Government communication

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In modern democracies, governments produce vast amounts of text, talk and images that are made available to the public: news releases, social media postings, policy documents, televised speeches, broadcast interviews, advertisements, and so forth. In this chapter, I provide suggestions as to how communication practices of executive government institutions could be conceptualised and operationalised for a discourse-analytic study. I delineate several competing ways in which scholars have written about government communication, flesh out three example analyses of government officeholders’ strategic language use, and point at some conflictual aspects of government communication that would merit further linguistic study.

Introduction: government, communication and communicators

From a linguistic perspective, ‘government communication’ can be conceived of as oral, written and visual language used by, and on behalf of, government officeholders, directed at the general public or particular groups in society. Hence, government communication belongs to the arena of political action. The word ‘political’ has several meanings and dimensions (see, for instance, Palonen 2003), but in broad terms, it integrates two contradictory senses:

On the one hand, politics is viewed as a struggle for power, between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it. […] On the other hand, politics is viewed as cooperation, as the practices and institutions that a society has for resolving clashes of interest over money, influence, liberty, and the like.

(Chilton 2004, p. 3)

In government communication, as in politics in general, language is used strategically, that is, text, talk and images are employed with a goal to manage the interests of the speaker/writer. Discourse analyst Paul Chilton (2004, pp. 45–46) posits that language use in politics can serve three broad and often intertwined strategic functions: coercion, (de)legitimisation, and (mis)representation. This three-fold distinction can be usefully applied to guide our thinking about the functions of language in government communication.
1. Language use of the executive government can be backed by legal and physical sanctions. A government can issue commands and use its non-linguistic resources (e.g. the police, courts and prisons) to punish those who do not comply. Governments and government officeholders are therefore often perceived as powerful, high-status actors. Their requests, choices of conversational topics, and assumptions of shared knowledge and beliefs are frequently accepted by government outsiders even without the actual threat of coercion. Coercive power is also exercised by government officeholders when they censor others’ language use, limit the public dissemination of certain kinds of information, and regulate the arenas of communication (e.g. by introducing policies that affect the work of journalists or social media platforms).

2. Governments use language to establish and maintain their right to be obeyed by citizens. Such legitimising may involve arguing in favour of certain courses of action chosen by the officeholders and engaging in positive self-presentation (e.g. boasting about achievements of the government). However, governments also use language to delegitimise various opponents by presenting them in a more negative light, sometimes blaming, insulting, or marginalising them, and presenting as undesirable any alternative courses of action proposed by opponents.

3. Governments try to control the amount and the quality of information that they dispense. When government officeholders produce linguistic representations of events, actors, or objects, they often omit or substitute some elements. They may also add new elements, or rearrange the sequence of events in their stories. Misrepresentation can involve manipulative moves such as lying, verbal evasion and the use of euphemisms with the goal of ‘blurring’ the audience’s understanding of some aspect of reality.

The actions of the government officeholders – including their public use of language – potentially affect the lives of thousands or millions of people. Therefore, unsurprisingly, a large proportion of the daily news served by the mainstream media is about governments or somehow related to the members and activities of governments, ranging from topics such as road safety, education reform and international diplomacy, to social inequality, government debt, and the occasional resignation of a cabinet minister. Governments have become increasingly ‘mediatised’ (Couldry & Hepp 2013; Strömbäck & Esser 2014) by adopting communication techniques, selecting employees and devising policies on the basis of how well they seem to fit into a society where media plays a central role. This means that government officeholders themselves produce a lot of text, talk and images for public consumption: they draw up policy documents, deliver televised speeches, distribute news releases via email, respond to reporters’ questions at press briefings, create websites, and post comments, photos and videos on social media, give broadcast interviews, launch advertising campaigns, and so forth. However, government officeholders may also be tempted to monitor and control the flows of information, including restricting access to some knowledge, or making attempts to distract certain audiences from paying attention to certain problems in society, including the (possible) failures and misdeeds of policy-makers and public administrators.

