Emotive Meaning in Political Language

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The paper is devoted to emotive language using as one of a real argument characteristic. The real argument is regarded in the context of informal logic approach to argumentation. The topicality of considered problematic relates to the bright cases of emotive words used in the current political life. In the paper, I analyze, firstly, the specific features of a real argument which is used in everyday and public communication. Secondly, I review the sense of “emotive meaning” notion proposed by Charles Stevenson in relation to “descriptive meaning.” Thirdly, I consider the distinction between a good argument and an effective argument in the theoretical and practical perspective. Further, I describe and analyze certain practical cases of real political speech trying to understand the specificity of the audience’s conviction depending on emotive words used by the speaker. The result of this research is making clear the notion of emotive meaning and its place in communication, inter alia in political life.

Keywords: emotive meaning, emotive language, real argument, good argument, effective argument

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Introduction

The contemporary argumentation theory widely extends beyond the borders of purely logical analysis of arguments. It aims to give instruments to deal with real arguments people make in their ordinary life. Political speech, as one of the real argument kinds, is also the subject of its research.

As each of the natural language kind, political language is characterized by ambiguity and emotive character of used arguments. Thus, the political discourse language is a part of real-life argument discourse, also called real argument or ordinary-life argument. The real argument is used to change the point of interlocutor’s view in different communicative situations (Fisher, 1989: 57-61). Thus, the specific feature of a real argument is the dependence of conclusions from the context and circumstances of each communicative situation on which an argument occurs. That is why it is possible to evaluate a political argument, only taking into account the context of its use.
It is appropriate to consider Hamblin’s thesis about the argument. He notes hypothetical and real arguments are manifested in our experience. The first one appears in logics textbooks, and the second — in real communication (Hamblin, 1970: 234). The term “real argument” refers us to argument understanding closely related to its real functioning.

With regard to argument understanding in this paper, I consider an argument as the sequence of premises and conclusions, which can become the intermediary conclusions and be the premises on the next stage of the conversation. Therefore, one of the specific features of a real argument is the complexity of its structure.

The next real argument’s feature is the presence of not only deductive and inductive reasoning in it (Fisher, 1989: 57). Really, it is impossible to make judgments by only deductive reasoning in practical life. Furthermore, it is also possible to use so-called “case-by-case reasoning” in real communication. As Govier admits, such reasoning occurs in the situations where criteria used for the inference are not clear enough to make deductive reasoning. I would like to admit, and John Wisdom argues that namely case-by-case reasoning is the subject of informal logic. Logician notes such reasoning is used when conclusion is archived by analogies with several similar cases. Such reasoning is not deductive nor inductive one because, on the one hand, it presupposes empirical data as the ground. On the other hand, it does not presuppose analogies with many cases of such a kind (Wisdom, 1991: 159-160).

Carl Wellman calls this reasoning type “conductive” and describes it as reaching a conclusion by the ground on-premises, which do not appeal to other similar cases (Wellman, 1971: 36-40).

Underlying all the above, I would like to note the essential features of a real argument. There are:

1. Functioning in the people real-life discourse which is emotional.
2. The ambiguity of propositions which is related to natural language using.
3. The possibility of missing premises.
4. Its effectiveness dependence on the context.
5. The complexity and sophisticated structure.
6. The possibility of using non-deductive and non-inductive reasoning called case-by-case reasoning or conductive reasoning.
7. Involving of the value, normative and other non-empirical propositions for which it is impossible to cast logical meaning.

Nevertheless, a real argument understanding is not as clear as it looks like.

For example, argument theorist George Goddu defines four of the main senses on which the term “real argument” is used by logicians. He argues this term is used to illustrate the oppositions between (Goddu, 2009: 3-7):

1. Genuine argument as opposite to non-genuine.
2. Everyday argument as opposite to specialized, i.e., practical as opposite to theoretical.
3. Actual as opposite to hypothetical.
4. Natural as opposite to contrived.

George Goddu analyses these notions’ specifics by argumentation theorists and argues that each opposition cannot be separated clearly from each other. It lets the author conclude that a
real argument notion has only a pedagogical function. At the same time, it has no theoretical sense (Goddu, 2009: 12).

