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The semiotics of political commemoration

Martin Reisigl

Introduction

Commemoration is a multimodal semiotic (including verbal) practice and – with respect to its purpose – an important political activity that serves the formation, reproduction and transformation of political identities. Typically, it is organised around the cyclical return of an occasion that relates to a meaningful moment in the past of a political community and its ‘lessons’ for the present and future. Commemoration involves the political dimension of polity, that is, the general framework for political action, including political culture, rules and values. With respect to this political dimension, commemoration primarily has an integrative function. However, it can also play a disintegrative role if negative experiences are recollected in order to stir up collective aversions towards an enemy.

The topic of political commemoration is dealt with in many disciplines, for example, in historical research (Koselleck & Jeismann 1994), sociology (Durkheim 1995, p. 487; Halbwachs 2002, 2004; Zerubavel 1995; Olick 2003; Zifonun 2004; Levy & Sznaider 2005), cultural studies (e.g. A Assmann 2006, 2007; J Assmann 2007), political science (Meyer 2003, 2009), geography (McDowell & Braniff 2014), and philosophy (Ricœur 2004). The present chapter cannot do justice to this wide-ranging field of research. It will primarily focus on salient semiotic dimensions of political commemoration.

This chapter is divided into five parts. It begins with an explanation and discussion of the fundamental characteristics of political commemoration. This followed by a description of the commemorative speech as a basic format of communication that allows for ‘bringing to remembrance’ a particular reading of the past in the context of a ritualised public event. The next section briefly focuses on important semiotic aspects of commemoration beyond the verbal dimension. It is followed by a look at the salient discursive features of political commemoration from the perspective of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), taking Austrian commemoration as an example. The selective focus will concentrate on the representation of social actors and events, on argumentation referring to commemorated events, on tropes (metaphors, metonymies and synecdoches) relating to the commemorated past and the representation of historical changes as well as continuities. The chapter will be rounded up with a short conclusion.
The semiotics of political commemoration

Fundamental characteristics of political commemoration

Commemoration comes from the Latin noun commemoratio, which derives from the Latin verb commemorare. The verb is composed of the prefix con – which in our case becomes com due to the phonological contact assimilation, meaning ‘altogether’, and memorare, meaning ‘relate’, ‘to mention from memory’. Literally, the etymology tells us that commemoration means ‘remembering together’, that some individuals come together and bring some things (people and/or events) into remembrance. This means that commemoration is a social activity involving various people and various remembered things, and it means that commemoration does not just involve mental processes, but also verbal and other forms of semiotic externalisation. Commemoration is a joint multimodal performance, event and experience that includes speeches, images, music, material places with monuments and buildings, front- and backstage, platforms, stands, requisites, parades or processions.

Commemoration is a significant social, religious and political practice that serves the formation, reproduction and transformation of social, religious or political identities. During ancient times and the Middle Ages, commemoration only took place in ritualised religious, cult-related and magic-related contexts. From the period of Reformation and Enlightenment onwards, the state was gradually separated from religion and the political sphere gradually became secularised. Thus, commemoration also developed into a secular political practice. Historical events became an object of public ceremonies of remembrance, in which fights for liberation and independence, battles, victories, fallen ‘heroes’, national poets, and monarchs’ birthdays and coronations were remembered. During this process of secularisation, many semiotic elements of formerly religious commemorations were adapted for political practice in order to institutionalise a ‘national liturgy’. The commemorating religious community was transformed into a commemorating political community, the commemorative speech replaced the sermon, patriotic hymns and songs were substituted for religious chants (the introit, Kyrie and Gloria), the national anthem received the function of a chanted prayer, processions changed into (military) parades, and the patriot profession of faith replaced the Christian creed (Mosse 1993, pp. 28, 93, 97, etc.). The new secularised commemoration served the function of political integration and mobilisation of the bourgeoisie, which became a new collective political actor.