A number of terms are used to denote these activities, including ‘government communication’, ‘administrative communication’ (Garnett & Kouzmin 1997), ‘government information’ (Graber 2003), ‘government public relations’ (Lee, Neeley & Stewart 2012), ‘government publicity’ and ‘government media management’. Some of these activities are carried out, at least in part, by the top executive politicians themselves (e.g. the president’s weekly video address in the US), while the bulk of the daily planning, preparation and
presentation of a government’s messages and interacting with the press and the public is the full-time job of (in some cases, fairly large) teams of communication experts, special advisers, press officers and spokespersons who have been specially hired by government departments for these tasks. Importantly, their action is both enabled and constrained by various regulations and institutions that determine what they can or cannot do and say (Yeung 2006). For example, freedom of information laws may establish what kind of government-held data should be made public, and civil service legislation may stipulate that civil servant communicators should always remain ‘impartial’ and avoid taking sides in party-political struggles. Hence, professional government communicators may try to cast themselves as ‘neutral transmitters’ of administrative information (te Molder 1999).

The tasks of professional government communicators typically include producing and publicising texts about policies, public services and institutional arrangement of the incumbent government, and giving advice and orders to people, for example, on how to submit annual tax returns, and how to behave in case of crises such as floods and pandemics (see, for instance, Government Communication Service, 2015). The ‘government communication’ sub-domain of political communication usually does not cover distributing information about, and on behalf of, political parties (including election campaigns and party-political advertising), communication activities of legislatures such as parliaments and congresses, and communication of the heads of state who are not heads of executive government and serve in mainly ceremonial roles (e.g. presidents in parliamentary democracies). Notably, in comparison to party-political communication and election campaigns where the ‘struggle for power’ is perhaps more central and explicit, government communication in its many guises has received somewhat less scholarly attention (Canel & Sanders 2013).

Ways of conceptualising government communication

Scholars who study government communication position themselves in relation to the subject matter of their research in different ways. This involves more-or-less-explicit perspective-taking: looking at communication either from the point of view of government (the ruler, officeholder, institution, political leader, campaign manager), or a government outsider (the ruled, citizen, individual, oppressed group). The former perspective is adopted by authors who write instructional literature on how to govern or how to run public services. The latter perspective is typical of authors who are more interested in how not to be governed or how to be governed otherwise. Along these lines, in communication studies, a basic distinction has been made between ‘administrative’ and ‘critical’ research (Lazarsfeld 1941). A more detailed review of literature within both of these distinctive streams of research reveals that government communication in modern democracies has been conceptualised by scholars in four competing ways: as a policy instrument, as a commodity, as manipulation, and as a factor in (un)doing democracy (Hansson, forthcoming). Each of these ways of talking about government communication may be seen as reflecting distinctive historically sedimented sets of normative ideas about political life that its proponents subscribe to.

*Government communication as a policy instrument*

Many authors adopt the perspective of a government or a top officeholder, and conceptualise communication as a necessary ‘tool’ that the government uses to exert authority and
Government communication

Maintain control. Governments use three general types of policy instruments: they issue orders that people are obliged to follow (regulation backed up by coercion), they give or remove material resources (e.g. subsidies and taxes), and they use text and talk (issuing voluntary appeals). Such policy instruments may be defined as ‘the set of techniques by which governmental authorities wield their power in attempting to ensure support and effect or prevent social change’ (Vedung 2003, p. 21). In searching answers to the central question of ‘what works’ in government, the authors of instructional texts on government communication deal with the practicalities of exerting influence on ‘governees’. Some of the typical recurrent concepts that are used with a predominantly positive connotation in such literature are reminiscent of military language: ‘strategic’, ‘tactical’, ‘operation’, ‘target’, ‘officer’. Works in this tradition generally adhere to a functionalist presumption that the society should be characterised by social order, stability, and productivity. They more or less explicitly idealise the state of play in which the government as a system ‘runs like clockwork’ without facing any serious internal or external obstacles, or disturbances such as resistance, scandals, or crises. A well-known historical example of such an instrumental conceptualisation of government communication is found in The Prince by Niccolò Machiavelli (2006 [1513]), a Renaissance-era statesman who provided detailed advice to a monarch on how to hold on to power.

