Beatrix Kreß (ed.)

Totalitarian Political Discourse?

Tolerance and Intolerance in Eastern
and East Central European Countries

Diachronic and Synchronic Aspects

Introduction

Beatrix Kreß

 "You haven't a real appreciation of Newspeak, Winston," he said almost sadly. "Even when you write it you're still thinking in Oldspeak…. In your heart you'd prefer to stick to Oldspeak, with all its vagueness and its useless shades of meaning. You don't grasp the beauty of the destruction of words. Do you know that Newspeak is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year?" (Orwell 1949: 45)

Orwell's notion of "Newspeak" has its equivalents in many languages, as it has been translated extensively, but in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc it had not only a reference in the real world, we can also find artistic synonyms. In his play "Vyrozumění" ("The Memorandum") Václav Havel even found two expressions to name the phenomenon of a language constructed along strictly scientific lines without the annoying ambiguity of natural languages: "Ptydepe" and "Chorukor".

This is not the only evidence of a well-known and already well-described fact, the existence of a phenomenon largely analogous to Orwells's Newspeak in the former communistic countries; analogous in its functioning as a certain political language that helps to persuade and spread an ideology, but mainly to conceal facts and establish a sphere of anxiety. However, the linguistic devices used by politicians of the regimes and countries in question differ from Orwell's Newspeak in certain aspects: they are rhetorically sophisticated, polysemy and ambiguity are sometimes not only accepted but even pushed, and although we can also find euphemisms like 1984's "ungood", we can also find a sharp polarization between good and bad (cf. Rathmayr 1995, Weiss 2003).

The different characteristics of Newspeak or totalitarian language in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc have been thoroughly described (for Russian, see e.g. Weiss 1986, 2003; for Polish, see e.g. Głowiński 1990; for Czech, see e.g. Čermák/Cvrček/Schmiedtová 2010). One might rightfully ask, why there should be any need for another publication about totalitarian language in Eastern Europe and whether there are any questions still unanswered. However, what this volume tries to bring together is a diachronic and a synchronic view and a look at certain spheres of communication. Most studies of the political discourse of the communistic regimes in Eastern Europe have a retrospective focus; studies dedicated to contemporary language are rare. They search for elements of Newspeak in the "new political speak" (cf. Rathmayr 1995, Gusejnov 2003). In this volume this is also one point of view (cf. Woldt, Kreß and, in the analogy between Lukašenko and Stalin, also Scharlaj), but the scope is wider: from classical genres of intolerant, i.e. totalitarian language in compari-

son to an "unsuspicious" – the philosophical – genre (Kuße) to the language of a certain medium (Hedin) or on a certain topic (Grigorieva), from a metalinguistic evaluation of language change by (Russian) linguistics (Warditz) to the analysis of semantic fields crucial to the totalitarian system – in Russian exemplified by the field of power and revolution (Dobrovol'skij/Pöppel), in Czech by the evocation of unity (*jednota*) (Gammelgaard). This is supplemented by the analysis of two – from a contemporary view – highly interesting discourses and their treatment in former totalitarian societies: the environmental discourse in Russia (Goletiani) and the discussion of gender and feminism by Czech politicians – and their partners (Borovanská).[1] The focus of all contributions is either on Russia, Belorussia or the Czech Republic/Czechoslovakia, which coincides with the personal interests of the authors, but which by no means should be taken as implying that Polish, Bulgarian etc. political language is of no scholarly interest.

The volume opens with a focus on totalitarian language in the narrow sense in contrast to seemingly non-totalitarian texts and times. Based on the assumption that totalitarian language is a certain form of persuasion, comparable to the language of advertising and commerce, *Holger Kuße* shows in his comparison between an almost "classical" totalitarian genre, the Moscow Trials (1937–1938), and a collection of philosophical texts from 1909–1910 (*Bexu*) that the transition from non-totalitarian forms of persuasion to a propagandistic manner of speaking is fluid. It is a question of intensity in evaluation, but also a question of contexts that might help to distinguish between a totalitarian and a non-totalitarian text. However, it can be stated that a seemingly non-totalitarian text cannot automatically be absolved of all suspicion of using totalitarian devices.

In her contribution on Czech parliamentary discourse *Claudia Woldt* takes a comparative perspective as well, but this time it is the diachronic view on political language in the communistic Czechoslovak parliament and in the Czech parliament after 1989. Although forms of intolerance can be observed in the language after 1989 as well, the characteristics differ: Whereas before 1989 the political enemy was somewhere else, beyond the (iron) curtain, after 1989 the number of addressees of political speeches in parliament increased, at least doubling. There is the political opponent in parliament, who is addressed, in a manner of speaking, in an intolerant way, but there is also the potential voter, so there is the danger of a loss of face and intolerance has to be kept in check.

A kind of résumé of the comparative and diachronic view is the contribution of *Vladislava Warditz*, who, using the perspectives of mostly Russian linguists on changes in the Russian language after 1985, works on a metalinguistic level

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1   The contributions of Claudia Woldt, Holger Kuße and Beatrix Kreß originated from the panel "Totalitarian political discourse – Tolerance and Intolerance" at the ICCEES-Meeting in Stockholm in July 2010. For publication in this volume, the papers were revised and slightly extended. All other contributions were written specially for this volume.

and from a metalinguistic point of view. Taking the dichotomy purism-vs.-pluralism she shows how it parallels the poles totalitarian-vs.-democratic/liberal. She describes changes in the linguistic description (and prescript), as there is a step from a dichotomy between standard vs. non-standard (analogous to totalitarian vs. anti-totalitarian) to the statement of polyphony in the Russian language, but on the other hand there is still an orientation towards a norm, though it is now described in different terms. Furthermore, a new language use is often exploited as truly anti-totalitarian, which might be considered as a new totalitarianism in linguistics.