Therefore, a real argument is a vague concept used by argument theorists to mark their research subject. However, to my mind, the specificity of real-life argument actually needs analysis by an informal logic method, which is useful to understand the specifics of everyday and public discourse, partly, a political one.

Thus, the real argument is the specific type of inference, and it is the subject of informal logic. It lets us provide the analysis of the argument of political discourse by the methods of informal logic.

**Emotive language**

Besides the described features, it is even more important in the context of the issue considered in this paper. I mean to appeal to emotion and, more exactly, emotive language. Real communication is full of the emotional spectrum. The real argument as argument people use in their communication is not the pure structured propositional set. Thus, the emotive aspect of a real argument takes place.

Primarily, in this aspect, I would like to admit that appeal to emotion is a well-known logical fallacy considered in formal logic. Actually, logic as the method aims to eliminate the ambiguities from clear reasoning. However, this way has led to well-known paradoxes of material implication. The analysis of natural language arguments, therefore, needs the other methodological grounds which informal logic provides.

There are three utterances related to emotions in argumentation. Firstly, it is “appeal to emotion” (argumentum ad passiones), which is a logical fallacy, which occurs when a proponent manipulates with an interlocutor’s (audience’s) emotions. There are many kinds of this fallacy related to different passions, such as appeal to pity, appeal to ridicule, appeal to consequences, appeal to fear, and others.

Secondly, it is “emotive language,” which deals with the speaker’s tone, expressions, and phrases chosen by him. This aspect is rather psychological, although plays a role in the conversation. Furthermore, it creates the specific meaning of some communicative intention.

Thus, thirdly, it is the notion closely related to emotive language — emotive meaning which is the main subject of our analysis. Charles Stevenson, a famous philosopher and ethics investigator, who also was interested in the linguistic theory of meaning, is the author of this term.

The researches of emotive, or ethical, language appear between argumentation theory, cognitive psychology, linguistic pragmatic and pragmatic of non-verbal communication.

When we use emotive language in everyday arguments? The clearest case is using words, e.g., negative “liar,” “shameless,” “villain,” or “crucial,” “brave,” and so forth. For example, most words are emotive in the sentence “This terrorist attack is a horrible offense and has to be severely punished” (Macagno & Walton, 2019: 231). Fundamentally, most conversations in practice involve emotive language.

Let us drill into the essence of emotive language and emotive meaning. Charles Stevenson describes the emotive meaning in comparison with a descriptive one. Two sides of the meaning — descriptive and emotive — form together with the word’s holistic meaning or utterance. Descriptive meaning relates to all cognitive aspects of the message, such as knowledge, beliefs, or supposition. Meanwhile, emotive meaning relates to psychological
aspects of communication and a word as a sign. It is necessary to admit, the descriptive and emotive meaning of the proposition mainly relates to each other, and can even coincide (Stevenson, 1944: 71).

However, the relation between meanings of the proposition is more difficult than it seems. Thus, they have some degree of independence from each other (Stevenson, 1944: 73). For example, the emotive meaning of some proposition can be used even after forgetting its descriptive side.

Moreover, Charles Stevenson notes emotive meaning is more independent from descriptive than vice versa. He describes it in the example with ethical words, such as “good” or “bad” (Boisvert, 2015). These terms can be used in many contexts and have the same emotive meaning; thus descriptive meanings will be different.

As Douglas Walton admits, Stephenson’s term “emotive meaning” expresses very clearly the connection between the property of using words (despotism, terrorism, war) and emotions. Charles Stevenson describes emotive words in the thesis: “instead of merely describing people’s interests, they change and intensify them. They recommend an interest in an object, rather than state that the interest already exists” (Stevenson, 1937: 18-19). Actually, the role of emotive language in political life is the same.

To my mind, Stevenson’s pragmatic conception of meaning can be an addition to Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson post-Gricean pragmatic theory of communication called ‘relevance theory.’ So-called informative and communicative intentions as two levels of every conversational message correlate to some degree with the descriptive and emotive meaning of the sign.

Levinson notes, communicative intention, on the one hand, becomes understood only in the context of the dialogue (Levinson, 1983: 16-19). On the other hand, it strongly depends on the sentence meaning. However, the decoding process is changed in the case of the speaker’s emotive language.