Government communication as a commodity

Communication can be understood as a set of services provided by the government to specific groups of customers. The authors who take this view place an emphasis on governing and communicating according to the logic and values of the market. They write of people as ‘customers’ (rather than ‘citizens’ or ‘governees’), who are generally presumed to be self-interested and rational utility-maximisers. From this perspective, the goal of the government and its communication activities is to guarantee ‘customer satisfaction’. Some of the key words that signal this approach include ‘efficiency’, ‘competence’, ‘management skills’, ‘training’ and ‘innovation’. Public communication is primarily regarded as a means for selling more goods or services produced by the organisation (‘marketing’, ‘promotion’, ‘publicity’, ‘advertising’) and guaranteeing the survival and smooth functioning of the organisation via ‘building goodwill’ among people external to the organisation (‘public relations’, ‘branding’, ‘reputation management’, ‘public affairs’, ‘corporate social responsibility’). This conceptualisation of government communication shares its historical roots with the instructional literature on scientific management (e.g. Taylor 1911) and public relations (e.g. Bernays 1928).

Government communication as manipulation

Some authors side with individuals and groups who feel oppressed by the government and see government communication mainly as top-down manipulation of public perceptions and behaviour by the self-serving ruling elite. Many government outsiders share a distrust of government and its communication activities. From this perspective, government is depicted as posing an inevitable threat to its ‘governees’ due to its permanent disposition to abuse its power and isolate outsiders by mystifying its action. A concern about people being oppressed by malicious discursive manipulation, government-perpetrated propaganda and ‘spin-doctoring’ can be traced back to the premises laid out in Marxist conflict theory in the nineteenth century. Major influences include the Marxist notion of ‘false consciousness’,

329
Gramscian conceptualisation of ‘hegemony’, and the critical tradition of the Frankfurt School that focuses on the often subtle cultural and psychological factors that limit the capacity for critical thought among ‘the masses’.

**Government communication as a factor in doing or undoing democracy**

Some authors recognise that public communication on the part of the government is an integral component of policy-making and the provision of public services, but they also express critical awareness of its manipulative tendencies (e.g. image-making and spin). Government communication, therefore, could be seen as one of the factors in larger societal processes that either advance or limit public participation in political debates. ‘Democratic deficit’ or ‘political disenchantment’ in contemporary societies is a standard theme of many critical studies (see, e.g. Hay 2007; Norris 2011). Much of the discussion in this camp has been revolving around the Habermasian conception of the emergence of the ‘public sphere’ and the normative theories of democracy, where communication is central. From this perspective, governments should ideally observe high standards of integrity and commit themselves to certain criteria for ethical communication. Major influences include Max Weber’s early twentieth-century sociology that provided an effective blueprint for analysing contradictions in modern societies (e.g. acknowledging that while bureaucracy is a prevalent and efficient form of governing, it poses a threat to people’s individuality and social meaning-making), and the interpretive, linguistic and cultural turns in social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century.

Much of the literature under the rubrics of critical linguistics and critical discourse studies is in line with the latter two conceptualisations of government communication. The first two – the administrative conceptualisations – are more or less explicitly adopted by applied linguists who write instructional works on how to use language more ‘effectively’ or ‘efficiently’ in law, management, service provision, marketing and advertising.

Some critical discourse analysts (e.g. Fairclough 2000) point out how government officeholders increasingly use managerial and promotional language to present certain processes in society as inevitable, and normalise a particular business-centric understanding of the social world that may ultimately increase inequality and suffering. By actively promoting certain managerial actions as ‘solutions’, governments discourage public debate. Managerial discourse in government is characterised, not only by the use of lexis that is typical of those who run for-profit businesses (e.g. ‘customers’, ‘marketing’, ‘benchmarking’), but also by some more subtle persuasive linguistic constructions. For example, Mulderrig (2011a) shows how officeholders represent some actions in ways that seem to reduce government agency and increase agency for others: they portray government as an overseer, a leader, or a facilitator, thereby masking its coercive power (see Example 3 p. 335). Linguistically informed critical studies of government communication have also involved contrasting language use and actual behaviour of the government of the day. For example, Farrelly (2015) highlights the ways in which government officeholders in the UK make frequent references to ‘democracy’ in their text and talk, while some of their deeds are rather non-democratic.