From a diachronic point of view semantic changes in language are of special interest. In her analysis of code words in totalitarian discourse, *Karen Gammelgaard* considers the cognates, paraphrases, colligates, collocates, and semantic preferences of the Czech noun *jednota* in the period between 1948 and 1953. She traces the more frequent use of the word along with the growing maturity of the regime, but also the development of a new meaning, the absolute unity and agreement between the leadership and its subjects. It is interesting enough that in official discourse no paraphrasing words or phrases can be found, which is an indicator of the absence of a (democratic) negotiation of meaning, usually associated with the development of new meaning. This is true for the public sphere; the picture in private discourse remains unclear because of a lack of sources.

Dmitrij Dobrovol'skij and *Ludmila Pöppel* provide a second semantic analysis. By concentrating on an aspect in the semantic field of power, here: coming to power by certain activities related to some kind of political coup, they show that apparent synonyms in contemporary Russian like *революция* (revolution) and *переворот* (coup) are by no means equivalent, but differ with respect to certain semantic features and in the accompanying evaluation as well. Therefore the use of the one or the other can be utilized for political or even propagandistic purposes. From a diachronic point of view one can see how this semantic differentiation took place in the last hundred years as both expressions were used synonymously in connection with e.g. the February and October Revolutions. A second study concerns *восстание* (uprising) and *мятеж* (revolt). The authors show how these are differentiated from *революция* (revolution) and *переворот* (coup), but also semantic nuances that distinguish *восстание* and *мятеж* from a diachronic and a synchronic perspective.

The third section of this volume is dedicated to the interaction between political language and its presentation in the media. Using linguistic and semiotic tools, *Tora Hedin* analyzes how the daily newspaper *Rudé právo* presented such far-reaching historical events as the death of Stalin and Gottwald. Her examination of the newspaper's front pages from the establishment of the new regime in 1948 to the historical events in 1953 reveals some significant changes in media discourse: a more homogeneous layout is accompanied by blurring of genres

and the clear influence of Soviet media, not only in linguistic devices (e.g. Russian calques and loanwords) but in certain text types (e.g. the editorial), too.

In her contribution about media reporting of the South Ossetia war *Ioulia Grigorieva* develops an interlingual and intercultural perspective on evaluative expressions in press texts in Russian and German media discourse. Her focus is not only on lexical elements, but in particular on the speech acts of evaluating, along with particular rhetorical aspects. She points out certain parallels in the Russian and the German reports and commentaries, but there are some distinctive features, too, which throw a light on the evaluation of the whole conflict. One interesting example in this context is that some parts of German media discourse are focused on the values "honest – dishonest" whereas in Russian discourse it is the "brave – cowardly" opposition.

Based on the question of whether there are still elements of totalitarian language in apparently non-totalitarian regimes, *Beatrix Kreß* takes a closer look at the former Russian president Dmitrij Medvedev and in particular his self-presentation in his favorite medium, the internet. Whereas in his texts (blogs and video blogs) about the end of the Second World War and the Russian victory one may find some typical features of the "old" Newspeak of the Soviet regime – which is not surprising, given the topic – his very casual outward appearance in his video blog is startling. An open effort to present himself (and Russia) as clearly democratic and open-minded can be observed in Medvedev's web pages dedicated to Russia's young citizens.

A very broad view of media display is taken by *Marina Scharlaj* with her description of the Belorussian president Aleksander Lukašenko and his omnipresence in Belorussian everyday life. Analyzing the (self) presentation of Lukašenko, she shows its metaphorical impact: In a wide range of media forms – from pop songs to online games – which find themselves in a permanent state of reciprocal indications, the president is not only the Father (predictable in the totalitarian and autocratic paradigm), but also the Godfather and Pope in one person. However, the ironic or even sarcastic reactions, and the reinterpretations of this hyperbolic and exalting stylization in different branches of the media are taken into account as well.

The contributions in the last part of this volume consider phenomena that might at first sight seem rather peripheral, but which are closely and (more or less) explicitly linked with the totalitarian phenomenon. *Liana Goletiani* examines Russian environmental discourse in its diachronic development, but also in comparison to Western tendencies in speaking and writing about ecological topics. She points out that the environmental sphere and the way it is treated in discourse is to some extent a clear reaction to the Soviet regime and its handling of nature, including the resultant catastrophes, above all Chernobyl, but she also describes parallels with Western discourses as well as idiosyncrasies of Russian environmental thinking.

Sabine Borovanská gives an insight into gender discourse in Czech politics. Interestingly enough, Czech media discourse of the early 1990s represented feminism as an ideology not so different in kind to that of the repressive communist regime, so it is hardly astonishing that this topic is still a tricky subject. Using interviews in the Czech press, the author shows how female politicians try to cope with the fact that they feel oppressed and disadvantaged as a result of their gender, but know that the expression of any other feelings but humor would be perceived as lamentation. This leads to interesting coping strategies, which reveal a pressure to conformity – a typical sign of an intolerant, maybe even totalitarian context.

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