipulation were the priority.

## MIGRANTS OR REFUGEES

It is known from business and political strategic communication, as well as the language of science, that, in order to describe new phenomena of reality, new concepts must be formed, consequently, new linguistic tools must be found or created to develop them and express them — for example, new words. The innovative concepts and words or phrases enter into mutual interaction, have an impact on our thinking and may assist the formulation of new problem solving concepts.<sup>3</sup> If business or political actors fail to describe a new phenomenon with new linguistic tools and in an innovative conceptual frame, they fall into a communication trap, get confused and become paralysed.

Certain concepts recall a conceptual frame with so much power that elicits a whole narrative, a whole story. On 28 August, 2015, the following article appeared on the BBC homepage: *The battle over the words used to describe migrants*.<sup>4</sup> The metaphor *battle* expresses the fight for the information space quite precisely. The article defined the concept of migrant and of refugee as follows:

“A refugee, according to the 1951 Refugee Convention, ‘is any person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality

<sup>2</sup> For example: George, A. L. *Propaganda Analysis: A Study of Inferences Made from Nazi Propaganda in World War II*. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson, 1959.; Krippendorff, K. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Thousand Oak, Ca.: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1980. Hungarian edition: *A tartalomlemezés alapjai*. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 1995.; Fairclough, N. *Language and Power*. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Krippendorff, K. *Strategic Narratives and Competitive Advantage: Do Winners Speak Differently?* Abo: Abo Akademi University Press, 2014. 26–29.

<sup>4</sup> Ruz, C. “The battle over the words used to describe migrants”. BBC News Magazine. 28 August 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34061097>, Accessed on 02 September 2015.

and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country’.”

The homepage of CNN displayed noticeable harmony with the BBC coverage of migration. On 11 September, 2015, it explained the same in the form of a narrative in the article entitled *Things to know about Europe’s migrant crisis at land and sea*:<sup>5</sup>

„A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her home country because of armed conflict or persecution. Syrians are a prime example.”

The narrative hidden in the word, more precisely, in the concept of *refugee* can be told as follows: someone is persecuted somewhere due to an armed conflict or the above mentioned reasons, they flee, they can no longer rely on their home country, for this reason, some other country has to admit them and protect them. One interviewee of the 28 August article of BBC,<sup>6</sup> which was mentioned above, worded the behavioural constraint deriving from the conceptual frame as below:

“Refugee implies that we have an obligation to people,” says Betts. “It implies that we have to let them on to our territory and give them the chance to seek asylum.”

On the whole, the use of the word, that is, of the concept *refugee* imposed such a psychological constraint which resulted in the realization of the scenario which it had elicited, as required by the norms.

The definition of *migrant* in the mentioned 28 August article was the following:

A UN document suggests: “The term ‘migrant’... should be understood as covering all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned, for reasons of ‘personal convenience’ and without intervention of an external compelling factor.”

It was CNN again that helped to decode the narrative hidden in the word:

„A migrant is someone who chooses to resettle to another country in search of a better life. So, for example, those fleeing poverty in Nigeria, looking for work in Europe, would not have refugee status and would be considered migrants.”<sup>7</sup>

It can be seen that the narrative, or the retrieved and realized or, rather, self-realizing scenario differs from the series of events recalled by the concept of *refugee*: someone gets disappointed about their situation in a poor country, they decide to move on, trying to find a job and a better life; they leave their home country and apply for admission to another country. The target country judges their application either favourably or unfavourably, depending on its social and economic needs.

The explanation by CNN in the 11 September article was concluded as follows:

“The United Nations notes that both groups are present in Europe and at its shores. It’s safe to call all of them migrants because each is migrating, but many of them are also refugees.”

To sum up, the choice of the linguistic signs referring to certain concepts results in the development or activation of ‘self-fulfilling’ cognitive schemata, that is, scenarios. Studies prove that this can be exploited in the media and in political communication.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Martinez, M. “Things to know about Europe’s migrant crisis at land and sea”. CNN. 28 August 2015. <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/08/28/world/things-to-know-europe-migrant-crisis-worlds-deadliest-border/index.html>, Accessed on 08 October 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Ruz, C. “The battle over the words...”.

<sup>7</sup> Martinez, M. “Things to know about...”.