Critical discourse analysts have made substantial contributions to our understanding of expressions of social and political exclusion and discriminatory prejudices in government discourses. They have pointed out the ways in which government officeholders try to consolidate public support by exploiting xenophobia, ethnocentrism, racism and prejudices in their language, thereby normalising the omission of certain groups of people from political
life (Krzyżanowski & Wodak 2009; Wodak, KhosraviNik & Mral 2013; Wodak 2015). They have also provided detailed analyses of the discursive construction of history and national identity (Martin & Wodak 2003; Heer, Manoschek, Pollak & Wodak 2008; Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl & Liebhart 2009), dissected the language use of totalitarian governments (Wodak & Kirsch 1995), and carried out ethnographic studies of how language is used in the backstage of political institutions (Wodak 2011).

**Analysing government communication: examples**

The language-orientated researchers of government communication often focus their studies on a particular genre or medium used by officeholders. For example, some scholars have specifically addressed the rhetoric of presidential or (prime) ministerial speeches (Reisigl 2008; Kienpointner 2011, 2013), the discourses used in public policy documents (Scollon 2008; Wodak 2000), the pragmatics of presidential, (prime) ministerial, or departmental press conferences (Bhatia 2006; Ekström 2009; Eriksson 2011; Jacobs 2011) and press releases (Jacobs 1999). Depending on the research question and data at hand, scholars may adopt various approaches, methods and tools, such as discourse-historical analysis (Reisigl & Wodak 2015), socio-cognitive analysis (van Dijk 2015), ethnographic fieldwork (Gobo 2008), argumentation analysis (Reisigl 2014; van Eemeren 2010; Walton 2008), corpus-assisted discourse analysis (Mulderrig 2011a, 2011b), conversation analysis (Tolson & Ekström 2013), and so forth.

As should be clear from reading the previous sections, strategic use of language is a constitutive part of governing, administering and other aspects of ‘doing politics’. Accordingly, a basic orientating question for an empirical linguistic study of government communication could be: *How are various linguistic resources, strategies, techniques, or devices employed by executive officeholders to achieve certain (political) goals?*

Depending on the apparent goals of the participants in a particular episode of communication at hand, it might also be worth asking: (1) *How do executive officeholders use language to claim and maintain their right to be obeyed?* (2) *How do executive officeholders use language to exercise their right to be obeyed?* I will expand on these questions in turn and provide some examples of data analysis.

**Using language to hold on to power**

Seeking an answer to the first of these two questions involves analysing the language of self-presentation and self-legitimation of government actors. How do governments and individual government officeholders present themselves linguistically? How do executive officeholders use language to construct and defend certain socially shared representations of the government, its members, goals and actions? How do officeholders build rapport with various government outsiders by casting them linguistically as an ‘in-group’, as members of a collective with shared values and interests (e.g. a nation, an ethnic community, citizenry)?

A practical methodological scaffolding, as well as a useful set of analytic tools for tackling these kinds of questions, has been developed by linguists working within the discourse-historical tradition of discourse studies (see, e.g. Reisigl & Wodak 2015; Wodak 2011, 2015). Following this approach, self-presentation of a government can be operationalised for a linguistic study by focusing on the following set of discursive strategies:
Naming and attributing can be used by officeholders strategically to induce compliance by establishing in-groups and out-groups, and labelling actors, actions, and outcomes of the government as more positive (e.g. ‘our long-term economic plan’) and those of the opponents as negative (e.g. ‘their reckless and appalling behaviour’). This often involves the use of linguistic membership categorisation devices and references to stereotypes.

Officeholders may use argumentation schemes and warrants that lead to the conclusion that the government should be obeyed (e.g. appeals to force and authority).

Perspective-taking involves using a variety of linguistic devices (e.g. deictics, reported speech) to indicate the speaker’s or writer’s point of view and involvement. For example, officeholders may try to portray themselves positively by using direct quotations of non-government actors who praise the government.

Intensifying and mitigating devices (e.g. hyperboles, vague expressions) can be used to modify the epistemic status and illocutionary force of what is being said or written, to emphasise the positive and de-emphasise the negative utterances about the government.

