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NEGATIVE IMAGE CONSTRUAL IN THE MEDIA¹

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ABSTRACT: This present paper upholds discursive aspects of image construal in British news media. The term negative image construal is introduced within the framework of World Modelling Theory, developed by the author to explore discourse in terms of representational structures. The objective is to reveal news content that contributes to negative image construal. Discourse-world of information war is characterized as a conceptually complex representational structure, textualized in the British media. It is argued that negative country image of Russia is profiled against a background of discourse-world of information war. This enables media managers to evaluate Russia as adversary of the West. The materials are taken from the “News on the Web” corpus, covering the period of 2010-2018.

1. Image: scope of the notion

The complexity of image results from an interplay of different semantic categories that comprise it (Image 2019). These include visual (color, exterior, symbols, pictures, designs), mental (dreams, memories, ideas), verbal (tropes, descriptions), communicative (speech acts, interaction), cultural (norms, traditions, prejudices), and ideological (geopolitics) elements that constitute a mental construct in the heads of the audience. Image can be studied at an individual level (politician, entertainer, celebrity, athlete) or at a corporate level (group image, ethnic minority image, country image). In the latter case, image is “the alienation of personal attributes for semiotic purposes” (Hartley 2002, 107).

An impressive compendium of works analyzing images ascribed to various ethnicities and nationalities has been presented within imagology. The discipline studies “the origin and function of characteristics of other countries and peoples, as expressed textually, particularly in the way in which they are presented in works

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of literature, plays, poems, travel books and essays” (Beller/Leerssen 2007, 7). M. Beller formulates the objective of imagology: “It is the aim of imagology to describe the origin, process and function of national prejudices and stereotypes, to bring them to the surface, analyze them and make people rationally aware of them” (2007, 11-12).

Initially limited to literary representations, the scope of imagology has become broader in recent years due to divergent studies that use notions such as *image*, *imagotype*, *ethnotype*, *stereotype*, *prejudice*, *national value*, *national character* (Dudziak 2011; Hurcombe 2016; Kiklewicz 2011; Pocheptsov 2004 etc.). The present research is based on an assumption that images, which have cultural and political consequences, have intensive coverage in mass media. Most people’s scope of experience is naturally very limited and their knowledge of foreign countries comes mainly from mass communication. Images are formulated, perpetuated and spread in media discourse. The media are the strongest image shapers:

There can be no doubt that mass media influence the way a country’s people form their images of the people and governments of other countries, because it is the mass media that disseminate the greater part of the information about foreign countries (Kunczik 2016, 7).

The created media picture of reality determines the way people think of other countries. Contemporary British mass media project a highly negative country image of Russia. It has recently become more pronounced in a vast majority of media texts, saturated with information war theme.

2. Media pictures of reality: decision making and image construal

The world is too vast, complex and often out of sight to be processed by an individual directly. Mental representations, engendered by mass media, are decisive in understanding the world as they enable making pictures of different fragments of reality beyond people’s reach. Due to the media, man is “learning to see with his mind vast portions of the world that he could never see, touch, smell, hear, or remember” (Lippmann 1998, 29).

The process of world-modelling in the media includes journalists (broader terms *media subjects*, *gatekeepers*, *managers of the media*) as key personnel involved in the decision-making flows of news production. They are “powerful agents” of discourse (Van Dijk 2014, 49), since they have access to information and channels of its distribution. Media managers select, define and present concepts that they consider newsworthy, people perceive what has been textualized and eventually start attributing to the world the characteristics regularly evoked by the media.

A. Kiklewicz stipulates two aspects of the choice of information for the audience on the part of the media subject – representational and social. They specify selection and representation of information in news production. Metaphorically, the recipients get a dissected product, which has previously undergone psychological and axiological processing (“препарированный продукт, прошедший предварительную психологическую и аксиологическую обработку”) (Kiklewicz 2015, 181). The social aspect of the choice of information suggests that the media manager’s position is never neutral: selection and dissection of information are employed as means of realization of social attitudes (“селекция и препарирование информации используется им как средство реализации социальных установок”) (ibidem, 182).

