CONfines

Artículos

Discourse, Meanings and IR Studies: Taking the Rhetoric of "Axis of Evil" As a Case*

Liu Yongtao**

Using "speech act" theory as its starting point, the article ponders the sources of hostility and conflict in global politics, arguing that discourse as a social practice is an increasingly crucial but a more or less neglected source of (in)security culture, postuating that greater attention should be taken to it in international relations studies. The article states that the politics of (in)security, conventionally accepted as "objective" and "natural", are in fact a socially, politically and lexically (re)constructed and (re)interpreted by nation-States. Discourse and meanings, in turn, can help (re)produce the effects of hostility and conflict between Nation-States. This article illustrates the importance of designing a language policy in international relations by taking U.S. president George W. Bush's rhetoric of "axis of evil" as an example and thus revealing the extents of causal links between the improper use of language and the construction of antagonistic tensions between the U.S. and its lexically targeted counter-parts.

Con la teoría de los "actos de habla" como punto inicial, este artículo reconsidera las fuentes de la hostilidad y el conflicto en la política global, argumentando que el discurso como práctica social es una fuente cada vez más crucial pero más o menos descuidada de la cultura de la (in)seguridad y por lo tanto postula que debería prestársele mayor atención en los estudios de relaciones internacionales. El artículo afirma que las políticas de la (in)seguridad, convencionalmente aceptadas como "objetivas" y "naturales", son de hecho social, política y léxicamente (re)construidas y (re)interpretadas por los Estados-nación. A su vez, el discurso y los significados atribuidos pueden ayudar a (re)producir los efectos de hostilidades y conflictos entre los Estados-nación. Este artículo ilustra la importancia de diseñar una buena política lingüística para las relaciones internacionales, tomando la retórica del presidente George W. Bush sobre el "eje del Mal" como ejemplo y revelando así los vínculos causales entre el uso incorrecto del lenguaje y la construcción de tensiones antagonistas entre Estados Unidos y sus contrapartes señaladas por su discurso.

** Center for American Studies, Fudan University, China /ITESM. Campus Guadalajara, Mexico, *ytliu@fudan.ac.cn*

Language has long been understood ontologically as a device for human communications and as a mirror for objectively reflecting the external world. In "mainstream" International Relations (IR) theories, discourse or the language in use, like other culturally contained notions in social sciences, is treated as a less vital unit of political analysis. Indeed, if the purpose and function of language were used only as a tool for exchange and representation of "objective" meanings, IR students would not have taken much interest in discourse analysis, since that would be a chartered territory of social linguists and philosophers.

However, it has increasingly become a given assumption in many fields of social sciences that discourse and the meanings produced by it, have certain social features and power effects. Besides the function as a mirror and a tool for representation and communication, language can also be used instrumentally to perform various social acts and (re)construct social "realities". In fact, there has been in recent years an increasing awareness among IR students that language has played an indispensable and powerful role in world politics. An increasing number of works have been produced conceptually and empirically on this theme.[1] These scholarly efforts contribute to the continuity and expansion of a resurgence of a "sociological and cultural turn" in IR studies at the wake of the end of the Cold War.

Indeed, with communications, dialogues and diplomatic efforts advocating the tackling of conflicts and disputes as a major trend in world politics, evidence of use and abuse of language has become more prominent in the field of IR in the Post-Cold War era. One comes to realize gradually that culture can be both a source of conflicts or violence and a precondition of peace and stability. In the process of social and political

---

1 In recent years, there has been accumulated IR knowledge that has been produced in China from linguistic or discursive perspectives. For example, Ruan Jianping. (2003). "Huayu quan yu guoji zixu de jiangou". Discursive Power and Construction of International Order. *Xiandai guoji guanxi*. (*Contemporary International Relations*), No. 5; Dan Xinwu. (2004). "Zhongxi zhengzhi wenhua yu huayu tixi zhong de baquan-zhongxi baquan guan bijiao" (Political Cultures between China and the West and Hegemony in Discursive Structure-A Comparative Study of Hegemony in China and the West), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (*World Economy and Politics*), No.9; Zhen Hua. (2005). "Huayu fenxi yu guoji guanxi yanjiu-fuke de 'huayu guan'dui hou xiandai guoji guanxi lilun de yinxiang"(Discourse Analysis and IR Studies-Impacts of Foucault's View of Discourse on Postmodernist IR Theory), *Xiandai guoji guanxi* (*Contemporary International Relations*), No. 4;Hui Gengtian. (2006). "Goutong xingdong lilun yu guoji guanxi yanjiu"(Communicative Action Theory and IR Studies), *Waijiao Pinglun* (*Diplomatic Review*) No. 3; Sun Jisheng. (2006). "Guoji guanxi zhong de yanyu yu guize jiangou. Nigula aonufu de guize jiangou zhuyi"(Language in IR and Construction of Rules-A Study of Nicolas Onuf's Rule-Oriented Constructivism), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (*World Economy and Politics*), No.6; Yuan Zhengqing. (2006) "Jiaowang xingwei lilun yu guoji zhengzhi yanjiu. yi deguo guoji guanxi yanjiu wei zhongxin de yixiang yanjiu"(Communicative Action Theory and Studies of International Politic-A Survey Centering on German IR Studies), Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi (World Economy and Politics), No.9.