In the face of being criticised for possible mistakes or transgressions, officeholders may try to use a variety of linguistic strategies defensively to ward off blame. Such strategies of blame-avoidance may be realised in a variety of ways (Hansson 2015a, 2017):

- **argumentation**: using argument schemes to support the standpoint that the negative event or outcome has been brought about either unintentionally, unknowingly, involuntarily, or by someone else; such defensive argumentation is often characterised by the use of certain topic-specific conclusion rules or topoi (see Reisigl & Wodak 2001, pp. 74–80; Reisigl 2014);

- **framing**: representing the self metaphorically/narratively as a Hero, a Helper of a Hero, or a Victim, and/or representing someone else as a Villain, to escape being assigned the role of the Villain by a blame-maker; such formulaic narrative frames have been described and discussed by Propp (1968 [1928]) and Lakoff (2008), among others;

- **denying**: rejecting agency (via act-denial, control-denial, intention-denial) and loss (via mitigations, downtoning) in response to accusations (see van Dijk 1992);

- **social actor and action representation**: exclusion, suppression, and backgrounding (e.g. by impersonalisation or nominalisation) of harmful actions, victims, and/or those actors who could possibly attract blame (see van Leeuwen 2008); and

- **legitimation**: providing explanations and justifications of possibly blameworthy actions by using references to authority, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis (see van Leeuwen 2007).

Example 1: ‘eradicating waste in Whitehall’

To illustrate how government may use language defensively, I analyse an extract from the UK Cabinet Office’s news release in response to an investigative story on government overspending published in *The Times* on 9 January 2012. The story, entitled ‘Whitehall waste: the £31 billion cost of failure’, constituted a well-grounded (based on the National Audit Office’s data) blame attack by a major newspaper on the government on an issue that was at the time at the core of its programme and thus also its collective identity. The story provoked the government to make an unusual move and issue a carefully crafted official response in the form of a Cabinet Office news release, entitled ‘Eradicating waste in Whitehall saves £3.75 billion’, on 11 January 2012. The news release contained a statement
by Francis Maude, Minister for the Cabinet Office. Here are the first three sentences from his statement:

1 When we arrived in government we pledged to be ruthless in hunting down and eradicating waste in Whitehall and that is precisely what we have done.
2 Just in the first ten months to last March we saved £3.75 billion – equivalent to twice the budget of the Foreign Office, or to funding 200,000 nurses.
3 This has not been easy; spending hours renegotiating contracts, tackling vested interests and large suppliers and cutting back on spend on consultants and advertising does not make for glamorous or headline grabbing work.

(Cabinet Office, 11 January 2012)

In lines 1–2, Minister for the Cabinet Office uses the argumentative strategy of parading the government’s own qualities (argumentum ad verecundiam) by claiming that it has fulfilled its pledge. Importantly, this sentence also implies a total act-denial: the Minister states that the government has ‘eradicated waste’, that is, he and his colleagues have done the opposite of ‘wasting’. The Minister represents wasting, not as an action carried out by his fellow officeholders, but as a nominalised entity: ‘waste in Whitehall’. Moreover, he diffuses blame by portraying the government metaphorically as a ‘container’ (‘when we arrived in government…’), rather than a specific group of human actors who could be held responsible. He frames ‘waste’ as a Villain (or perhaps as some kind of a dangerous wild animal) and the government as a Hero (perhaps a gunman) who ‘hunts it down’ and ‘eradicates’ it.

In lines 3–4, the Minister backs up his claim by using a particular conclusion rule, *topos of numbers*, by suggesting that a given statistical figure (£3.75 billion allegedly saved in ten months) serves as proof that the government has not wasted money and should not be blamed. However, the Minister does not directly counter the central accusatory claim put forward by *The Times* that ‘more than £31 billion of taxpayers’ money has been wasted across government departments in the past two years’. Thus, he may be seen as committing a ‘straw man’ fallacy and violating a pragma-dialectical rule of reasonable discussion that requires the debater to use correct reference to previous discourse by the antagonist.