Sharing these ideas, I emphasize that media managers also govern image construal processes. The notion of *image construal* postulates an active role of the agent of discourse in structuring and organizing information about people or countries in the media. The concept *construal* emerged in R. Langacker’s research (1987, 487) to denote a relationship between a speaker or hearer and a situation that they portray and conceptualize, and later received more academic attention (Taylor/MacLaury 1995).

Under image construal I mean the process and result of media representation of a country or nation taken collectively. Image construal is essentially *text-driven*, i.e. media texts prompt which areas of knowledge should be activated in order to induce certain mental representations on the part of the readers. Negative image construal is salient and striking as soon as I draw cross-cultural comparisons. I give evidence of how one and the same state of affairs is represented in British and Russian media. I take random selection of interpretations of the 2014 events in Crimea. It is described as “the 2014 annexation of Crimea” (The Daily Mail, 28.02.2019), “Russia’s invasion of Crimea in 2014” (The Telegraph, 27.02.2019), “Russia’s seizure of Crimea” (BBC News, 26.02.2019), “Putin’s annexation of Crimea” (The Guardian, 09.04.2015), “Russian-occupied Crimea” (<https://www.stopfake.org/>) in British media. In Russian media the reader finds “Crimea’s reunification with Russia”, “the accession of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation” (<http://en.kremlin.ru/>).

I do not take responsibility of assessing the adequacy / inadequacy and reliability / unreliability of the reporting process in the above cases. I focus on discursive mechanisms of negative image construal and account for its representation in British media. I use terms *country image* and *national image* synonymously as “the cognitive representation that a person holds of a given country, what a person believes to be true about a nation and its people” (Kunczik 2001, 9).

I have incorporated the gestalt perception principle into the exploration of image construal in the media. Some elements of discourse are intentionally foregrounded

or profiled by media managers and some structures serve as a reference space for the characterization of what is profiled. Profiling is closely associated with figure/ground terms, meaning that

the perception of an overall shape comes about by dividing the perceptual field into a more prominent part, the figure, and a less salient part called the ground. It is against this ground that the figure moves, is moved or stands out (Dirven/Ibanez 2010, 17).

In the following section I demonstrate that discourse-world of information war serves a discursive reference space against which negative country image stands out.

3. Discourse-world of information war: country image profiling

Investigation of negative image construal relies on an approach proposed within World Modelling Theory. It is a branch of discourse studies that takes into account cognitive, communicative and social factors. It integrates ideas of European and Russian cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis to explain the characteristics of mental and linguistic representations of reality in discourse for the purposes of communication (Kushneruk 2018). World Modelling Theory initially draws on Text World Theory (Canning 2017; Gavins/Lahey 2016; Tincheva 2018; Trimarco 2015; Werth 1999). It also uses advances of theories that highlight ideological influence of discourse in terms of mental representations (Boldyrev 2017; Chilton 2004; van Dijk 2006).

World Modelling Theory is developed by the author to explore discourse in terms of representational structures. In language, media and communication, representations are:

words, pictures, sounds, sequences, stories, etc., that ‘stand for’ ideas, emotions, facts, etc. Representations rely on existing and culturally understood signs and images, on the learnt reciprocity of language and various signifying or textual systems. It is through this ‘stand in’ function of the sign that we know and learn reality (Hartley 2002, 202).

Representational structures is a generic term I use to denote mental constructs of different degrees of conceptual complexity (namely discourse-world and text-world), objectified in discourse, which relate to the processes and results of world representation for the purposes of communication. I interpret them as conceptually-complex, rich, discourse-level structures, textualized in mass media. Specifically, they are “cognitive entities simulating a reality”. (Tincheva 2018, 298). In this paper I limit myself to the notion of discourse-world.

Under discourse-world I generally mean a projected reality that presents a dynamic system of meanings, created by agents of discourse (media managers)

and interpreted by readers under the influence of a wide range of extra-linguistic factors – cultural, pragmatic, psychological, ideological, etc. Discourse-world as a representational structure can be reconstructed and assessed on the basis of a large number of texts, that are thematically, communicatively, or functionally connected.