In order to promote national identification of the new ‘collective political subject’, commemorative references to matters of alleged national importance are instrumentalised, for instance, the reference to the birth, life or death of figures considered to be important for the political community (e.g. ‘heroes’ and ‘founding fathers’), the reference to victims of political suppression, victories, defeats, catastrophes and fortunes, the reference to agreements, treaties or other political documents (e.g. a document that mentions the name of a political unit for the first time; see Reisigl 2007), the reference to the foundation of a state, political system or form of government, and the reference to the community itself or the formation of a new policy.

The nature of this ‘collective’ memory is of a special kind. It is not a ‘common memory’, but a ‘shared memory’. This conceptual distinction has been introduced by Avishai Margalit (2000, pp. 34ff.). Whereas ‘common memory’ refers to the recollection of an episode (e.g. a war episode) that has been experienced personally by various individuals and is remembered by these individuals, ‘shared memory’ refers to the recollection of past episodes that, for the most part or entirely, have not been experienced personally by those who recollect these experiences by communicating about them within a community of practice. As Margalit
(2000, p. 37) sets out for modern societies, memory shared by communication is the object of a mnemotechnical labour division. Shared memory is ‘carried’ by institutionalised professions and institutions, by special semiotic materialisations, such as street names, monuments and memorials, archives, museums, and so on. In other words: shared memory, is, for the most part, remembrance of remembrance (Margalit 2000, p. 41). This holds true for the most part of political commemoration, except for cases in which witnesses of the times participate in the commemoration as survivors, or provide testimonies and recall their personal experiences. A great deal of political commemoration is not rooted in individual and bodily engraved knowledge about an individual’s own past, but in knowledge about narrated, described and explained past events, in a communicatively mediated past. This fact is often covered or confused by rhetorical devices, such as the historically expanded ‘we’ or the historical ‘we’. These synecdochic or metonymic forms of ‘we’ encompass a trans-generational political (often national) community that includes persons from several centuries, or that suggests living members of an alleged national collective have participated in events that took place centuries ago (Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl & Liebhart 2009, pp. 46ff.).

The integrative function of political commemoration can go hand in hand with a socially disintegrative function, for instance, with the function of social exclusion and separation from other national collectives. This close relationship between integration and disintegration is based on the Janus-faced process of identity formation: identity always relies both on sameness or similarity, and difference, distinction or diversification against others. The latter is most salient in secessionist nationalism that strives to break apart multiethnic political units (for the disintegrative function of political commemoration in Austria, see also Reisigl 2008, p. 251).

A tripartite question runs through political commemoration like a thread: where do we come from, who are we, where are we going? This triadic question relates to the three basic dimensions of time. The question is sometimes asked explicitly in commemorative speeches of presidents. The answer to it is organised around the cyclical – annual, fifth, tenth, twentieth, fiftieth, centenary, millenary – return of a specific occasion. This occasion appears to be an important moment in the past of a political community that both influences and ‘instructs’ the present and future.

The central political dimension of political commemoration is the polity. Commemoration supports a common framework for political action. This is not only due to the facts that commemoration is usually a consent-orientated political practice aiming to strengthen political cohesion and that the orators are often politicians with an integrative role, such as presidents and chancellors. Commemoration represents and sustains a political culture; in our times and European latitudes, a democratic culture, in former times, a monarchic culture, or sometimes a dictatorship (e.g. in Nazi Germany, or in the German Democratic Republic). Commemoration follows specific rules of communication, and it affirms specific political rules (e.g. democratic rules) and political values (e.g. political autonomy, independence, sovereignty, unity, singularity, solidarity, co-operation, community, peacefulness, etc.).