In lines 5–7, the Minister represents government’s activities at a high level of abstractness (‘renegotiating contracts’, ‘tackling vested interests’, ‘cutting back on spend’), thereby making it more difficult to understand the exact nature of the activities. This, in turn, may evoke a sense of mystery and awe among his audiences and therefore function as a kind of appeal to authority. In addition, he casts the government as a selfless Hero by claiming that the work of the government has been neither easy nor glamorous.

To illustrate how blame avoidance may involve negative other-presentation, I examine another extract from that news release. In his statement, Minister for the Cabinet Office says:

1 And I am not alone in highlighting all the good work we have done so far;
2 the Public Accounts Committee recently recognised and welcomed
3 our transparent approach to savings.
4 Meanwhile other countries, especially in troubled Europe,
5 are now looking to us for how this is done.

(Cabinet Office, 11 January 2012)
In lines 1–3, the Minister uses *ad populum* argumentation and authority legitimation in service of positive self-presentation of the government. He supports the position that the government should be praised (or at least not blamed) for its financial conduct by claiming that a collective actor who apparently holds high status in society – a parliamentary committee – has given the government a positive evaluation. In terms of representation, Maude nominalises the government’s action: ‘our transparent approach to savings’ (line 3). This nominalised construction is remarkable for its ambivalence. It presupposes that the government is acting transparently and is saving money – both of which are supposedly regarded as worthy of public praise rather than blame. However, it is sufficiently vague to permit an opposite interpretation: that it might be possible to ‘have a transparent approach to savings’, but actually not save any money.

In lines 4–5, the Minister juxtaposes the actions of the UK government with those of other countries, evoking an ‘Us vs Them’ opposition. The suggestion that other governments regard the UK as a positive example (or perhaps a mentor or a role model) is not supported by any data – it ultimately relies on a presumption that his audience is likely to agree with the statements that reaffirm positive in-group feelings. The perceived opposition is intensified by negative other-presentation: ‘troubled Europe’ (line 4) is a salient linguistic construction that is based upon a presumption that the audience regards ‘Europe’ as an out-group (i.e. that the UK citizens do not belong to ‘Europe’) and also implies that the UK is not financially ‘troubled’ (problem denial). This kind of discursive triggering of group polarisation may be regarded as manipulative, if it is carried out systematically with the purpose of deflecting blame for possible financial misconduct of the government.

*Using language to exert power*

A linguistic study of how executive officeholders exercise their right to be obeyed involves analysing communication in relation to particular policies, that is, certain courses of action taken by a government organisation. Public policy-making involves inevitable trade-offs between goals and criteria such as equity, efficiency, security and liberty (Stone 2012). Governments’ decisions as to ‘who gets what, when, and how’ seem to provide a constant source of discontent for groups and individuals who see themselves as ‘losers’ or ‘bearers of a burden’ under a particular distribution regime. Governments’ attempts to maintain order and safety in society necessarily involve setting restrictions to human behaviour and limiting individual liberty.

Using language as a policy tool, that is, as an instrument for either encouraging or discouraging certain behaviour among diverse actors, may take various forms. Government officeholders may issue direct commands and requests that are backed up by coercion, or use some more subtle persuasive linguistic strategies that are designed to bring about a behaviour change, but mask the underlying threat of punishment. Here are two example analyses of such instrumental applications of language by the UK government.

Example 2: ‘go home or face arrest’

In July 2013, the UK Home Office launched a communications pilot campaign, in which a van carrying a large billboard drove around six boroughs of London with sizeable migrant populations. The billboard displayed a photo of handcuffs, the logo of the Home Office and the following text:
In the UK illegally?
106 arrests last week in your area
GO HOME OR FACE ARREST
Text HOME to 78070 for free advice, and help with travel documents
We can help you to return home voluntarily without fear of arrest or detention
(Home Office 2013)

In line 1, a question is used to elicit self-identification by (potential) individual violators of immigration rules as addressees of the advertisement. In line 3, a contingent threat is constructed, specifying that the addressee must comply with a demand of the source (‘go home’) or else suffer a cost inflicted by the threatener (‘face arrest’). Numerical data about previous arrests is presented in line 2 to increase the addressees’ perceived risk of suffering a cost in case of non-compliance. In line 4, a concrete order is given: the addressee must send a particular text message to a certain number. Lines 5 and 6 include lexis that seems to indicate that complying with the given order has positive consequences for the addressee: ‘free advice’, ‘help’ and ‘without fear’.

