Semantic strategies as a means of politics: Linguistic approaches to the analysis of "semantic struggles"

Dietrich Busse

1. Introduction

Political power and its exertion by the various agencies of politics (i. e., politicians, civil servants, political institutions) can be described as a kind of symbolic action (cf. Edelman 1972; Edelman 1974). Social and political reality, its perception or constitution by the participants of politics (politicians and citizens), is shaped and determined by communication and its means: linguistic expressions provided by the language of public discourse. This language opens and restricts, due to the semantic rules of its linguistic signs, the possibilities of constituting symbolic meaning and sense within a range of socially accepted definitions of political and social reality. Linguistic sense within a discourse can only be socially effective if it is an intersubjectively accepted sense. The constitution of public sense as a part of the process of linguistic communication is an important component of linguistic action. This semantic or semiotic constitution of public sense may determine which social and political events and facts are accepted and with which connotations as a part of social reality, which are "existent" (in a certain sense of that term) and which are not. In other words, the semantic possibilities of linguistic signs correspond to the form of reality, or the view towards reality, admitted by society. Politicians and political agencies that desire to influence the publicly accepted view of political reality will try to dominate the linguistic possibilities within the discourse of politics (Edelman 1974; Mey 1979: 423). Thus language (especially the semantics of political terminology) becomes a means of political action: the so-called "semantic struggles" arise (cf. Dieckmann 1975; Heringer 1982). Success in determining the social interpretation or definition of political reality can be seen as a result of such semantic struggles.

With regard to the important role of dominating interpretations of social reality there must be a strong interest for the bearers of political power to defend their interpretation against competing interpretations.

This includes the interest to maintain the belief that there is only *one* reality and that this reality is the same as the official reality defined in the (official) political discourse. This also implies that the belief has to be maintained that only the words (i. e., their meaning) used by the bearers of political power denote the "one and only" reality. Competing definitions and interpretations of political events and facts have to be denounced as wrong: as "the wrong use of words", as "ideological speech", as part of a semantic struggle (whereas one's own speech is declared to involve the correct use of the words denoting the "real" reality) and so on (Smith 1973: 105; Lasswell 1968: 12). Semantic strategies take place in public political discourses, in newspapers, tv and radio news broadcasts, interviews with politicians, and so on. The function of such media for the public political discourse is not only to give information about political events, but, more than this, to offer interpretations that are not dangerous for the stability of political power. The official interpretation must be on the market of public opinion before competing interpretations can occur and be effective. Interpretation of reality by means of the language of politics works by dominating the selection of certain linguistic expressions to denote the political events. Words have to be chosen which bear semantically preferred connotations. It is more efficient if the words chosen not only have the desired meaning or connotation, but open the way for a whole range of semantic possibilities, including significations, connotations and associations. Semantic strategies are more successful if they not only refer to events, facts and things, but also enable a specific discourse to have the desired effects on the constitution of social reality. "Semantic struggles" often do not only involve single words or meanings, but complete meaning-systems.

2. Methodological reflections

Methodological reflections about the analysis of political semantics and semantic strategies can be found in historical semantics ("Begriffsgeschichte") and the linguistics of language in politics (cf. Busse 1987). The majority of empirical studies analyze single words or concepts but not semantic strategies (or, in other words, discourse strategies in Foucault's sense). Analytical instruments for the semantic analysis of discourses have yet to be developed. From the viewpoint of contemporary linguistic pragmatics "semantic struggles" can be described as conflicts about the rules of the usage of linguistic signs. The "winner" of a semantic struggle

has succeeded in establishing his or her own rule-of-use as the linguistic norm for the linguistic community. A linguistic analysis of such attempts to establish a new linguistic norm has to describe semantic deep structures, covert predications and presuppositions. These can then serve as a means for attempting to define, redefine or constitute political reality. The rules-of-use of linguistic signs can be analyzed by describing paradigmatic uses in different linguistic and situational contexts. The first step in the analysis has to be a reflection on word-semantics; but the meaning of the analyzed word cannot be taken from dictionaries, but has to be reconstructed within its immediate linguistic context, the so-called "collocations". Collocations as fixed combinations of two or more words can be an important instrument in defining a new word-meaning or creating new connotations. Collocations can be seen as verbally expressed connotations. If these connotations become a part of the rule-of-use of the analyzed word, they will have introduced a change in the word-meaning. But collocations can still have another function within discourse strategies. They can epistemically open the way for new discourse, i. e., to a complete semantic network as an epistemic horizon of understanding and realization of sense. It is this dynamics of epistemic associations provided by a discourse which is one of the most effective means of semantic strategies in politics. Semantic strategies often operate through the linking of different discourses and can be seen as an attempt to attach to the word or phrase used a complete semantic sphere with the intended epistemic and — in the long run — political consequences.