<sup>8</sup> Krippendorff. *Strategic Narratives and Competitive Advantage...* 34–35.; Nerlich, B. “The role of metaphor scenarios in disease management discourses: Foot and mouth disease and avian influenza”. In Handl, S. and Schmid, H-J. (eds), *Windows to the Mind*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 2011, 116–118.

In the period examined, on the BBC homepage the following statement could be read at the end of each article reporting on the European migration crisis:

“A note on terminology: The BBC uses the term migrant to refer to all people on the move who have yet to complete the legal process of claiming asylum. This group includes people fleeing war-torn countries such as Syria, who are likely to be granted refugee status, as well as people who are seeking jobs and better lives, who governments are likely to rule, are economic migrants.”

It will be proved below that the linguistic choice, i.e., lapsing from one word to the other and interchanging concepts provided grounds for the persuasion, the emotional manipulation of the news consumers.

## THE MOTIVES OF MIGRATION ACCORDING TO THE NEWS

The recipients of news must have been searching for the causes of the migration surge. Consequently, the explanations offered by the news texts on the mentioned homepages should be examined. On 9 September, 2015, for example, the following headline could be read on the BBC homepage:

“Migrant crisis: How Middle East wars fuel the problem”<sup>9</sup>

The news text placed responsibility solely on the European Union, as if it had been the only organization which had a share in the wars.

“The new crisis is about refugees. The European Union is discovering, belatedly, that it is impossible to avoid the consequences of a range of wars and civil conflicts right next door.”

A headline of CNN on September 11:

“War has forced half of Syrians from their homes”<sup>10</sup>

The noun *war* is personified: *it has driven half of Syrians from their homes*. The warring parties, who actually perform acts of war, are concealed by this phrase. The following information could be found on the BBC homepage on 19 September, 2015:

“Many have fled the conflicts and abuses in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Eritrea. But there are also many economic migrants from the Balkans.”<sup>11</sup>

The correspondent kept silent about the participants of the conflicts again. Nevertheless, on 6 October he named those who generated a possible new migration wave — without naming those who had sparked the conflict in Syria.

“Turkey says millions more refugees could flee the conflict in Syria due to Russian and Iranian involvement.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> “Migrant crisis: How Middle East wars fuel the problem”. BBC News. 09 September 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34193762>, Accessed on 08 October 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Bixler, M. and Martinez, M. “War has forced half of Syrians from their homes”. CNN. 11 September 2015. <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/11/world/syria-refugee-crisis-when-war-displaces-half-a-country/index.html>, Accessed on 15 October 2015.

<sup>11</sup> “How is the migrant crisis dividing EU countries?”. BBC News. 09 October 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34278886>, Accessed on 15 October 2015.

<sup>12</sup> „Migrant crisis: EU plan offers more money for Turkey camps”. BBC News. 6 October 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34451660>, Accessed on 15 October 2015.

In an earlier article on 23 April (Migrant crisis: Who are Africa's people smugglers?)<sup>13</sup> the BBC homepage quoted an interviewee who spoke about the restructuring of the market of African people smuggling:

“The Syrian migration flow changed the game as far as human smuggling was concerned in Sub-Saharan Africa, because the Syrians had more money to pay.”

As it can be seen from the above, all the explanation the reader got for the mass appearance of the migrants was that its causes had been wars and people smugglers. The news texts ignored the actual factors that generated the astonishing footage and statistics, similarly to the possible long-term consequences. No reference was made to the parties involved in the Syria war, and no reasons were stated why migration suddenly increased in the particular period of time. In the news reports, the destination of the migrants was presented as given information, as part of the shared background knowledge of the journalists and of the news consumers:

“[...] migrants bound for Germany. The route through Greece and the Balkans became very popular because Libya and the sea passage to Italy proved extremely risky.”<sup>14</sup>

## MIGRATION AS A NATURAL DISASTER

On the basis of news texts, migration had been associated with the Mediterranean Sea and with countries of the Mediterranean as destinations until autumn 2015. When masses of migrants appeared on the Balkan and in Central Europe, the English language news reports used the discourse metaphor ‘migration is the same as natural waters flooding and forcing their way’ to describe the events. A discourse metaphor depicts a phenomenon for a community by projecting onto it another, known phenomenon. In this case, it described the mass of people through the movement and power of natural waters. Similarly to scenarios and conceptual frames, discourse metaphors impose a cognitive and narrative constraint concerning the event which is presented. Their dissemination in public talk is often the result of a pre-designed communication strategy.<sup>15</sup> Just to mention a few examples of water related metaphors (all of them include my emphasis):