The term *discourse-world of information war* (henceforth DW of information war) denotes a complex representational structure revealed in British media discourse that is encoded by media managers and decoded by readers in an aggregate of texts, united by the theme of information war (Kushneruk 2018a). The quantitative factor has to be a reliable indicator of its existence. DW of information war has proved palpable due to corpus approach. The News on the Web corpus contains about 7.4. billion words of data from web-based newspapers and magazines from 2010 to the present time (News 2019). I have used keywords *information war* and *information warfare* to single out DW of information war in British media texts. 219 contexts of use have been found through the 2010-2018 period. I have further analyzed syntagmatic relations of word-combinations *information war* and *information warfare* with lexemes *Russia, Russian, Kremlin, Moscow, Putin*.

DW of information war serves a background space, against which negative image of Russia becomes salient. The following characteristics help to visualize a complex representational structure textualized in British media discourse and to understand what news content contributes to negative country image. Discourse representation is in accord with news values or professional codes used in news production. They involve selection, construction and presentation of information in the interests of a powerful elite. What news about Russia is privileged over other in British media? It has been revealed that a highly negative country image is shaped by the following news content.

A) News content directly representing Russia as initiator of information war that has marked an era of global confrontation ('Russian', 'Putin's information war', 'new Cold War', 'cyber cold war', 'shadow war'). Russia is imputed an image of aggressor. The scope of information war is regularly characterized by epithets ('worldwide', 'massive', 'acute', 'intense', 'propagandistic', 'hybrid', etc.):

- (1) Based on what we know about Russian information warfare, the Twitter accounts run by the country's 'troll army', based in a nondescript office building in St Petersburg, are unlikely to be automated at all. (The Guardian, 07.01.2018).
- (2) Russia vs the West: Is this a new Cold War? (BBC News, 31.03.2018).

B) News content that metonymically names key actors of information war ('Moscow', 'Kremlin', 'Putin', 'pro-Moscow puppet groups', etc.):

- (3) The report cited evidence that the Kremlin waged 'information warfare on a massive scale' after the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines' jet MH17 over Ukraine

in 2014. (<https://themarketmogul.com>, 05.01.2018). It's all part of a new Russian strategy and information war. There is an attempt by Putin to create a new Cold War (The Herald, 17.03.2018).

C) News content focusing on key subjects (opponents) on the battlefield of information war. Regular oppositions include Britain – Russia, USA – Russia, Russia – Lithuania, Russia – Czech Republic, Russia – Sweden, Russia – European countries, the West – Russia:

- (4) Mr Laughland said the Syrian conflict had made the 'information war' between the West and Russia more acute than ever. (The Independent, 18.10.2016). Speaking to Newsnight on Friday she also spoke of her joy at hearing her cousin's voice but also said she is 'scared' by being caught up in the information war between Britain and Russia (The Daily Mail, 07.04.2018).

D) News content representing theatre of information war – real and virtual space where information war is conducted ('online', 'social media sites', 'pro-Russia news channels', 'Russian media', 'Russian web-sites', etc.):

- (5) But then there's increasing evidence that our public arenas – the social media sites where we post our holiday snaps or make comments about the news – are a new battlefield where international geopolitics is playing out in real time (The Guardian, 01.11.2016).
- (6) Moscow has flooded pro-Russia news channels and social media platforms with more than 20 conspiracy theories about the Salisbury attack to deflect attention from Britain's assertion that Moscow is to blame (The Times, 06.04.2018).

E) News content describing active means of information war ('information operations', 'cyberattacks', 'cyber espionage', 'hacking operation', 'fake news', 'propaganda', 'disinformation', etc.) and its troops and soldiers ('secret Russian government labs', 'botnets', 'cyber actors', 'human trolls', 'troll factory', 'troll farms', 'troll armies', 'cyber criminals', 'hackers', 'spies', 'spy agencies', 'cyber army', etc.):

- (7) The Kremlin officially denies all knowledge of the troll factory and questions its existence (The Daily Mail, 12.11.2017).
- (8) Fake news and botnets: how Russia weaponized the web (The Guardian, 02.12.2017).
- (9) The frequency of information warfare in all its manifestations, including fake news and cyberattacks, is now becoming better known (The Daily Mail, 14.12.2017).