construction of such (in)security culture, the use and abuse of language, and the understanding and misunderstanding of the meanings produced by it, has played an increasingly crucial and critical role.[2] Therefore, it is imperative that proper concern and attention be taken regarding language and language (ab)use in IR.

Although there are divergent strands within this "linguistic turn" in IR studies, some fundamental claims are shared among them. First, IR are not only material, but also comprises countless acts of human language. Second, despite the existence of real events and objective reality in IR, the reality of IR is that it is understood mainly through systems of signs like language. The "reality" that is told and understood this way is no longer neutral but refined, cut and modified in the process of, say, its linguistic production. Third, people do IR studies mainly through means of using language as instrumental tools, methodologically including reading and interpreting different (inter)texts, and the use of lexicons to affix their research results as IR "knowledge". Fourth, all language performances are products within given contexts in which they are historically, socially and culturally conditioned, thus the "reality" or "knowledge" constructed by language in IR is arguably not only normative in its meanings, but subjective due to its constant reconstruction in time and space.[3]

As an integral component of culture, language not only represents meaning, but also produces meaning. In this sense, language is both a symbolic system and a form of social power. If IR is a discipline that takes interest in the subject of power, then language and its use should be brought back into the domain of IR studies. When discourse is introduced into IR studies, several crucial questions arise: how does a State develop its foreign and security policy game through discourse? How does one understand the meanings produced by discourse that can affect the interaction between States? And, how can enemies, hostilities, and risks be made and constructed in world politics through discursive means?

---

2 See Chilton, P. (1996). *Security Metaphors: cold war discourse from containment to common house.* New York: P. Lang. Ray T. Donahue and Michael H. Prosser. (1997). *DiplomaticDiscourse: international conflict at the United Nations. Addresses and analysis.* Conn: Anlex Pub Corp. Henrik Larsen. (1997). *Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis.* London: Routledge. Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson, and Raymond Duvall (eds.) (1999). *Cultures of Insecurity, States, Communities, and the Production of Danger.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Francois Debrix (2003). *Language, Agency, and Politics in Constructed World.* New York: M.E. Sharpe; Costas M. Constantinou: States of Political Discourse (2004). *Words, regimes, seditions.* London: Routledge; Lene Hansen (2006). *Security as Practice: discourse analysis and the Bosnian War.* London: Routledge; Michael C. Williams (2007). *Culture and Security: Symbolic power and the politics of international security.* London: Routledge, 2007.

3 In broad senses, critical theory, feminism, postmodernism/poststructuralism, social constructivism, and postcolonialism favor sociological and cultural approaches to IR studies, and thus share those fundamental claims.

To answer these questions, this article takes a social constructivist approach to the issue of discourse and the meanings produced by it in IR, arguing that discourse can be a form of (in)security practice and its social meanings are not naturally given but socially produced. One assumption here is that if discourse is a form of social practice and can produce meanings, it can also become a source that helps shape (in)security culture in world politics. In other words, a State's foreign and security policy discourse not only articulates certain ideas of that State's policy and strategy, but also creates social interactions in IR through conveying meanings to other States. Simultaneously, the (im)proper use of discourse may cause effects of either mutual understandings or antagonistic conflicts among States. The article attempts to transcend a conventional assumption that international (in)security derives from (un)balanced distribution of material capabilities among States by arguing that (in)security can also be produced by (im)proper use of language, and as a result designing good language in foreign policy is also crucial in IR.