“Migrants have **poured** into Austria from Hungary, en route to southern Germany.”<sup>16</sup>

“Croatia has now said it is regulating **the flow** of migrants.”<sup>17</sup>

“He accused Germany of encouraging the **influx**.”<sup>18</sup>

“Since Hungary sealed off its border with Serbia there has been **a surge** of migrants entering Croatia.”<sup>19</sup>

“The **flow** shows no sign of easing, with crowds still **streaming** across Hungary’s border with Serbia. Officials in Germany say thousands more migrants are expected to arrive later.”<sup>20</sup>

“[Europe is] **absorbing** refugees.”

<sup>13</sup> “Migrant crisis: Who are Africa's people smugglers?”. BBC News. 23 April 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32381101>, Accessed on 12 October 2015.

<sup>14</sup> “How is the migrant crisis dividing EU countries?”

<sup>15</sup> Nerlich, B. “The role of metaphor scenarios...”. 116–117.

<sup>16</sup> „How is the migrant crisis dividing EU countries?”

<sup>17</sup> „How is the migrant crisis dividing EU countries?”

<sup>18</sup> „How is the migrant crisis dividing EU countries?”

<sup>19</sup> „How is the migrant crisis dividing EU countries?”

<sup>20</sup> “Migrant crisis: Germany to release funds to help regions cope”. BBC News. 07 September 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34171161>, Accessed on 09 October 2015.

On September 1, this metaphoric image appeared in a headline:

“Migrant crisis: ‘**River of humanity**’ on Hungary border”<sup>21</sup>

and correspondent Nick Thorpe said it on the video report linked into the news text:

“[...]during the day I witnessed a **river of humanity** flowing”

The discourse metaphor of flood sets the frames of the narrative similarly to the way the concepts of *migrant* and *refugee* impose action in order to realise the scripts conceptually connected to them. As a flood is a natural disaster, it fits the method of concealing the actors who fuel wars and conflicts: it would be irrational to search for people who can be made responsible for natural disasters in human society or in human communities.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE ANCHORED CONCEPTUAL FRAMES OF THE NARRATIVE

Media attention turned to certain aspects of reality owing to the anchored frames and the elicited scenarios of the narrative, which entered into operation, while other aspects were completely concealed by the two news sources examined. It is particularly noticeable in the article entitled “How is the migrant crisis dividing EU countries?” published on the BBC homepage on 19 September, 2015,<sup>22</sup> a section of which is cited below with my emphasis:

“It became the focus of world attention when Hungarian riot police fired water cannon and tear gas at a big crowd of migrants at the border with Serbia on 16 September.

Hungarian officials said bottles and stones **had been thrown** at police, who were preventing the migrants from pouring through the new border fence.

There is widespread criticism of Hungary for its decision to build the razor-wire fence and prosecute migrants who enter illegally. Many fellow Europeans see the measures as a Draconian overreaction. But reports indicate that many Hungarians support the government’s tough stance.

Refugees have a right under international law to get protection and claim asylum. Pushing them back at the border violates that right, aid organisations point out.”

In the spirit of the note on terminology published on the BBC homepage and quoted above, the word *migrant* refers to the mixed group of both refugees and economic migrants. The correspondent lapsed from *migrants* to *refugees* without any explanation. The last comment insinuated the Hungarian authorities without justifying the term *refugees* with any reason. What is more, the journalist avoided including the agent in the sentence on throwing stones, which led to unnatural sentence structure and vague reference (...officials said bottles and stones **had been thrown**...). It seems that violent behaviour did not fit into the scenario elicited by the concept of *refugee*. At the same time, the news producer used the term *migrant* meeting the declared rules of ethical language use, then suddenly switched to *refugee* and created a negative image of the measures by the Hungarian authorities. In addition, the aid organisations mentioned were not named clearly.

In the period of time examined (early August to mid-October 2015) the leading news of BBC and CNN did not cover any unfavourable information about the migrants who stayed in Hungary or who appeared at its borders, but they did include unfavourable, often distorted, information and manipulative photos and video footages about the Hungarian authorities. Both

<sup>21</sup> “Migrant crisis: ‘River of humanity’ on Hungary border”. BBC News. 01 September 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34112928>, Accessed on 10 October 2015.

<sup>22</sup> “How is the migrant crisis dividing EU countries?”

