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# War Discourse

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# War Discourse

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War discourse refers to the use of language and social interaction as a mediating element in the outbreak, conduct, and disputation of armed political conflict. As an organized and purposeful form of group action, war depends upon the organizational capacity of discourse to create unity and mobilize support among an in-group, to construct an out-group enemy and direct actions against that enemy, and to legitimize the (actual or potential) use of lethal force in the eyes of domestic and international audiences.

The study of war discourse involves many intersecting fields that share an interest in language and social interaction, including linguistics, rhetoric, and communication studies. In particular, scholars associated with the approach known as critical discourse analysis (CDA) have provided substantial contributions to the topic. Such explorations move beyond broad examinations of rhetoric and propaganda in an effort to understand the microlevel discursive strategies involved in the exhortatory power of language. Key elements of war discourse include call to arms rhetoric, the discursive construction of social identities, and the use of legitimating devices in language.

## The call to arms

The violence of war is preceded by a call to arms made by a leader to mobilize the group or nation-state. The call to arms attempts to bring discrete individuals and smaller groups within the fold of the larger community so that they are persuaded to take up arms for a cause distinct (and often counter) to their personal interests. Call to arms rhetoric in democratic nations is of special interest given that democracies require consent of the citizenry to engage in war. Although philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that this requirement in democracies should help prevent unwarranted uses of the military, the use of call to arms rhetoric is typically effective in gaining consent regardless of how warranted a military venture may be. The call for war against Iraq made by President George W. Bush in late 2002 and early 2003 represents an important case study in this regard. Once a leader deems war to be necessary, discourse is harnessed to persuade the public to adopt the same position while muting dissenting voices. The question for discourse scholars then becomes, how does call to arms rhetoric disarm critical faculties en route to manufacturing public consent for war?

In general terms, a large aspect of the effectiveness of war discourse involves the cultivation of a shared identity of an in-group that is positioned as wholly other to an out-group. Each member of the in-group becomes part of a larger whole, shedding individual concerns in lieu of a sense of accountability to the collective. This sense of

unity and responsibility to a larger cause is fostered through narratives of belonging that (re)define a national identity through the shedding of internal differences within the polity. Such narratives draw upon tradition and a collective understanding of history to position the current war effort as but one more instantiation of a fight to uphold values passed down from previous generations. The fight is deemed necessary due to a threat posed by the out-group enemy that threatens the in-group's safety and way of life. The enemy is defined in a manner that increases its social, cultural, and moral distance from the in-group, working to outcast the enemy and strip away its humanity en route to justifying violent action against them.

In the context of western democracies, a call to arms is typically couched in the philosophical tenets of "just-war theory," a system of ethics stretching back to Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, and Aquinas that spells out, among other elements, the justifications for entering war (*jus ad bellum*). Political leaders often draw from the principles of *jus ad bellum* in their calls to arms to emphasize the justness of the cause and that it is carried out with the right intention and proper authority, as a last resort, with a reasonable probability of success, while using means proportional to the ends. As such, call to arms rhetoric often emphasizes the defensive aspect of the conflict, pointing to an act of aggression carried out by the enemy as the precipitating event of war or *casus belli*. In this way, the in-group is said to wage war only in self-defense as an unwilling participant in a conflict that was forced upon it by an aggressive enemy that acts without regard to the rule of law. Through use of a narrative that juxtaposes the in-group's values with those of the out-group, war is positioned as the natural and only response to an unreasonable out-group's aggression. With alternative options thus foreclosed, critical dissent is shunted and collective action made possible.

### **The construction of in-group and out-group identities**

Although the division of humanity into groups arises from the need to organize and categorize the world, the process leads to invidious distinctions in times of war. War discourse typically presents such distinctions as natural and objective, yet the construction of in-group and out-group identities is a social achievement dependent upon language and social interaction. Identities are made (not simply found), and are the result of discursive tactics that variously play upon dimensions of sameness and difference. Sameness among in-group members is highlighted while downplaying differences to create unity. For example, the differences between Republicans and Democrats in US politics are set aside in favor of the similarities among the two political groups broadly defined as Americans. Slogans such as "United We Stand" (seen on bumper stickers in the aftermath of the events of 9/11 in 2001) play up unity. At the same time, differences between the in-group and out-group are placed into sharp relief, erasing the common humanity both share. Differences are made salient through the articulation of various forms of distance between the in-group and out-group, whether social, cultural, political, geographical, or moral.

Distinctions are constructed through the common semiotic process of *positive self-presentation* and *negative other-presentation* represented by the "ideological square"

(van Dijk, 1998, p. 267). Speakers suppress or deemphasize information that is negative about the in-group and positive about the out-group. At the same time, speakers express or emphasize information that is positive about the in-group and negative about the out-group. Although the former move is typically manifested through absence rather than presence in discourse, the latter move is salient, for example, when a leader discusses positive values attributed to the in-group in contradistinction to negative characteristics attributed to the out-group. These include the in-group's benevolent intentions (in contrast to their malevolent actions), law abiding actions (in contrast to their disregard for the rule of law), honest and transparent actions (in contrast to their deception and deceit), and moral authority (in contrast to their immoral actions). The values of the in-group are often explicitly articulated in line with the tenets of "just-war theory" to provide a moral and ethical dimension to the argument. Regardless of the material interests of nations or the practical self-interests of leaders, a strong moral dimension typically underpins war discourse so that leaders often speak of going to war as a moral imperative. Waging war against the out-group is said to be the right thing to do, often appealing to in-group members' sense of (in)justice.