The pragmatic linguistic representative, Diane Blakemore, calls the emotive meaning of the words “expressive meaning.” She argues that such a meaning sometimes has descriptive ineffability, for example, with regard to the words like “bastard.” It is remarkable that Blakemore investigates the pragmatics of non-verbal communication, and her conclusions involve finding out the similarities between linguistic and non-verbal expressional instruments. The author describes the reason for which expressive meanings have no descriptive possibilities. Namely, it relates to the audience’s assumption that efforts to understand the word’s expressive meaning are disproportionate to the cognitive effects it leads to (Blakemore, 2011). By the way, I should admit that cognitive effect is the relevance theory notion that means changing the audience’s cognitive environment. The last one is a set of an audience’s assumptions, notions, and beliefs that determine the possibility of a speaker’s thesis understanding (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

To describe such a communicative model better, let me drill into Sperber and Wilson’s pragmatic “relevance theory” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). According to it, each linguistic and non-linguistic message has two levels. There are levels of informative intention and level of communicative intention. Every message has at least one of them — informative. However, a communicative one achieves only if the hearer really understands what the speaker actually wants to say.

Thus, namely, communicative intention includes as descriptive as emotive words. Nevertheless, using emotive language leads to the violation of the whole decoding process. Emotive language expresses the stable psychological attitude of the speaker towards the
discussed question (Hom, 2010). That is why the speaker’s emotive word understanding becomes less rational but more affective.

In this context, it is useful to appeal to Walton’s approach, on which he proposes to represent effects of emotive words as inferences, which considers as micro-arguments (Macagno & Walton, 2019: 231).

**Argument effectiveness and argument goodness: what is the difference?**

As understood from emotive words description, their using conflicts with a traditional logic view to what an argument has to be. However, emotive words help achieve the aim, which is changing the audience/interlocutor’s point of view to certain issues.

Thus, the question is, how does a good logical argument correlate with a rhetorically effective argument?

Primarily, let us concern ourselves with the “good argument” notion. To do this, I have to begin with strong and weak argument distinctions.

Thus, a strong argument is one that is capable of convincing the audience that the conclusion is acceptable. Weak argument, conversely, is not capable of doing this. Therefore, political speech with emotive language using can be strong in the sense that it achieves the aim to persuade the interlocutor/audience to accept the thesis/conclusion.

Logical argument evaluation aims to decide if an argument is logically good. Such a good argument has to meet three main requirements: to have a relevant relation between its premises and conclusion, to have acceptable and sufficient premises (Blair, 2004). However, a logically good argument actually differs from a rhetorically effective one.

Firstly, a good argument can be, anyway, unconvincing. For example, if an argument premises, although relevant, sufficient, and acceptable, but an audience’s opposite beliefs are strong enough to defend itself against the proponent argument.

Secondly, an argument that fails logical evaluation, nevertheless, can be convinced, for example, in the case of using emotional language in an argument.

Therefore, a logical evaluative procedure is necessary to avoid falling into the trap on the practice of argumentation. On the other hand, it lays the ground for making good arguments. Thus, a strong argument is a proponent’s purpose.

However, we should understand that strong and weak arguments are only extremes of possible real arguments variations. As is noted in (Groarke & Tindale, 2004: 134), there is such a strong argument which cannot be stronger than it is, and there is a strong argument which, however, can be stronger. The same thing is with weak arguments. There are many grades of a weak argument, and the weakest and almost strong arguments are among them.

All noted above let us argue that the notion of a strong argument needs more requirements satisfying because, as was mentioned, a good argument can be a weak one.

Remarkably, convincing is one of the effectiveness’ conditions, needs including pragmatic and rhetorical aspects of argumentation. That is to say, an argument’s effectiveness relates rather to the way of its using correctness, not to an argument’s goodness itself.

This point is closely related to the issue of the dialectical character of each argumentation. A logically good argument has no practical sense if it is outside of real communication. Moreover, all fallacies, traditionally called logical fallacies, are actually the failure of correct argument using in the dialectical situation.
With regard to emotive language, it is notable that emotive words often become so only in certain contexts.

**Emotive meaning in political speech**

Whereas Charles Stevenson concerns the ethical problem, I would like to analyze emotive language in political discourse. As an ethical one, it demonstrates dealing with not merely facts; for example, science does. Political speech is emotive in most cases, especially in the election season.

