

Dobkiewicz, P. (2023) Mediated political discourse: Self-presentation on social media and ideological shift in interpreting. Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznań: Doctoral dissertation.

Report: Bart Defrancq, Ghent University

Patryk Dobkiewicz (PD) has submitted a doctoral thesis consisting of an introduction to the topic of mediated political discourse, three published research articles and a short conclusion. The thesis therefore formally meets the criteria of the Adam Mickiewicz University as they were communicated to this reviewer.

The different studies are structured around a central topic (though see further) and strung together by a common methodology: critical discourse analysis is promoted across all three studies and reportedly combined with visual grammar and an experimental setup.

The research results can be summarized as follows:

- Social media mediation of a right-wing populist such as Trump on Instagram presents him as a more palatable politician than is the case in other (social) media. In particular, the nativist component of right-wing populism is underrepresented compared to expectations.
- Mediation by interpreters in the European Parliament downtones salient ideological features of source speeches brought by Members of the European Parliament. This downtoning affects both right-wing and left-wing discourse and is not determined by the interpreters' political views.

The research results are said to be socially relevant to the extent that distortions of self-presentation and other-presentation could have a normalizing effect on extreme discourses, making them gradually acceptable for more mainstream types of audiences.

In all, PD has made an innovative contribution to interpreting studies. I do not feel qualified enough to assess the social media component of the PhD on its innovativeness. The studies on interpreting make a significant contribution to the field in that they confirm earlier results to be found in the literature and try to link them to background variables. The thesis adds to our knowledge about the determinants of interpreter behavior by excluding an important variable (interpreter ideology) from the equation. Despite certain shortcomings (see further), the design of the experimental study has been carefully executed and draws on findings of the corpus study, enhancing the coherence between the two studies that read as a diptych.

Although the doctoral thesis is of high quality overall, also witnessed by the fact that all studies that it is comprised of have already been accepted for publication, there is a series of issues that I would like to discuss with the author.

1. Centrality of mediation and general significance of the findings

Mediation of political content constitutes the central topic of the doctoral dissertation. PD tries to build a case arguing that social media diffusion and simultaneous interpretation of political content are both forms of mediation. This is true to a certain extent, however it is doubtful that the uses of the concept in both cases are similar enough to be helpfully united in the framework of a single doctoral dissertation. After all, the cases of social media mediation are based on written language and visual semiosis, while simultaneous interpreting is an example of cross-linguistic oral mediation. Image projection is intentional in social media mediation, while it is expected to be unintentional in the case of simultaneous interpreting. Such discrepancies harm the coherence of PD's doctoral dissertation. One wonders why mediation by translation, another form of cross-linguistic mediation, was not included in the study. In this respect, it is noteworthy that on p. 21 of the second paper, PD calls the translations published on the EP's website before 2012 "polished", implying that translation may have an effect on the ideological load of the source text, which is exactly the focus of the studies on interpretation.

PD puts his research into a broader perspective of discourse studies on radicalization, holding that mediation can lead to normalization of extreme discourses. This certainly holds true for the social media as they allow mitigated discourses to reach very large audiences. For all the sympathy I foster for interpreters, it is quite a stretch of the imagination to consider normalization a potential effect of mediation by interpreters in the European Parliament (EP). It is true that Members of the European Parliament have considerable exposure to interpretation and could be moderately misled by interpreters' mitigation of ideologically salient language, but the interactional nature of EP plenaries (the setting of PD's studies) and the extent to which MEPs influence each other's points of view should not be exaggerated. EP Plenaries are extremely ritualized, creating very little opportunity for real exchange (see Slapin and Proksch 2010 and, notably, Lord 2018 who applies Max Weber's concept of "working parliament" vs. "debating parliament" to the EP) and are less likely to be a breeding ground for normalization through mediation. As for the general public, I am not aware of any research into the question how many citizens are actually exposed to interpretation when they attend the plenaries physically or virtually. However, Lord (2018) pointedly refers to the EP as a "parliament without a public", denouncing the weak connection between the EP and European society at large. MEPs are tied to their local constituencies and mainly communicate with their own constituents in their language through social media. Chances are very slim that constituents take an interest in MEPs speaking other languages and listen to their points of view through interpreters. This also limits the potential of EP plenaries in normalizing extreme speech. Finally, DP's method of selecting plenary speeches held in English defeats the normalization argument to a large extent: as English is the *lingua franca* par excellence in the European Union, English speeches are more likely than others to be listened to in the original, non-mediated, format.

It is therefore also debatable whether the promised future research will yield significant results. A reception study of interpreter-mediated speeches is certainly interesting, but how representative will the results be for society's reception of the political debates in the EP? A study of social media reception would probably be more relevant, but no doubt less original.

2. Concepts and methods

If the order in which the chapters appear reflects the chronology of their making, it is clear that PD has grown considerably on the methodological level in the course of the research. Whereas the analysis of social media posts is mostly done by way of illustration, the papers on simultaneous interpretation, the third paper in particular, apply stricter methods. There is a laudable effort in the third paper to depart from the subjective researcher-centered approach characteristic of the first two papers.