This article falls into five parts. The first part gives a brief account of some philosophical resources on which the discourse as (in)security practice and the understanding of its meanings are based, with its focus mainly on the insights of "speech act" theory and poststructuralist theory on meanings. The second part explores discourse and meanings in IR, arguing that IR is not only an arena of physical competition among States, but also a place where States struggle for dominance of discursive power. In part three, the article conceptualizes critically drawing notions from the conception of "securitization" provided by the Copenhagen School on how the meanings of foreign and security discourse can be lexically constructed and interpreted in the context in which the effect of (in)security culture is produced, and how the process of language use itself is taken as an (in)security practice. The fourth part takes the U.S. president George W. Bush's rhetoric of "axis of evil" as an empirical case, crystallizing how improper use of language in foreign and security policy has led causally to bitter antagonistic tensions between the U.S. and its lexically targeted States. Concluding remarks comprises the final part of this article.

PHILOSOPHICAL INSIGHTS AS INTELLECTUAL RESOURCES

It has long been believed that language is an abstract system of signs. This understanding tends to see language as something ontologically static and neutral in nature, and thus takes neither adequate attention to its dynamic use nor the productive role it plays in social practice. According to conventional assumptions in traditional linguistics, social practice is particularly

conducted by physically "doing" or perpetrating deeds rather than by verbal "talking" or words.

However, language is not merely an abstract system of signs. It is also a crucial factor that can help constitute social acts or realities. Language in use or discourse is a social practice that produces effects of power in social relations. In fact, people participate in various kinds of social, political and cultural activities mainly through the use of language. In other words, people employ linguistic signs in a given historical, social and cultural context, in which the language in use not only conveys ideas of the language-user, but also generates social effects on the language-user and the targeted audiences in their social relations. It can be argued that language is not merely a device of human communication and a reflection of reality; it also functions as a catalyst on the minds and deeds of others. The social implications of language consist in its influence, persuasion and even alteration of others' ideas, beliefs, and behaviors. An important use of language is as significant social practice that produces effects of power in social relations. That is a crucial but unheeded aspect that is fundamentally different from traditional linguistic theories.

That said, it is imperative to take earnest concerns with use of language, which is no longer merely viewed as innocent and impartial in social life. One focus on it refers to how people do and even accomplish things by words, and how responses and effects are produced among the audiences who interpret the meanings of those words. A theory of "speech act ", advocated by English philosopher John L. Austin, is invoked here as a point of departure for these concerns on the ground that this theory expounds the idea that human beings do things with words.

According to the "speech act" theory, a particular use of language may involve different acts. The language in use not only illustrates the language user's acts, but also causes social effects of power on audiences. As a social practice, discourse can be employed to do either good or bad things. People may use language to influence, alter and even manipulate thoughts, behaviors and feelings of others, and to make "others believe or engage things against their own interests".[4] In that sense, the given discourses become a social practice of suppressing and dominating others, who are made victims of those discourses. The "speech act"theory provides a philosophical framework for the idea of discourse as social practice, though

---

4 Teun.A. Van Dijk.(2006). Discourse and manipulation. *Discourse and Society*, 17 (3), p. 360. As to Austin's "speech act" theory, see John L. Austin. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.

the theory itself also invites critiques and challenges. Still, the theoretical claim that people do things with words is both intellectually insightful and pragmatically meaningful. Unlike other social practices, discourse may not directly affect the structure and changes of the external world, but works "indirectly and psychologically".[5]

A related concern to the discourse as social practice is the issue of meaning. In both structural linguistics and poststructuralist philosophy, a shared view is that the meaning produced by linguistic signs is not naturally given or fixed; rather, it is the product of social customs and norms. The meaning that a word obtains lies in its difference from other words. That is to say, meanings exist in the relationship of differences, so called "the principle of differences". However, there is a fundamental disagreement between structuralism and poststructuralism as to whether the meaning remains stable after its existence. The former insists that as soon as the meaning of a word is produced, it is in a stable and unchangeable structure. In other words, the meaning of a sign thus produced has stability and fixation. The latter, though sharing with the former's view that meanings of a sign are not obtained by its relations to external reality but by internal relationship of the structure of different signs, does not share such a structuralist idea that meanings can be stable, fixed and complete as soon as they are socially given.