3. Political stigmatization

Semantic strategies can be exemplified by the strategies of stigmatization used by West German politicians against radical political minorities (for an extended analysis, Busse 1989). The situations to be defined and interpreted involve demonstrations against nuclear sites in construction, and the participants. In 1986 there were large demonstrations in Wackersdorf (Bavaria) with occurrences of militant resistance against the police by a minority of the demonstrators. One commentator referred to the latter people with the word "Chaoten" (chaotic people) with a conspicuous frequency. Before (in 1968 and the seventies), expressions such as "communists" or "anarchists" were more frequent. The new word "Chaoten" ("chaotics") is not only used as a single word to refer to the demonstrators. Such new words for an old thing not only refer to and

denote an existing reality but have a linguistic function of predication. The meaning of such a predication could be, for instance: "These demonstrating people are not only pure demonstrators, but are chaotic, irrational and violent people." Following the German linguist v. Polenz (1985), the revelation of such covert predications is one of the most important instruments in the linguistic analysis of political language. Covert predications are those words or phrases, which have, syntactically speaking, the function of reference (noun-phrases), but which in fact semantically function as predications. A profound analysis of political texts can reveal for relatively short sentences a complex and extensive structure of covert predications. These covert predications have the purpose of insinuating semantic definitions and interpretations of reality without revealing the fact that a linguistic act of predication has taken place and that there are agents responsible for these acts.

In our example, the word "chaotics" ("Chaoten") was constantly used not as a single noun but in fixed collocations. The most frequent collocations can be interpreted as headings for complete semantic (or epistemic) spheres which are then attached to the denoted events and people. In my material the most frequent collocation was "Chaoten und Gewalttäter" (chaotic and violent people), followed by "Chaoten und Kriminelle" (chaotics and criminals) and "Reisechaoten" (travelling chaotics). Within the semantic strategy of stigmatization the collocation "chaotic and violent people" has the core function of restricting the semantic possibilities (possible uses) of the word "Chaoten". As a single lexical unit the word "Chaoten" could also be interpreted as a reference to "harmless, confused people". So it is necessary to combine the word with another expression that has the required connotations.

Only if "chaotic people" are defined as "violent people" can the word "Chaoten" be used like a proper name for the demonstrators and may develop its function as the central organizing term of a complete system of meanings and connotations (in Foucault's words, a discourse). Once defined as "violent people" the demonstrators can semantically be attached to a discourse about criminality. The collocation "chaotics and criminals" opens up access to a wide range of words, phrases, definitions and connotations which all have a pejorative function in common. It also opens up access into the discourses of legal policy and the policy of law and order. It is important to remember that, as far as the linguistic analysis is concerned, the semantic strategies are not only based on explicitly expressed words or phrases, but also on insinuated epistemic contexts. My material contains examples of the attachment of the basic

word "*Chaoten*" to the discourse spheres of "para-military organizations", "civil war" and "terrorism". These links are not based on explicit collocations but on the textual context. The main function of fixed collocations is to define the rule-of-use of the linguistic sign being analyzed.

4. The aims of political discourse

Public speech within the political discourse has its own aims and ends. One of these aims can be the attempt to influence further acts of legislation. One of the means to achieve this aim can be the attempt to link together political and legal discourses. If expressions like "criminals" ("Kriminelle") are used to refer to demonstrators, this can (but does not necessarily have to) be part of a semantic strategy that has as its aims the field of legal policy. To refer to demonstrators as "criminals" not only stigmatizes these people, but also prepares and justifies legal measures against them. Thus, the speech event comprises the step from the interpretation of a political event to efforts in the policy of law. The act interpreting social reality is thus secondary to the political aims. This will be shown with some remarks from the West-German Chief Federal Prosecutor. He states that "among the 'heutigen Protest-Chaoten' (the chaotics protesting today) exist a few wandering groups which 'hook on' to peacefully planned demonstration with acts of violence" or, in another translation, "violently infest" peaceful demonstrations (in German: "sich gewalttätig einklinken"). He added that these groups of demonstrators could be compared to ("nahekommen") "criminal organizations" because of their organized cohesion. "Kriminelle Vereinigungen" (criminal organizations) is a legal term in West German criminal law. The German word "einklinken" (hook on) presupposes that there are two different objects that are connected. For example, the word is used to denote something to be hooked on to something else. The presupposition (or insinuation) of two different things is not accidental. It is the aim of the utterance to insinuate that the allegedly well-organized groups of people cannot be referred to as "demonstrators" but are people with aims and ends differing from those of normal demonstrators (or, differing from those, normal demonstrators — according to the law — should have).