I will mostly focus on the chapters on interpretation in what follows, as this is my area of expertise. These chapters focus on a phenomenon called ideological shift. Ideological shift is assumed to occur with respect to a reference point represented by the source speech and to affect its ideological salience or load. However, the latter terms are neither defined nor sufficiently operationalized. PD seems to use them interchangeably with varying frequencies across papers. In one case, both concepts are infelicitously combined to form "the salience of the ST ideological load" (p. 21 of the second research paper), suggesting that there might be a difference. So crucial a concept deserves a more coherent handling. "Salience" seems to fit a terminological framework grounded in cognitive linguistics (Langacker 1987) or visual processing (Treisman & Gelade 1980), emphasizing the conspicuity of an item in the visual or conceptual space. In contrast, "load" metaphorically refers to a level of difficulty that has to be overcome by effort, in particular in interpreting studies where the concept of "cognitive load" is pervasive. Crucially, "salience" usually implies ease of processing in cognitive linguistics, which makes "salience" an antonym of "load".

Both "salience" and "load" are gradable concepts, which is also implied by the comparative nature of PD's approach: ideological shifts are assumed to result in more or less salient features or more or less ideological load associated with particular features. At the same time, the operationalization betrays a binary conception, as an ideological shift is assumed to occur or not. Variations in the intensity of the shift are ignored. Admittedly, including this variation in the analysis would have been extremely challenging. However, considering certain aspects of the methodology applied in the third research paper, it would not have been entirely impossible if raters' scores had been included in the study and if the interpretation of the selected items had been scored as well. Only in the third paper does there seem to be a differential approach to omissions on the one hand and shifts on the other, although the paper is not entirely clear on that point (see further).



In addition to this fundamental question about the concept of “salience/load” and how it has been operationalized, I would also like to ask methodological clarifications on the following accounts regarding the last two papers:

1. It is stated that the dataset used to analyze the source speeches is based on the written verbatim reports of these speeches (second paper, p. 6). Why is that? Especially with regard to the fact that written translations of these reports are discarded as “polished” (p. 21, see above), it seems incoherent to use written reports of the source speeches, as those are likely to be “polished” too (Ferraresi et al 2018). Has this been checked in any way?
2. The selection of the relevant debates is based on topics that are dear to right-wing parties, even though the papers look into ideological shifts in interpretations of speeches coming from different wings in the European Parliament. Is this a potential bias in the study?
3. The transfer of knowledge from the second to the third paper is a positive feature of the doctoral dissertation. It is however incomplete: we know from the second paper that there is a difference in the interpretation of verb phrases and noun phrases. The former seem to undergo more mitigation than the latter. Was this taken into account while writing the stimuli for the third paper? Is it possible to provide the numbers for noun phrases and verb phrases in each of the stimuli to check whether any bias arises?
4. There are two issues in the third paper with the ideological backgrounds of the interpreters. First, the categories “conservative” and “anti-EU” are conflated into a single category in the study, as well as “progressive” and “pro-EU”. Perhaps politics in Poland is so polarized that these camps present such monolithic views, but in my part of the world there is no contradiction between “conservative” and “pro-EU”. Hence my question: does this reflect the real political landscape in Poland? Or is it just a simplification for ease of statistical processing? Second, and relating to the statistical analysis: the distribution of interpreters over political categories is unbalanced with only 3 interpreters in the conservative category. What risks does this entail for the GLMM and should not there be a mitigation for these risks?
5. Some known predictors of mitigation in simultaneous interpreting are ignored. I have personally supervised a PhD on gender differences in hedging by interpreters and in the interpretation of face-threatening acts (Magnifico & Defrancq 2016; Magnifico & Defrancq 2017). How would gender interfere with the results if it were to be included? While the gender distribution in the second paper is unknown, the gender balance is fairly good in the third paper; so the gender variable could be included in the GLMM.

3. Results and conclusions

The results and conclusions of the studies are mostly presented clearly and appropriately. However, a general reflection on the results of the papers on interpretation in the broader context of normalization of extreme discourse is lacking, although it seems to be an important point in the general introduction of the thesis.

There is some doubt about some of the results reported in the third paper. First, participants are reported to have completed a Lextale, but the results are not reported. The only reported results regarding proficiency in English seem to be those based on the self-reporting scores. Were the Lextale scores included in the GLMM? Second, I gather from the paper (p. 6) that the accuracy rating is based on the omission rate and that omissions have therefore been excluded from the GLMM. Is that a correct interpretation of the paper?

It seems that PD sometimes takes some liberty with his own (and other) findings when reporting them in the third paper.

(p.3) While ideologically loaded verb phrases were shown to be more susceptible to ideological shift than noun phrases due to their greater relative complexity and novelty, no statistically significant relation was found between the occurrence of ideological shifts and the ideological orientation of the interpreted source text.

> Actually, no research was done in the second paper into the political orientation of the source texts. It was assumed that source speeches delivered by members of particular political groups in the European Parliament had a default ideological orientation in accordance with what is generally known about the political groups.

(p. 4) We predicted that there will be ideological shifts in interpreting ideologically loaded texts in line with previous studies (Bartłomiejczyk, 2020, 2021; Beaton-Thome, 2013) and that mitigation would be used more frequently, especially when interpreting right-wing discourse.

> This is not in line with the findings of the second paper, where both left-wing and right-wing speeches were found to be considerably mitigated. Actually, right-wing items were found to be substantially more often intensified than other categories of items.

It is my opinion that based on this general assessment of Patryk Dobkiewicz's doctoral dissertation, the doctoral process should be allowed to move to the next stage.

References.

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