I want to admit there are many reasons politicians use emotive words and sentences more or less regularly, such as educational level, temper, the specificity of the situation, etc. That is why one of the politicians demonstrates a high degree of emotive language using, and the other — low level.

The brightest representative of the worldwide stance politician who frequently uses the emotive language is the USA ex-president Donald Trump. As Fabrizio Macagno and Douglas Walton note, in the 2016 election season, Trump rejects the correct and habitual image of the presidential candidate. His loaded language became the discussing subject in global media.

Namely, this type of language is called emotive or ethical in philosophical discourse. Using emotive words aims to influence the audience’s point of view and elector’s decisions. Thus, it is a strong rhetorical instrument frequently used in political life.

Using slur words is a common tactic for some politicians. For example, Donald Trump said about the press during the presidential election campaign in 2016: “They’re scum. They’re horrible people. (…) I would never kill them, but I do hate them. And some of them are such lying, disgusting people. It’s true” (Hampson, 2016). As Macagno and Walton note, “scum” (very bad or immoral person) is a lexicalized metaphor. It is a slur which captures the subject matter evaluation (Hom, 2008). Meanwhile, the words “horrible” and “disgusting” logicians call purely evaluative. Finally, the word “lying” Macagno and Walton consider as properly ethical words (Macagno & Walton, 2019: 233).

Let us analyze some Ukrainian politicians’ speech in which emotive language is used. For example, during Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy’s visit to Boryspil, he said to the official: “Go out, God. I don’t like bandits just. (…) Get out of here, bandit. Can’t you hear?” Here we see words “bandit,” “God,” “go out,” which are non-correct in traditional political discourse (Go out of here, 2019; Poroshenko, 2020). If we analyze these words following Walton’s analysis of Trump’s speech, it is clear that purely emotive is the word “bandit,” while “God” and “go out” become so in the concrete situation as the context.

Besides slurs, often used are metaphors and similes. For example, Trump calls the USA “dumping ground,” where migrants are garbage (Hampson, 2016). He associates these words also with opponent Hillary Clinton and ex-president Barack Obama. In addition, he calls his opponent Marco Rubio “weak like a baby” (Macagno & Walton, 2019: 234). Thus, such in-direct lexical constructions let him consider offenders as the subject of anger or ridicule, reducing the chance for them to be elected.

What relates to Ukrainian politics, in September 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskiy drew the analogy in the thesis “Bandits must be in prison, not in the Maldives.” This sentence is intended for the Ukrainian ex-president Petro Poroshenko, who rested in the Maldives during the Russian-Ukrainian war.
Therefore, Tramp and Zelenskiy’s vocabularies show us that the term “emotive language” includes many subtypes of such words. However, such words act on the same schema — skip the step of rational audience’s judgment about the sentence content.

It is remarkable that the practical use of emotive language leads to the possibility of mixing the descriptive and emotive meanings of the words. As Macagno and Walton note, this situation is dangerous because the emotional use of the word which is normally used in neutral meaning, can lead to misunderstanding and obsfuscation.

All noted above is also justified by Arnauld and Nicole — Port-Royal Logic representatives — thesis: “As a result, the same thing can be expressed decently by one sound and indecently by another, if one of these sounds is connected to some other idea that conceals the shame, and if the other, by contrast, presents it to the mind in an immodest manner” (Arnauld & Nicole, 1996: 13). Thus, using the words normally indicated some shameful or offensive action in the other sense — when there are no such actions — always presupposes some emotional character of the thesis on which they are used.

To say more exactly, in practice, the danger of the word’s meaning change is that the hearer can understand a certain word in the ordinary meaning, while the speaker uses this word in emotive meaning.

It is noteworthy, Fabrizio Macagno and Douglas Walton interpret emotive and descriptive meanings of emotive words as different types of inference. Thus, they try to describe this problem in a logical way (Macagno & Walton, 2019: 238-239).

Let me describe their approach. Firstly, the authors define descriptive meaning as an inference attributing a predicate to a subject based on specific features and definitional premises (in other words, it is the “naming” process) (Macagno & Walton, 2019: 239). Secondly, they define emotive meaning as “an inference leading from a description of a state of affairs to a value judgment thereon (evaluation), and in some cases the proposal of a commitment to a course of action (decision-making inferences)” (Macagno & Walton, 2019: 239).