BBC and CNN ignored the news report “Sky Finds ‘Handbook’ For EU-Bound Migrants” published on the Sky News homepage on 13 September.<sup>23</sup> That news story could have made a sensation because the Sky News correspondent had made an interview with a member of the organisation which allegedly had distributed the ‘handbook’ in Turkey. This person was reported to be living in Austria, and told the journalist that they had a network of more than a hundred people in North Africa and Europe. Nevertheless, it was not selected as leading news or as news for unknown reasons.

Another extract of the above mentioned article “How is the migrant crisis dividing EU countries?”<sup>24</sup> is worth analysing for its special devices of deception:

“Initially Slovenian Prime Minister Miro Cerar said his small Alpine country **would stick to the Schengen free movement rules**. He said it would process asylum requests and not create a “corridor” for refugees to simply travel on to Austria.” (My emphasis.)

The statement of the Slovenian Prime Minister as quoted by BBC suggested that the Schengen rules of free movement applied not only to the EU citizens living in the Schengen area but also to the migrants. Contrary to this, on grounds of the theory of presuppositions in linguistic pragmatics, the second sentence can be interpreted only if it is assumed that there was another country which did not process asylum requests and created a ‘corridor’ so that the refugees could ‘simply travel on’. Consequently, both stopping the migrants and letting them on were disapproved and were against the rules.

The examples analysed above prove that the description, the narration of migration in the mentioned news texts was stylistically and linguistically as confused as uncertain and diverse the political assessment of the situation was in various countries. It is obvious from the language use of the news texts that communicative and political confusion were replaced by clearer and more coordinated communication and action in October. The word *refugee* gradually disappeared, and the word migrant was combined with adjectives. On 9 October, in the BBC article “Migrant crisis: EU considers faster deportations” the word *refugee* occurred only four times, but *asylum seeker* was also used four times.<sup>25</sup> Remarkably, the term *migrant* occurred eleven times, with the following adjectives: *illegal, irregular, unwanted*.

It marked the turning point of a media campaign of more than two months in autumn 2015. The campaign stirred strong emotions and seemed to be a well-designed information operation. What may have been the purpose of the coordinated strategic communication operation by BBC and CNN?

## CONCLUSIONS

The total occupation of the information space was observable. In my view, the articles published on the front of the BBC and CNN homepages, the recommended links, the videos conveying manipulative images, footages, and comments by correspondents, as well as the series of photos disguised as Twitter or Facebook notes distracted the attention of the international public from the area of the Mediterranean. They targeted home recipients rather than global ones. This can be supported by the fact that, relying on their prejudice,

<sup>23</sup> Samuels, J. “Sky Finds ‘Handbook’ For EU-Bound Migrants”. Sky News. 13 September 2015. <http://news.sky.com/story/1551853/sky-finds-handbook-for-eu-bound-migrants>, Accessed on 13 September 2015.

<sup>24</sup> “How is the migrant crisis dividing EU countries?”.

<sup>25</sup> “Migrant crisis: EU considers faster deportations”. BBC News. 08 October 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34471858>, Accessed on 09 October 2015.

the news texts offered the simplest stereotypes when setting the agenda, such as the alleged 'democracy deficit' of the Central and Eastern European countries, the opposition between the old and new members of the EU, and the sad plight of the refugees or migrants. While the construction of the fence along the border of Hungary was criticised, very little coverage was provided on the fence at Calais or the incidents occurring there. The United Kingdom opted out of the planned refugee quotas of the EU, and the US did not respond to the suggestion of world quotas.

The media campaign gave the impression that the former foes had suddenly transformed into friends and advocates of the victims of the war in Syria, distancing themselves from their earlier deeds and even from their allies. In the era of the globalised media, when strategic communication intended for home public is received by foreign public and vice versa, media workers must have been aware of the hazard of sparking a conflict between the Muslim world and European countries with their irrational and emotionally overheated news reports.

During the coverage of the European migration crisis the causes that had sparked it were not mentioned, and neither was the part the UK and the USA played in the conflict. The re-tuning of the attitude to Syria may have been in the centre of the concerted effort: the transformation of the Syrian people from enemies into victims (of the Russian and Iranian intervention) by arousing sympathy. If the communication about Syria had been re-tuned, it would affect the positions at the possible peace negotiations. From that time on, Iran and Russia could have been made responsible for the situation in Syria, which could have an impact on the positions at the future peace talks.

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