**Commemorative speeches**

The commemorative speech forms the basic type of communication that allows for ‘bringing to remembrance’ a particular reading of the past in the context of a ritualised public event. It forms a consent-orientated sub-genre of political speech and is located in the field of the formation of public attitudes, opinions and will.
The genre structure of commemorative speeches is often connected with patterns of the epideictic genre. According to ancient rhetoric, the epideictic genre relates to the speaker’s demonstration (the Greek word *epideiktikós* means ‘demonstrating’, ‘showing’) of praiseworthy or blameworthy social and political – but also rhetorical – values (Dominicy & Fréderic 2001), as well as the demonstration of the speaker’s rhetorical ability and ethos. In contrast, the function of the judicial genre is to prepare a jurisdictional decision by focusing on the past of the defendant and questions of (in)justice. The purpose of the deliberative genre consists in the preparation of a political decision by advising (exhorting or dissuading). When analysing particular commemorative speeches, it becomes clear that the genre of commemorative speech shows many features classically attributed to the epideictic speech, but that it rests across the three ideal-typical genres. In fact, a commemorative speech often deals with the problematic past of a political community. Thus, it also adopts elements of the judicial genre. Its parts on the political present and future include deliberative elements. Thus, commemorative speeches are best described as a generic mix of epideictic, judicial and deliberative elements.

When it comes to the macro-structure of the commemorative speech, we can describe it with the help of the classical distinction of functional speech sections:

The introduction (*exordium*) establishes the contact between the speaker and her or his audience by an initial vocative and salutation (*salutatio*). This phatic start is followed by attempts to attract the listeners’ interest. In addition, the introduction of a commemorative speech familiarises the addressees with the topic and occasion of commemoration. This functional part is sometimes treated as a separate speech section (*propositio*) and sometimes as a part of the narration (Ueding & Steinbrink 2005, p. 263).

The main part of the speech conventionally consists of a narrative or explanation and an amplification of the issue in question (*narratio*), which is typically followed by a section containing arguments that are designated to persuade the listeners to adopt the speaker’s opinion (*argumentatio*). The argumentation is considered to be the most important sub-section of the main part. It is classically divided into a sub-section aiming to argue for something (*probatio*) and a sub-section arguing against something (*refutatio*). Often, the narrative section also serves argumentative purposes. The argumentation section of commemorative speeches includes passages dedicated to the political present and future. This sub-section also includes prescriptive and directive elements that should help to obtain the listeners’ consent, solidarity, identification and disposition to act in accordance with the values of the political community.

The final part of a speech (*peroratio*) has the double function of summarising the most important claims of the speaker and of re-intensifying the contact between the speaker and the listeners in order to make them emotionally and cognitively inclined to adopt the speaker’s perspective. The summary often takes the form of an emphatic enumeration that fulfils a mnemonic function. Furthermore, the last part contains directive speech acts, such as requests and pleas, exhortations and warnings, as well as expressive speech acts, such as optative wishes, and – sometimes – compliments, congratulations and thanks. The illocutionary quality of these speech parts is to mobilise the listeners and to move them emotionally.

Spelling out the political functions of commemorative speeches in more detail, a series of sub-functions can be identified. Among them are the establishment of in-group consent, solidarity, identification and the disposition to act in accordance with what the speaker proposes. The complex action pattern of the commemorative speech can be sub-specified with respect to various tasks, and here again it becomes clear that the commemorative
speech has a part in all three genres distinguished in rhetoric. Among the epideictic purposes of commemorative speeches are the laudatory, vituperative, retrospective or anamnestic, admonitory, consolatory, thanking, congratulatory, optative, promising and teaching functions. Among the deliberative purposes of commemorative speeches are the conciliatory, admonitory, promising and teaching functions (as we see, some deliberative and epideictic functions overlap). Lastly, the three typical judicial purposes of commemorative speeches are the accusing, exculpatory and justificatory functions.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, commemorative speeches played an important role as an established form of public political speech when it comes to the retrospective historical self-presentation of a political community. Historical occasions for national days of remembrance include Independence Day (4 July) and Thanksgiving (fourth Thursday in November) in the US, the anniversary of the October Revolution in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (7 November), the ‘Oath on Rütli’ and the signing of the Federal Pact in Switzerland (1 August), the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille as the beginning of the French Revolution (14 July), the Norwegian Constitution Day (17 May), the Liberation Day in Italy (25 April) commemorating the capitulation of the armed National Socialist forces on Italian territory, the anniversary of the military capitulation of the National Socialists celebrated as ‘Day of Liberation’ in the former German Democratic Republic (8 May), the German Unity Day commemorating the anniversary of the German reunification in 1990 (3 October), the National Holiday in Austria as the anniversary of the day on which Austria declared and enacted its ‘permanent neutrality’ (26 October), the ‘Koninginnendag’ as the anniversary of the coronation day of Queen Beatrix and the birthday of her mother, Princess Juliana, in the Netherlands (30 April; the name has now been changed to ‘Koningsdag’, because King Willem-Alexander is the successor to the throne), the anniversary of the beginning of the liberation fight against Turkey in Greece (25 March) and – in former colonies – the anniversary of the beginning of independence from the colonial power (6 March in Ghana, 21 March in Namibia, 24 May in Eritrea, 5 July in Algeria, 15 August in India).