The remark of the Federal Prosecutor about the groups of demonstrators being "similar" to "criminal organizations" can be interpreted as an attempt to insinuate that the behavior of those people cannot be described with words like "demonstration", or similar words for their

acts of civil disobedience (a concept that is unusual in West German public discourse), but has to be described with the terminology of criminal law. According to the West German Criminal Code, groups of persons cannot be prosecuted for belonging to "criminal organizations" if the "aim to commit criminal acts is secondary to the other aims of the group."

According to this law, it would not be possible to prosecute demonstrators for belonging to "criminal organizations" since their aim is to demonstrate against the nuclear power plants. If they commit criminal acts while demonstrating, this is secondary to their aim to demonstrate. If the Federal Prosecutor insinuates, by using the word "hook on" ("einklinken"), that demonstrators and "Protest-Chaoten" ("anarchists") are two different sorts of things, he is attempting to presuppose that, for some demonstrators at least, the aim of demonstrating is secondary to the aim of committing criminal acts. If this is the case, they can then be prosecuted for belonging to "criminal organizations". The semantic strategy is to introduce connotations into the political discourse which insinuate that demonstrators can be punished for belonging to "criminal organizations". This aim is not a legal aim (since prosecutors and judges have to interpret the existing law and should not be allowed to discuss changes in the law), but it is an aim within the discourse of legal policy. The Federal Prosecutor uttered his opinion as a politician, not as a civil servant.

5. Defining "violence"

A further example of semantic strategies is the semantic change of core concepts of criminal law concerning the so called criminal acts against public order. This semantic change can be found in the written judgments of the West German Federal Supreme Court concerning the concept of "Gewalt" (violence) (for an extended analysis, Busse 1991a; Busse 1991 b). In German Criminal Law the concept of violence is referred to in the paragraphs about "coercion" or "breach of peace", etc. The legal paragraph about "coercion" is applied to people who demonstrate against nuclear weapons and who participate in sit-ins in front of the gates of military bases.

In German the concept "Gewalt" can have three meanings: it can refer to the English word "force", the word "power" and to the word "violence". Some years ago, the term "Gewalt" was interpreted as "violence" so that the paragraph about "coercion" could not be applied to sit-ins. But in the meantime the Supreme Court has widened the sense of the term "Gewalt" step by step in a long series of judgments going away

from the meaning "violence" to the meaning "force" or "power". Nowadays a wide range of acts of civil disobedience can be criminalized as "acts of violence" and thus prosecuted as acts of "coercion". For example, a speech at a large demonstration explicitly calling for a peaceful sit-in can be prosecuted for being "Gewalt" ("violence") in the sense of the paragraph about "coercion", even if the speaker himself has not participated in the sit-in. The series of judgments shows a semantic strategy beginning to influence the public use and meaning of the term "violence".

6. The complex aims of political discourse

It is a special aspect of discourse strategies in politics that the intentions behind public utterances do not concern single, unilateral aims. In addition to the intention of expressing certain thoughts and communicating ideas, there can be very complex intentions to influence not only public opinion but also special discourses.

The political discourse about demonstrators being prosecuted for belonging to a criminal organization firstly aims at influencing public opinion about policy of law. Second, it aims at influencing the opinions of judges and courts. The legal discourse about legal terms such as "violence" aims, first, at influencing the courts and judges; second, it aims at influencing public opinion. Semantic strategies as a means of politics may be made effective by attaching special discourses (as in the case of legal discourse) to the public discourse and vice versa. The semantic or semiotic analysis of semantic strategies has to examine such ambiguous intentions in political discourse. The analysis of interference between different kinds of discourse (public and political; political and, for example, legal; legal and public, etc.) can be made into an important contribution to semantic analyses.

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