In this case, language use is explicitly backed up by coercion: an order is followed by a promise to punish those who do not obey. Indeed, it is an official task of the Home Office to ensure that the immigration rules are complied with and that immigration offenders are removed from the UK. According to the report published by the Home Office (2013), their pilot campaign with ‘ad-vans’ resulted in a total of 18 cases of voluntary departure, and helped to save money, because the campaign cost less than enforced removal.

However, in her critical discussion of this campaign, discourse analyst Ruth Wodak (2015, pp. 84–87) argues convincingly that the mobile ad campaign should be seen as ‘fear-mongering’, the discursive construction of ‘the stranger’ and ‘fear of the stranger’, and thus as an attempt by the UK government to win favour with certain kinds of voters who share xenophobic and anti-immigration sentiments. This observation helpfully reminds us that when we analyse a particular instance of instrumental-language use by a government, we should also study its broader socio-political context: only then can we understand how the text or utterance in question could be interpreted by various readers/hearers, and how it may have been designed to simultaneously serve multiple political goals.

Example 3: managing actions

Discourse analyst Jane Mulderrig (2011a) describes with much insight some of the subtle ways in which modern governments use language to attract rather than coerce people into behaving in certain ways. She shows that officeholders try to accomplish this by textual mechanisms that she calls ‘Managing Actions’: by using managing verbs (such as let, allow, help, enable, require and expect), presenting certain actions or outcomes as desirable, presupposing their necessity, and assuming volition of the ‘managed actors’ (i.e. governees or manipulees) rather than giving them direct orders. The following three short textual examples are taken from her corpus of public policy consultation papers on education issues between 1972 and 2005 in England and Wales (Mulderrig 2011a). Note that in these sentences, the personal pronoun ‘we’ is used to refer to the government.

(1) We will ensure that young people […] achieve National Curriculum level 5
(Mulderrig 2011a, p. 60)
In this example, the government (‘we’) is construed as an ‘overseer’ who is in control of the behaviour of the managed actors (‘we will ensure that [managed actors] do X’), completion of the activity is assumed semantically, the outcome seems inevitable, and the independence of the managed actors is comparatively limited.

(2) We encourage […] schools to work together in local ‘families’ to help share [best practice]

(Mulderrig 2011a, p. 60)

In this second example, the government (‘we’) is construed as a ‘leader’ who has authority to instigate others’ actions (‘we encourage [managed actor] to do X’), the action is represented as desirable (or important, attractive), but there is no assumption of its completion. Other linguistic constructions that have a similar effect include, for instance, ‘require [managed actor] to’ and ‘expect [managed actor] to’.

(3) The government is concerned to enable the ethnic minority communities to play their full part in contributing to the education of ethnic minority pupils

(Mulderrig 2011a, p. 57)

Here, the government is construed as a ‘facilitator’ whose authority over others’ actions is assumed, but completion of the action is not necessarily assumed. Most importantly, the volition of the managed actors (‘ethnic minority communities’) is assumed here: they are represented as if they wanted to do X (‘play their full part’), but needed help or support from the government to ‘enable’ that. Other linguistic constructions that have a similar effect include, for example, ‘support [managed actor] to’, ‘allow [managed actor] to’, ‘free [managed actor] to’, ‘make it easier for [managed actor] to’, ‘provide the opportunities for [managed actor] to’.

Suggestions for future research: conflictual aspects of government communication

Governing is marked by both external (more visible) and internal (often less visible) conflict tendencies. Traces of various struggles and dilemmas can be illuminated by analysing government officeholders’ strategic uses of spoken and written language. Next, I list some themes and questions that may provide a particularly fertile ground for future (critical) discourse studies.