Then what makes the meaning of a sign change? There are divergent views about it even within poststructuralists themselves. Jacques Derrida, French philosopher, argues that the meanings of signs are always uncertain and unstable, and that words do not carry universal meanings, which are, on the contrary, taken as something that is subject to change. One can give multiple meanings to a sign through the device of deconstruction, a strategy of double reading of texts, which aims to unsettle the root of freezing or fixing meanings.[6]

To other poststructuralists, however, deconstructivism is an idealist "scholastic" effort, which relies naively and narrowly on the reading of symbolic signs or texts, refuses to accept methodology of empirical analysis, and as a result brings about "problems" to the social practice due to

---

5 Robin Tolmach Lakoff (2000). *The Language War: The politics of Meaning Making*. LA: The University of California, p.115.

6 Jacques Derrida. (1972). *Of Grammatology.* Trans. G. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p.50; Jacques Derrida. (1972). *Position*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 56-57. Also see Jim Powell. (1997). *Derrida.* London: Writers and Readers, Ltd.

its limiting the scope of pragmatic applications.[7] They favor neither structuralist ideas of fixation of meanings nor Derrida's poststructuralist view that meanings can be changed endlessly. Michel Foucault, French social thinker, argues that discourse can be regulated; and in the realm of power social relations, it can affect and create the object of knowledge, and determine what a "truth claim" is. Therefore, in social reality, meanings of a sign are not fluid all the time but can be controlled and even manipulated in the context of power social relations.

Social power determines what can be said, what cannot be said in a certain social and cultural context; it also regulates who can say things and when and where to say them. The speaker is always standing in a specific position, and is restrained by social relations of power which regulate and affect his/her discursive practice. A discourse under the social relations of power can help construct and maintain certain social order, which is regarded as one that is most suitable to power holder's interests, and silence and downplay other social orders that may threaten the power holders. Therefore, according to Foucault, there is a constitutive relationship between discourse as a form of knowledge and social power.[8]

Another French social thinker also observed meanings of signs through the lens of the social relations of power. Pierre Bourdieu pointed out that the feature of linguistic power couldn't be understood simply from the level of language itself but by putting it in the particular relationship between those who exert power and those who accept power.[9] In other words, the meaning created by symbolic power can only be represented in the process of social interactions. The power that can produce discourse is the one that can maintain or subvert social orders. Everyone produces discourse on a daily basis. But its importance and effects are of wide difference. It depends on who uses language. In both Foucault and Bourdieu's ideas on culture, struggling for dominance of discourse, and maintaining or subverting the meanings of signs, these are crucial aspects of social life. Those who control discourse control society.

Since discourse produces multiple meanings, a consensus is that people understand and, in most cases, deal with the world mainly through the

---

7 Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasiński. (2001). *Culture Studies and Discourse Analysis: A Dialogue on Language and Identity*. London: Sage Publications, 2001, p. 11.

8 Michel Foucault. (1995). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, p. 194.

9 Pierre Bourdieu. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. John Thompson (ed.) Trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p. 170.

means of words, and the knowledge produced and acquired in this way is not so much objective reflection of the real world as the result of discursive generalization and conceptualization of that world through the social relations of power. In other words, human knowledge is the social construction within a specific historical and cultural context. In this sense, the meanings of signs are obtained and generated in and through social interactions.

In short, based on the understanding of discourse as social practice, which draws the insight of "speech act" theory as its philosophical foundation, several claims can be made as follows. First, language is not merely a system of signs as a device for human communications or a mirror of social realities; it is also a crucial means by which the world is historically and socially (re)presented and (re)constructed. Things and events can be done and accomplished by words. The meaning of language derives from, and changes within, a specific social and cultural context. Second, discourse as social practice does not work alone or in isolation; it is closely related with other forms of social performances. Third, as a type of social practice, discourse or language in use is not value-free, but characteristic of ethical and normative intentions.

DISCOURSE AND MEANINGS IN IR STUDIES

In different disciplines of social sciences, discourse has different categories, like discourse of law, religious discourse, discourse of science and technology, medical discourse, and ethical discourse etc. In the discipline of IR, one often takes interest in political (including foreign policy) discourse. By political discourse, it may refer to the use of language pertaining to political topics and issues.[10] It can be argued that politics is always closely linked with the use of language, like political talks, speeches, debates, bargaining; laws, proclamations, Statements, treaties and other political documents. Political discourses often appear on newspapers, televisions, radios, and the Internet; they are also seen on various political arenas such as political campaigns, party rallies, popular demonstrations, political pamphlets, diplomatic negotiations and international agreements. Political discourses are usually involved directly with political topics and issues. Yet certain civil discourses indirectly associated with political issues can also be regarded as political discourse.[11]

---

10 Generally speaking, the terms of political language, political discourse, political speech, political rhetoric, and political propaganda are similar in their meanings, and can be used even interchangeably. This essay chooses the term of "political discourse" on the consideration that it is consistent with the theme under discussion, and that this term tends to be widely accepted and employed.