Depending on the political system of a state and the political orientation of a political orator, the specific commemorative speech will aim to construct and reproduce a democratic political identity, or to pursue ideological indoctrination legitimising an undemocratic, for example, autocratic or dictatorial political identity (Haspel 1996, p. 642).

The purpose of commemorative speeches given in the first half of the twentieth century in many European states was primarily political propaganda and agitation of the masses. Until the First World War, they were employed to suggest historical continuities. The alleged continuities were referred to in order to support nationalist claims, and expansionist as well as imperialist aspirations. From the 1920s onwards, Italian fascists and National Socialists utilised commemorative speeches to glorify their own political movement by monumentalist, mythical and apotheotic self-presentations. The glorification relied on the invocation of a splendid history. Aesthetical scenery with imposing architecture, masses marching, huge choruses, fanfares and ideological creeds charged with a triumphalist and para-religious fervour produced an atmosphere of mass hysteria and a reverential shiver, in which participants fanatically identified with the ‘leader, people and fatherland’ and adopted the attitude of being ready to sacrifice themselves (see Mosse 1993, p. 238).

The rhetoric of commemoration typical for fascist and National Socialist states in Europe has implications for the development of post-war commemoration after 1945. Formerly fascist and National Socialist nation-states have to confront themselves with their problematic political past. This negative history becomes a central topic of the speeches (Haspel 1996,
p. 643). Several remarkable commemorative speeches given in West Germany have focused on the period of National Socialism. Richard von Weizsäcker gave a speech on 8 May 1985 on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the liberation from National Socialism that assumed the character of an admonitory speech in empathetic solidarity with the victims of the National Socialist dictatorship and critical of the German perpetrators and the German post-war society that tried to evade political responsibility (Haspel 1996, p. 643). This speech has become a rhetorical and ethical benchmark against which every other speech on the topic is measured and evaluated up until today. Furthermore, the disastrous speech given on 10 November, 1988 by the former president of the German parliament, Phillip Jenninger, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the anti-Jewish pogrom (the night from 9 November to 10 November, 1938), differed considerably from Weizsäcker’s speech (see Kopperschmidt 1989; von Polenz 1989; Linn 1991; Wodak, Menz, Mitten & Stern 1994). Jenninger’s commemorative retrospection lacked the respectful empathy with the victims of National Socialism and their immense suffering. It included formulations and stylistic meanings of discourse representation (i.e. free indirect speech) suggesting that Jenninger was adopting and partly justifying the perspective of National Socialist perpetrators. The failed speech seemed to relativise the Nazi crimes and to insinuate the unavoidability of the historical development. The ‘Jenninger case’ shows at least two things: first, Jenninger’s subsequent resignation made clear that commemorative speeches are of vital importance for the public sphere of a modern democracy (see Haspel 1996, p. 643) and do not just assume the status of grandiloquent ‘Sunday speeches’. Second, the reactions of other parliamentary representatives showed that a commemorative speech is not just a monological piece of communication, but an interactive genre (see Figure 24.1). More than 40 representatives left the room during the speech, and various representatives started to shout spontaneous hecklings of disapproval at Jenninger. This interactive character of a commemorative speech is often not noticed. It becomes conspicuous if the speech fails and the expected consent of the hearers does not follow, or if non-verbal acclamations presupposed as applauding ‘minimal responses’ are missing or replaced by reactions of dissent.