The authors propose an argumentative scheme:

Premise 1: If some particular thing $a$ can be classified as falling under verbal category $C$, then $a$ has property $P$ (in virtue of such a classification).

Premise 2: $a$ can be classified as falling under verbal category $C$.

Conclusion: $a$ has property $P$ (Macagno & Walton, 2019: 239).

Macagno and Walton note, this argumentative scheme expresses emotive words, as inferences can be drawn from it (Macagno & Walton, 2014).

Referring to the distinction of descriptive and emotional senses of the word, it is useful to compare Stevenson’s model of the word understanding and the model proposed by Port-Royal logicians. Thus, Arnauld and Nicole distinguish two different parts of the notion (term, proposition) meaning. There are denotations and connotations. The first one deals with distinctiveness used for classification purposes. The second deals with some extra features, which are, nevertheless, semantic features (Macagno & Walton, 2019: 246-247).

Besides this, Arnauld and Nicole describe the specific use of such extra (additional) semantic features in practice. In the perspective of emotive language research, it is remarkable that namely connotation is the “part” of the word’s meaning, which is emotive (ethical).

Fabrizio Macagno and Douglas Walton note that the general category of “emotive words” can be separated into two groups: words that include an evaluative element into their definition, and words that include evaluative components only as additional, not essential features (Macagno & Walton, 2019: 247).
Such additional features appear as the result of using non-ordinary meanings of some words in certain contexts. This meaning does not directly relate to the features involved in the definition of the term. However, it contrasts to definitive meaning (or descriptive, using Stevenson’s terminology), depending on the external conditions. Kerbrat-Orecchioni distinguishes five types of connotation, such as stylistic, rhythmic, phonetic, syntactic, utterance connotations, and also semantic and associated values (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1977: 167). For example, utterance connotations involve “the semantic features that characterize emotive meaning, namely ideological, axiological (value judgment) and emotive connotations, which can convey value judgments that can trigger emotional responses” (Macagno & Walton, 2019: 247). In other words, connotations that presuppose emotive elements including are characterized by extraordinary use, for example, using in non-trivial contexts of the term. In practice, such a usage can be met often in ironic sentences.

It is definitely understood in linguistics that certain connotations have taken hold in certain specific contexts. Their use is considered as usual, namely in that context. As Kerbrat-Orecchioni admits, the lexical items “carry context (prior context), encoding the history of their prior use (prior context) in a speech community” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1977: 119). Therefore, we see that emotive meaning is woven into the cultural and linguistic context. Moreover, such a context can form, modify and save the connotation of some word.

Conclusions

Underlying all the above, I should mark several main results of this paper.

Firstly, most words have as descriptive as emotive meaning that can be mixed. That is the reason why the understanding of the interlocutor’s thesis can be incorrect. Using emotive language, e.i., ethical words or terms with extraordinary connotations that depend on the context, in political speech, such as debates, interviews, and public statements, can actually make the politician (proponent) thesis more memorable and lead to the action.

Secondly, the distinction between weak/ strong argument, good argument, and effective argument is clarified. It let us capture the role of the emotive words in convincing the audience. It is found out that emotive language often helps to achieve the purpose of convincing even more easily than only in a rational way that is with only emotional neutral words meaning. However, the ethical problem of manipulating is hiding here, which, however, deserves special attention in other papers. Here I argue that emotive words, which are of two types: emotive itself and emotive in the context, relates rather to a way of argument using (this term refers to Blair’s “Arguments and it uses”) than to an argument itself (Ralph & Blair, 2006). In other words, logical goodness is not closely related to an argument’s effectiveness. In regard to the question about emotive words, I should note that words with emotive meaning fit into logically good argument structure harmoniously enough. They, however, often become incorrect on the dialectical and pragmatic tiers of argumentation. Does that mean extensive use of emotive language by some politicians?

On the one hand, in some cases, conscious manipulation aims to change the audience’s attitude to some persons or accidents in a rough way. On the other hand, in some cases, using emotive words is justified by the context. For example, they are frequently used to stress on the positive or negative side of the discussed subject. The danger of misunderstanding appears when the speaker (politician, for example) uses words with emotive connotations and the hearer (elector, for example) does not suspect it is sure that the word is used in ordinary (denotation) meaning.
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