11 Christ'l De Landtsheer. (1998). "Introduction to the Study of Political Discourse,". In Ofer Feldman and Christ'l De Landtsheer (eds.) *Politically Speaking: A Worldwide Examination of Language Used in the Public Sphere*. Westpoint: Praeger, p. 5.

In IR, when certain language is in use, it expresses meanings on at least two levels. One is the superficial meaning that a word carries or the explicit meaning that is defined in dictionaries. Another is the deep meaning that a word carries or the implicit meaning behind that word. The superficial and hidden meanings of a word change with "the evolution of history and culture".[12] For example, the English word "crusade" originally conveys the meaning of Christian Europeans taking military actions to conquer the Holy land in the Middle Ages from Muslim societies. With the passage of time, the original meaning of this word fades away. After 9/11, however, when the U.S. government announced its "crusade" against Islamic terrorists on a global sphere, the word seemed to regain some religious tinge. The Bush administration expected that the word "crusade" could play a role in recalling American people's sentiments. But, it also helped American enemies, because the leaders of Al-Qaeda could also make use of the word to mobilize their forces to defend their "homes" and avenge the victims of the "crusaders".[13] Thus, the understanding of meanings involves the reading of its implicit as well as explicit senses.

Discourse is pragmatically used in real life. If it is correct to say that without discourse there is no world politics, and that one can hardly understand world politics without discourse, then it is necessary to do discourse analysis in IR. There are different approaches to understanding IR as a positivist approach that centers on "objective existence" of social world. Discourse analysis as a theory and methodology, in contrast, takes more attention to the issue as to how particular social events in IR are given meanings and (re)constructed and evolved as they are through the function of discourse. (Inter)texts are major objects of discourse analysis. The purpose of textual study is to "explore the facts that are described, recorded or documented by the text".[14] Since all texts are produced through certain positions and perspectives, different texts tell different social "realities".

---

12 Frank Costigliola. (2004). "Reading for Meaning: Theory, Language, and Metaphor". In Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (eds.). *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 292.

13 Ibid. For example again, as for the Cuban missile crisis during the Cold War, different countries had competing terms to label it. The United States called the incident as "Cuban missile crisis", while the Soviet Union termed it as "Caribbean crisis", still another term "October crisis" is used by the Cuban government. These different terms indicate that this crisis is "constructed by different narratives". See Jutta Weldes. (1999). "The Cultural Production of Crises: U.S. Identity and Missiles in Cuba", in Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson, and Raymond Duvall (eds.) *Cultures of Insecurity, States, Communities, and the Production of Danger*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 38-39.

14 Li Shaojun. (2006). Guoji guanxi yanjiu yu quanshixue fangfa. (International Studies and Methodology of Interpretation). *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (*World Economy and Politics*), No. 10, 2006, p. 5.

Discourse analysis warns that any single text is without meaning, it obtains its meaning only when it interacts with other texts and is put in a broad social and historical context in which those texts are produced, disseminated and consumed. For example, if one wants to understand the meaning of an event in world politics, he needs to put together divergent texts about the event (intertext), identify who is telling the story of the event (identity), recognize what perspectives that the story-teller is taking (world outlook or position), in what places (context) and who are the audiences (receivers). He needs to know not only what the story-teller says about the event (explicit meanings), but also what he does not say about it (implicit meanings).

Thus there is more than one form of reality in IR. While an objective existence of what really happens in a real world is out there, many (even most of) understand the reality mainly through different and competing "stories" retold by those who make use of language to represent the original one. The retold reality is no longer an innocent reflection of that original one, rather it is a "reality" that is refined, cut and modified by people, and thus is socially and lexically constructed.