The political commemoration of the National Socialist dictatorship is also an issue in post-war Austria. Until the end of the 1980s, however, the commemoration was conspicuous by the absence of condolences and sincere sympathy with the Nazi victims. Up until then, politicians primarily produced half-hearted confessions of an Austrian responsibility for National Socialist crimes. They hardly ever publicly expressed their regret and hardly ever asked the surviving victims and their relatives for forgiveness. Most of the commemorative speeches reproduced the claim that Austria and the Austrians had been the first victims of Nazi Germany. Only after the-then Chancellor Franz Vranitzky made a declaration on 8 July 1991 in the Austrian parliament and confessed the guilt of the Austrian Nazis (see Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, Liebhart, Hofstätter & Kargl 1998, pp. 213ff.; Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl & Liebhart 1999, pp. 89ff.), did the public dealing with the Austrian National Socialist past start to change (see also Ziegler & Kannonier-Finster 1997; Uhl 2011). Since then, victims of National Socialist persecution and extermination are commemorated with more compassion and regretful apologies based on the recognition of past wrongdoings, and the perpetrators are named and condemned more clearly.

The difficulties of ‘saying sorry’ in political commemoration (see Brooks 1999; Harris, Grainger & Mullany 2006) are also an issue in other countries with a highly problematic past. Efe and Forchtner (2015), for instance, focus on the example of Turkey and how the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, publicly addresses and admits the Massacre of thousands of Kurds in Dersim during the 1930s. From the example of Turkey, but also
other countries, we can learn that strong nationalism is one of the principal obstacles to performing a clear and unmitigated (e.g. non-conditional) political apology based on the recognition of wrongdoing and the assumption of political responsibility.

As observed, the commemorative speech is not a monological event. As a genre, it is a communicative action pattern with an interactive structure. This becomes most clear if a commemorative speech fails, as in the case of Jenninger’s speech in 1988. Figure 24.1 is designed to visualise both what the schematic interaction structure of a commemorative speech looks like and how the conventionalised interaction may be disrupted. The figure represents three kinds of speech-relevant processes, videlicet: (a) mental processes of the orator on the left, (b), semiotically externalised elements produced by the orator and the hearers in the middle, and (c) the mental processes of the hearers on the right. The rectangular double-lines mark the borders of the communicative action pattern. The rhombus symbolises a decisional nodal point with various alternatives, the small rectangles stand for specific mental, actional and interactional processes. The arrow represents the direction of the consecutive processes, and the broken and dotted lines denote the boundaries between the functional interactional meso-units (speech parts). Finally, on the right side, we perceive the (partial) breaking up of the communicative action.

Commemoration as a multimodal semiotic process and event

As already touched upon, commemoration involves various semiotic (e.g. symbolic, indexical and iconic) dimensions beyond the purely verbal dimension. Often, political commemoration is a complex multimodal ceremony and event that includes visuals, music, place arrangements, architecture and processes of collective action or interaction. It follows from this that the research on the semiotics of political commemoration has to take into account a series of interrelated elements. These elements are:

a. the selection of a specific place and architectural scenery with buildings, monuments, etc.;

b. the announcement of the speech event by strategic media activities of political mobilisation via fliers, press advertisements, appeals and organisational instructions, etc., and the often very selective invitation to participate in the commemorative event on the spot;

c. the preparation of the speech by a team consisting of the orator, advertisers and ghostwriters;

d. the preparation of the multimodal scenery and place by arranging the frontstage with the platform for the speaker(s) and the stands for the audience, by decorating the scenery with requisites, by choreographing the performance and eventually the parade or procession (for the distinction between frontstage and backstage, see Goffman 1959; Wodak 2011);

e. the musical framing of the commemorative event by hymns, anthems, (military) marches, etc.;

f. the dress rehearsal of the speech performance and the greater communicative event;

g. the delivery of the speech as a multimodal event that involves verbal and non-verbal aspects and that often shows discrepancies between the written and the oral speech;

h. the ‘after story’ of the speech performance, due to which the speech may become a media spectacle (Kellner 2003, pp. 160–178), i.e. the distribution of the registered speech or event by mass media, the reception of these recorded pieces of commemorative communication, and the reactions to the distributed semiotic pieces in the media.