F) News content pointing out objectives of information war waged by Russia ('to shape viewpoint', 'to create trouble', 'to fan the flames of division', 'to destabilize', 'to interfere', 'to meddle in politics', 'to stir up anger', 'to disrupt western way of life',

‘to divide the West and break its unity’, ‘to undermine democratic process’, ‘to spread disillusionment’, ‘to cause chaos’, etc.):

- (10) It’s very clear that the Russian state is engaging in black propaganda and fake news that seeks to spread disillusionment and chaos (The Herald, 17.03.2018).
- (11) Information warfare: Is Russia really interfering in European states? (BBC News, 30.03.2017).
- (12) NATO believes Moscow is involved in a deliberately ambiguous strategy of information warfare and disinformation to try to divide the West and break its unity over economic sanctions imposed on Russia following its 2014 annexation of Crimea (The Express, 13.11.2017).

G) News content that appeals to readers’ emotions, stirs strong feeling of danger and insecurity because of Russian threat:

- (13) Indeed, the immediate Russian threat may come from its information warfare and cyber campaigns directed against the West. That’s a battle that has already been joined. And it is one the West is equally ill-prepared for (BBC News, 28.06.2017).
- (14) The Kremlin is rehearsing aggressive scenarios against its neighbors, training its army to attack the West. The exercise is also part of information warfare aimed at spreading uncertainty and fear (The Express, 20.09.2017).

H) News content that ‘anchors’ on the opinion of experts in national security and international affairs. The readers’ attention is drawn to a reduced number of characteristics that are considered newsworthy and contribute to creating hardened prejudices, which rationalize and confirm the demeaning image of the country as a mixture of state with a criminal world.

- (15) Keir Giles, an expert in Russian information warfare at Chatham House, said the line between the Russian government, Russian business and the Russian criminal world was blurred. “The bottom line is these attacks would not be coming from Russia without Russian state collusion – if they wanted to stop it they could,” he told The Independent (The Independent, 21.04.2018).

The list above is by no means exhaustive. At present British media managers are trying to reach out to hearts and minds of their readers, proliferating malevolent characteristics that cultivate negative country image of Russia as a hindrance to the cultural and civilizational development of the West.

4. Conclusion

Media pictures of ontologically same fragments of the world differ greatly in different countries, being subject to a variety of geopolitical factors that specify views on controversial matters. It's neither good, nor evil. Globally, it's the question of the point of view and ethnocentrism. Linguistics and imagology are well beyond politics. It's not a discourse analyst's priority to assess ethnic-political relations or a pathology of international political situation that naturally determines media pictures of the world. A scholar is like an on-looker who contemplates on the given discursive reality – a discourse of representation – analyzes and systematizes facts, and draws conclusions relating to structuring information, language and the context of its usage.

My concern was to concentrate on mental and linguistic aspects of image in media discourse. By looking at the problem of negative image construal in British media, I have employed the heuristics of World Modelling Theory that analyses discourse in terms of representational structures. The notion of discourse-world has proved adequate in cognitive-discursive research of media communication. Corpus-based approach has made it possible to amass enough examples to reveal discourse-world of information war as a complex mental construct, regularly objectified in British media in an aggregate of texts, united by the theme of political confrontation. Out of many linguistic possibilities for signaling negative image construal, syntagmatic relations of word combinations *information war* and *information warfare* have been analyzed. News content contributing to projection of negative country image has been systematized. It has been shown that discourse-world of information war serves a background against which negative country image of Russia is profiled. The image features an extremely negative axiological modality established through negative evaluation. Russia is represented as a key ideological and political adversary of the West. This state of affairs has developed out of strained international relations between major political players and a lack of spirit of understanding on the global arena. Further investigation of image construal in transnational perspective might provide a relevant frame for better understanding and improving global relationship.

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