Intra-governmental strifes

It would be a mistake to regard government as a homogeneous ‘in-group’. Within all kinds of government organisations, including the ones at the very top of institutional hierarchy, interpersonal clashes and tensions often rise for various reasons and interdepartmental rivalry may easily emerge over allocation of power and resources. In coalition governments, where top executive power is shared between ministers from two or more political parties, governing is furthermore affected by inter-party competition, divergence in policy preferences within the cabinet, and struggles to make compromises with coalition partners, while maintaining integrity in the eyes of the party’s supporters (Strøm, Müller & Bergman 2008). There are only a few linguistically informed empirical studies that focus on analysing
backstage activity in political organisation (e.g. Wodak 2000, 2011). The question of how officeholders use language to mitigate or aggravate various conflicts in the workplace, construct in-groups and out-groups, make decisions, and address and persuade several audiences at once, would certainly merit further research.

**Compromised impartiality of non-elected administrators**

In many Western countries, there is an immanent tension between the widely observed trend of personalisation of politics (e.g. Castells 2009; Stanyer 2012) and the traditional public expectations and norms that demand formal impersonality and impartiality of public administration (Weber 1978). For example, the non-partisan civil servant communicators working in UK government departments are faced with a difficult task. They have to provide advice and support to their ministers, who are routinely engaged in personalised politics and a struggle for electoral support. However, as civil servants, professional communicators have to retain impartiality, that is, to avoid ‘political bias’ in their behaviour, as postulated by the UK Civil Service Code. While professional government communicators tend to claim neutral or impartial status by casting themselves as mere disseminators of messages about policies, they are, in practice, often engaged in formulating or reformulating government policies (te Molder 1999). Therefore, it seems necessary to investigate in more detail how civil servants use language and other symbolic resources in an attempt to construct and sustain an impression of impartiality.

**Mediated scandals and blame avoidance**

Political opponents make attempts to overthrow the incumbent by representing the policy-makers publicly in a negative light, blaming them for behaving in norm-violating ways, and causing bad outcomes. Strategic ‘character assassinations’ (Castells 2009) of individual officeholders help to fuel mediated scandals that undermine the overall trust in government (Thompson 2000; Adut 2008). Journalists are usually interested in seeking out and running ‘scandalous’ stories and are often (but not always, see Entman 2012) eager to publicise blistering criticism of political elites and powerful officeholders (Allem & Pollack 2012). While those in power usually try to avoid getting in the middle of a scandal, opposition politicians may deliberately use controversial discursive strategies (e.g. making a racist comment) to provoke and sustain scandals around themselves in order to dominate the media agenda – a dynamic that Wodak (2015, p. 19) has termed the ‘populist perpetuum mobile’. Executive politicians may respond to public blame attacks by providing an apology (Harris, Grainger & Mullany 2006; Kampf 2008, 2009), or by employing other defensive discursive strategies, such as denying, counter-attacking the blame-maker, or distracting the critical audience (Hansson 2015a, 2015b). Future studies could provide further insights into the ways in which government-related political scandals are linguistically constructed in media, as well as the ways in which government officeholders use linguistic resources to respond to public verbal attacks and mediated scandals.

**Concluding remarks**

While there is a wealth of literature on the election campaigns of political parties and the rhetoric of certain celebrity politicians, relatively little has been written about contemporary day-to-day language use of government communicators. Admittedly, dealing with ‘banal’
data such as news releases, posters and policy documents produced by government agencies may perhaps seem less exciting compared to dissecting more ‘noble’ presidential speeches or party election manifestos. However, the seemingly dull everyday flows of text and talk coming from public policy-makers and their spokespersons can have profound societal implications, as these often construct and sustain particular unequal relations of power between certain ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’. Hence, I hope that the handful of basic conceptual distinctions, examples of analytical approaches and research themes that I have sketched out in this chapter will inspire new linguistically informed critical research projects in this understudied field.

Notes
1 It should be noted, however, that acting strategically does not always mean following well-thought-through, meticulous, rational and logical plans: it may involve acting in particular goal-orientated ways that are conventional or have become routine or ‘automatic’ in certain contexts for a certain community (Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl & Liebhart 2009; Culpeper 2015).
2 The name ‘Whitehall’ is frequently used as a metonym for British central government.

References


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