Each of these elements or stages is significant for the process of political commemoration (see also Alexander 2006, pp. 66ff., who refers to the productive, distributive and
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orator (O)</th>
<th>Hearers (H)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mental sphere of O</td>
<td>interactional sphere of O and H</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- O walks on the lectern
- address and salutation (salutatio)
- introduction (exordium)
- presentation of the topic (propositio)
- narration of facts and circumstances (narratio)
- justification (argumentatio)
- recapitulation
- admonition / exhortation
- final appeal
- O leaves the lectern

- applause till it dies away
- silence
- applause till it dies away
-... 
- perceivable focus on O
- little cough / throat clearing / wandering eyes
- silence
- silence
- positive evaluation
- positive evaluation
- increased attention
- increased attention
- no increased attention
- no increased attention
- negative evaluation
- negative evaluation
- H leaves the place
- H leaves the place
- boooing / whistling
- little cough / throat clearing / wandering eyes
- applause till it dies away
- applause till it dies away

**Figure 24.1** (Failing) commemorative speech as linguistic action pattern

hermeneutical powers interfacing with the *mise-en-scène* of social performances), though the commemorative speech is usually of crucial importance. Particular semiotic elements, such as pictures, can become as influential or even more influential than the commemorative
speech itself. Here, we may think of the ‘Warsaw Genuflection’ of the former chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Willy Brandt, who had actively resisted the Nazi regime (see also Rauer 2006). The picture or series of pictures show the chancellor kneeling in Warsaw on 7 December 1970 in front of a monument dedicated to the uprising against the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto. Willy Brandt performed this gesture of penance and admittance of responsibility supposedly spontaneously during his visit to the monument and the related wreath-laying ceremony. Brandt’s visit took place in a specific historical context. He had come to Poland to sign the Treaty of Warsaw. In this treaty, the Oder-Neisse line was acknowledged as the final German border with Poland. The genuflection was, and is, perceived as an image of commemoration with a strong symbolic meaning. The picture of the emblematic gesture went around the world. While it was discussed controversially in West Germany, internationally, it was perceived as an important step towards a reconciliation and rapprochement between Germany and Eastern Europe. The respective images show a serious-looking man kneeling down, folding his hands and remaining silent for about 30 seconds. The shot is taken from above, that is, from a higher angle, and shows the politician on the right side, in social semiotic terms, as the new and most important information in the image. This non-verbal act of empathic commemoration was so impressive and influential that it has become, in turn, an important political event that has been regularly commemorated since. Thus, we observe here the commemoration of commemoration, since the commemorative genuflection itself is commemorated. Furthermore, Willy Brandt was dedicated a place name and monument in Warsaw for his gesture and policy. This means that the semiotic act of commemoration is collectively memorised in the form of a memory place, by the symphysical fixation of Brandt’s name to a street sign and a monument at a specific place.

Other examples of a visual policy of commemoration through gestural symbols could be mentioned, such as the handshake of the former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and the former French President François Mitterrand on 22 September 1984 at the war cemetery Douaumont in Verdun. During the playing of the Marseillaise, the two politicians shook hands unexpectedly and remained in this position of bodily closeness for some time – in front of two wreaths and a coffin adorned with the flags of France and Germany. The music of the two anthems seemed to have emotionally touched the two men. Mitterand started to reach out for Kohl’s hand during the pause after the German anthem and immediately before the beginning of the French anthem in order to overcome his solitude of grief (as he explained). The pictures of this gesture of friendship went round the world. The example also documents that music can have strong effects on the participants of a commemorative event and move them to perform an unexpected gesture of high symbolic importance.

In contrast, a controversial joint commemoration took place a year later, when Ronald Reagan and Helmut Kohl participated in a ceremonial visit in Bitburg in 1985. The pictures show the president of the US and the chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany at a military cemetery with two-thousand graves of fallen soldiers, 49 of whom were members of the Waffen-SS. They show Reagan in front of a wreath for the German soldiers. Within this context, the president had declared that the SS soldiers had been victims of fascism like the prisoners killed in the Nazi concentration camps. Understandably, this equation and the reverential act of commemoration at that very specific place became an object of international public critique.