As part of the moral dimension of war discourse, the in-group employs a general strategy of *moral outcasting* to create distance from the out-group. This can appear in religious terms. For example, President George W. Bush often talked about "us" and "the terrorists" in terms of "good" versus "evil" in his narrative about the "war on terror." This "(e)vilification" of the enemy—a form of outcasting based on the religious dichotomy of good/evil—banishes the out-group from the moral order (Lazar & Lazar, 2004, p. 236). As a result of this polarization, the threat posed by the enemy is amplified while the enemy's humanity is stripped away. These are important prerequisites for justifying and directing a campaign of violent group action against the out-group.

The in-group versus out-group dichotomy takes shape through a mutually constitutive discursive process that dialogically connects the language used by leaders on both sides of the divide. Saber rattling by one leader demands a rhetorical response by opposing leaders. For example, when the president of Iran calls the United States the "Great Satan" or threatens the legitimacy of the state of Israel, the US president responds in kind by denouncing the Iranian regime as a threat to democracy. Through this dialogic exchange, in-group and out-group identity positions are (re)established. Importantly, this is achieved in a mutually constitutive manner so that the move by one side to define the other as an enemy is reinforced and ratified by the other. In-group and out-group identities therefore exist in a mutually interdependent relationship with each group relying on the other to sustain the viability and legitimacy of those identity positions.

The fluid and dynamic nature of group identities is underscored by the shifting alliances that define and redefine enemies at different points in history. For example, contrast the positive representation of many Afghans as "freedom fighters" during the Soviet war in Afghanistan versus the redefinition of many of the same individuals as "terrorists" during the US war in Afghanistan. Discursive processes highlight or subdue similarities and differences, variously making such characteristics relevant or irrelevant as in-groups and out-groups are (re)defined. In times of war, "externally

imposed identity categories generally have at least as much to do with the observer's own identity position and power stakes as with any sort of objectively describable social reality" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 370).

### **The use of legitimating language**

A key function of war discourse is to legitimate the actions associated with war, making those actions appear appropriate, reasonable, and justifiable. One way this is achieved is through the use of euphemistic language to create a sanitized version of reality that works to block negative emotional responses. *Euphemisms* ("good naming") are mild words or indirect expressions that replace harsh ones and work to mitigate negative connotations. Euphemisms are ubiquitous when discussing the death and destruction of war. For example, to destroy a military target with a massively destructive missile attack or bombing raid is to launch a "surgical strike." Unintended civilian deaths caused by such a raid are referred to as "collateral damage." Euphemisms extend into the naming of weapons, such as the "Daisy Cutter" (a jungle clearing bomb used during the Vietnam War), the "Peacekeeper" (the nickname for the MX Missile, which contains ten warheads equal to the destructive power of 250–400 times the bomb dropped on Hiroshima), and "clean bombs" (nuclear fusion bombs with higher explosive power but less radiation than equivalent fission bombs). Such terms provide a bland way to refer to the weapons and effects of war without acknowledging the destructive realities, helping to absolve the in-group of responsibility for deliberately harming human lives.

*Metaphor* is another effective means for legitimating the actions of war. By describing one kind of thing in terms of another, metaphors work to frame experience through a particular ideological lens. To talk of a "war on terror," for example, entails a particular approach to dealing with the problem of terrorism. The approach fundamentally relies upon a military response consonant with a war stance, which involves real wars fought with full mobilization of the military (such as those waged in Iraq and Afghanistan in the years after the events of 9/11). In contrast, understanding terrorism in terms of crime would necessitate a different type of response that would mobilize the courts (instead of the military), involve lawyers (instead of soldiers), and result in sentences (instead of war casualties). The point is that there is no such thing as a neutral metaphor. Whenever one thing is presented in terms of another — and thereby conceptualized and reasoned about through that framework — certain ideological perspectives are favored. Yet that ideological dimension gets erased as the metaphor comes to dominate public discourse. The effectiveness of metaphor as a legitimating device therefore comes from its ability to present the world from a particular perspective as if that perspective were a completely neutral, natural, and objective portrait of reality.

Moreover, the legitimization of stances and actions taken during war relies upon the ability of language and social interaction to construct a version of social reality favorable to waging war. This demands a *narrative* to organize perceptual experience and organize reality in a manner that encapsulates a variety of underlying assumptions and explanations about the world (Hodges, 2011). Narrative can operate by providing a backstory

about the timeline of events that led up to the moment for war or by projecting ahead into the future to make a course of action seem knowable, inevitable, and controllable (Dunmire, 2011). Ultimately, narrative provides a potent means for constructing social reality in line with political goals espoused by leaders. Narrative excels in legitimation when it erases the ideological underpinnings of those goals, making them appear to fall within the general realm of “common sense” so they are taken as completely natural, inevitable, and unchangeable. In this way, narrative as a legitimating device positions the realities of war as phenomena external to social, political, and historical dynamics. As a result, war discourse portrays warfare as an inevitable aspect of the human condition when in actuality it is very much dependent upon the organizational capacity of language and social interaction.

## Conclusion

The dimensions of war discourse discussed here underscore the widely recognized perspective among LSI researchers that language is never neutral nor is it merely a transparent conveyor of preexisting meaning. Rather than describing or reflecting a world that exists prior to social interaction, language brings many aspects of that world into existence. Part of the challenge and opportunity for researchers is therefore to deconstruct the way war discourse conceals interested positions as neutral representations and to expose the way language operates within the broader context of power to construct sociopolitical reality.

SEE ALSO: Critical Discourse Analysis; Discourse Analysis; Identity Construction; Parliamentary Discourse; Political Discourse Analysis

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