All in all, the semiotics of political commemoration is becoming more and more important as an interdisciplinary research object. Various semiotic facets of commemoration are studied from different angles and with respect to different historical times, places, speakers and materialisations such as monuments (e.g. war monuments), museums and visitor books.
Among the many studies focusing on states such as Argentina, Austria, Egypt, Germany, Great Britain, South Africa and Uruguay are Aboelezz 2014; Abousnnouga & Machin 2013; Achugar 2009; Anthonissen 2006; Bietti 2014; Duncan 2014; Ensink 2009; Ensink & Sauer eds., 2003; Kopperschmidt 1999; Kohn & Rosenberg 2013; Matuschek 1994; Noy 2011; Sauer 1997; Staudinger 1994; Weedon & Jordan 2012; Zinsmaier 1999. Due to restricted space, they cannot be discussed in this chapter.

The discourse-historical focus on salient discursive features of political commemoration

During the last few decades, proponents of the DHA have carried out various discourse-analytical case studies on political commemoration in Austria and partly also in Germany and elsewhere (Wodak et al. 1994; Wodak et al. 1998; Reisigl 1998; Wodak et al. 2009; Reisigl 1999, 2007, 2008, 2009; Wodak 2006; de Cillia & Wodak, 2009; Wodak & Richardson 2009, 2013; Tominc 2014; Forchtner 2014a, 2014b).

From this specific theoretical and methodical perspective (see Reisigl & Wodak 2016), salient occasions have been looked at, among other things, the foundation of the First Austrian Republic in 1918 and the Second Austrian Republic in 1945, the signing of the so-called ‘State Treaty’ in 1955, the liberation of the Nazi victims imprisoned in the Austrian concentration camp Mauthausen on 5 May 1945, the military capitulation of the National Socialists on 8 May 1945, the first documentation of the toponym ‘ostarrîchi’ in the year 996 (from which the name ‘Austria’ is derived), the enactment of the ‘permanent Austrian neutrality’ in 1955, and Austria’s joining of the European Union in 1995.

Among the general discourse topics analysed in the respective commemorative speeches are: (1) the representation of Austrians and non-Austrians, (2) the narration of a national political history, (3) the reference to a common (national) culture, (4) the reference to a national present and future, and (5) the discursive construction of a ‘national body’ or ‘national territory’.

In addition to the general characteristics and genre-related features mentioned on pp. 371f. and 374f., significant discursive features relating to commemoration and focused on in the respective DHA studies are: (a) the discursive representation (by nomination and predication) of social actors and crucial events as well as actions relating to commemorated events, (b) argumentation patterns referring to causes and consequences concerning the commemorated events, (c) tropological patterns employed in order to discursively deal with the commemorated past and to construct or represent historical changes and continuities.

The analysis of the commemorative representation of social actors and events brings to the fore a series of nomination and predication strategies employed for the depiction of single, nationally important individuals (e.g. ‘founding fathers’ or national ‘heroes’ and shining examples) by proper names, honorifics and positive national attributes. The national in-group and various out-groups are further represented by collective nouns, toponyms, relational anthroponyms as well as deictics such as ‘we’ and ‘you’ and anaphoric pronouns such as ‘they’. A crucial point of commemoration is the question of how certain historical events, actions and processes are named, for instance, whether a historical turning point is named as ‘liberation’, ‘occupation’ or ‘defeat’, or whether another turning point is named as voluntary ‘Anschluss’ or ‘unification’, or as compulsory ‘annexation’. Predications used in commemorative semiosis are analysed with respect to national auto- and hetero-stereotypes.

Many argumentation patterns (topoi) have been identified in the above-mentioned Austrian case studies. They are employed in order to justify specific claims regarding the
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national past, present and future. Among these argumentation patterns are the topos of autonomy, the topos of heteronomy, the topos of singularity, the topos of will, the topos of difference, the topos of sameness and justice, the topos of the victim, the topos of culture, the topos of danger, the topos of responsibility, and the topos of history. In various Austrian commemorative speeches given by conservative politicians, this last topos is realised as a topos of the history as a teacher of lessons (historia magistra vitae). It refers to a positive change of the past and serves the positive national self-presentation by praising the we-group for having learned from its own past and by distracting the commemorative attention from the victims who deserve to be the main focus of attention.

Furthermore, tropes, that is, content-related rhetorical figures such as metaphors, metonyms and synecdoches, play a crucial role in the political commemoration in Austria and elsewhere. They help to construct historical continuities and historical change. They are not simply rhetorical decorations, but function as fundamental cognitive principles which – often unconsciously – shape and structure human perception and thinking. First, they are used to promote identification with political actors (e.g. the collective actor of the state or nation) and their aims, for instance via the metaphor of the ‘core’ with respect to Austria in relation to other nation-states of the European Union. Second, they are employed to promote in-group solidarity, for instance with the help of the family or kinship metaphor referring to the imagined community of the nation, or with the help of the bridge metaphor. Third, they support out-group segregation and discrimination, for instance via spatial metaphors implying strict frontiers between inside and outside. Fourth, tropes are used to generate a feeling of security, stability and order, for instance via construction and building metaphors referring to a state. Fifth, tropes fulfil justificatory or delegitimising functions with respect to specific political actions or their omission in the past, present or future, for instance via metaphors of gain or price relating to the consequences of a specific action or omission of action. Sixth, they may assume a relativising function, for instance via the metaphor of natural disasters and catastrophes for war, military actions and other cruelties willingly authored and committed by human beings, or via the metaphor of the rebirth of an ‘innocent’ national being without any problematic prehistory, or via the metaphor of the bridge that covers contradictions and antagonistic social structures that ought to be named explicitly and cleared by an adequate policy, or via expansive temporal synecdoches that disguise historical discontinuities and breaks (for details, see Reisigl 2009). Seventh, tropes are instrumental if it comes to mobilise political supporters to perform particular actions, for instance via inciting moving metaphors, journey metaphors or – in some cases – even militarising metaphors relating to political collaboration.

Conclusions

Within this chapter, I could only give some basic hints to important aspects of the topic. A comprehensive theory of the semiotics of political commemoration still awaits its elaboration. Such a theory is best constructed within the framework of an interdisciplinary co-operation that brings together historical research, political science, linguistics and semiotics in order to shape the contours of a historical politolinguistics that is connected with the DHA and Social Semiotics. Such a historical politolinguistics has to take into consideration the historical variability of the phenomenon. It has, for instance, to be aware of the fact that the political commemoration of periods such as National Socialism will change as soon as eyewitnesses from that time are no longer alive. The social demographic change has the effect that ‘common memory’ will successively disappear and be replaced by
'shared memory’. Historical politolinguistics also has to deal with new challenges following increased international migration, because the multitude of ethnic and cultural backgrounds has to be addressed adequately, that is, in an integrative way, in the practice of political commemoration. Furthermore, historical politolinguistics specialised for the analysis of political commemoration has to take into account that supranational commemoration is becoming more and more important.

With respect to the different semiotic modes, we have seen that, in the multimodal practice of political commemoration, non-verbal communication can have as much impact as verbal communication, and that music may sometimes trigger an unexpected non-verbal gesture of central political actors that assumes a strong symbolic meaning. All these dimensions are worthy of being accurately analysed, in addition to genre-specific elements of commemorative speeches and their interaction patterns, discourse topics, nominations, predications, argumentation schemes and tropes.

Finally, critical politolinguistics carrying out research on the semiotics of political commemoration may engage in speech criticism and political language advising (see Reisigl 2008, pp. 261ff.; Reisigl 2009, pp. 236ff.). Here, the practical critique has to rely on an accurate description and identification of bad practices as well as good practices of political commemoration. The respective evaluation should be based on a solid historical knowledge and on transparent semiotic (e.g. iconic, indexical, symbolic), cognitive (e.g. rational) as well as political (e.g. democratic) and ethical principles (e.g. of empathy and solidarity with the victims). In this sense, we analysts are ourselves part of an ongoing democratic project.

References


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