For example, a speaker usually chooses proper words and refines them carefully to make them correspond with the speaker's identity, the context in which the speech is made, the formation of targeted audiences and the need of political agenda. In other words, there are differences between the objective reality and the "reality" articulated by the speaker, because the "reality" retold by carefully chosen words is bound to be different from the original which has been "refined", "cut" and even "reshaped" by the function of words, and in this sense, "discourse is replete with ethical factors". [15]

One major task of discourse analysis in IR is to explore the relationship between language use and social realities, and see how social relations of power work constitutively in it. For instance, people use languages on daily bases, but this does not mean that the languages they use have equal social effects or leverages. According to poststructuralism, whose discourse is more relevant usually depends on how closer the relationship of this discourse is to social power. Put it concretely, politicians usually have more opportunities and resources to get access to discourse, and their political status and social identities make their political discourses look more me-

---

15 Yuan Zhenqing. (2006). "jiaowang xingwei lilun yu guoji zhengzhi yanjiu. yi deguo guoji guanxi yanjiu wei zhongxin de yixiang kaocha" (Communicative Action Theory and International Politics Studies. A Survey Centering on German IR Studies). *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (*World Economy and Politics*), No. 9.

aningful and easier to expose to the public. So it can be argued that the process of giving meanings to certain events in IR can be competitive and is one form of social relations of power. Whether launching wars or engaging diplomatic talks or delivering political speeches, they all contain the acts of giving meanings to the events in concern.

Debating over meanings (whether to maintain them or subvert them) is a common phenomenon in social life. For example, after the "9.11", U.S. government, in the name of global "war on terror", launched a war in Iraq, and triggered heated debates among people around the world as well as within the United States over the nature of this war. The war makers claimed that it was part of a global war "against terrorism", a war of "liberating Iraq". War opponents called it an "aggressive war" and put it in the analogy to U.S. launching Vietnamese war in the 1960s.

To some extent, whether the meaning of a certain thing can be maintained or overthrown, strengthened or destroyed, it depends on how the society categorizes and selects its values. States that are in dominant positions in world politics have more opportunities and accesses to give meanings to certain events than states that are less powerful. But whether the given meanings are accepted by others, and how they may give rise to controversies and even resistances, all these will affect in turn the authority and leverage of the given meanings. The process of accepting a given meaning is a process of willing to subject to power influences; while challenging a given meaning implies the challenge of the power of the meaning-giver.

For instance, U.S. decision-makers of war in Iraq have made use of series of "war mobilization" discourse, and persuaded people to believe that the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq had an "evil" and "criminal" nature. In the U.S. and Britain, people began accepted this "war mobilization" discourse, and were subject to the war makers' power exertion. When this discourse confronted questions and critiques against evidences, it implies that the war makers' authority and credibility began to meet greater challenges and turn to be unpopular.

So if language and its use are critical in terms of their giving meanings to social "realities", what do all these mean to IR studies? Several claims can be made as follows. First, it has unsettled the roots of hegemonic discourse in IR "knowledge". All the production of IR knowledge is a social, historical and cultural process related to discursive practice. Although there is objective reality in IR, the reality narrated through language is one that is interpreted, modified and refined, and thus can no longer be totally objective. IR theories as a form of knowledge are the products of

given social and cultural contexts, and are restrained by the time and space in which theorists live. All IR theorizing is taken from certain perspectives and views, which observe the external world from certain angles at the cost of marginalizing and even ignoring other ones.

It is understandable that the world politics approached by one theorist from one perspective will be different from the one by another theorist from another perspective. That is the reason why there are divergent strands of theories and approaches in the discipline of IR. All theories, ethically and normatively conditioned, are served "for certain people and for certain purposes". So the total knowledge about world politics is historical knowledge.[16]

Now a related question is raised in IR studies. If realities in IR can be socially and linguistically constructed, then what is reliable knowledge in IR? Different theoretical schools may have different views on it. The school of "linguistic turn" would argue that it depends on whether given knowledge could contribute to progress and emancipation of human society, and that the significance of IR theories lies in its providing guidance and direction for social and political improvement. Illuminating the fact that the meaning of reality in IR has features of social and linguistic construction does not mean the denial of relative stability of international orders, nor international orders replete with chaos or lawlessness. Other schools of IR theories, like political realist ideology, take more attention to issues as to how to maintain status quo of power relations in world politics.

Through selective accounts of human history, these theories tend to observe with prudence the (re)arrangements and distributions of material capabilities in international systems in order to avoid repetition of tragedies among major powers in the past. It is a process of social learning. Political realists focus on their studies of cruel experiences recorded in human past, taking historical lessons of violence, conflicts and wars as mirrors in dealing with security dilemma in realpolitik, and thus cherish a state' s superb political wisdom, physical priority and military power of containment. Still, other theories take more concerns about promoting transformation of social and political orders, seeking ways of restructuring prevailing global power structures. They stress human equality, social justice and fairness, advocating both construction of security community and tolerance of differences of diversified cultures and political beliefs and values. If world

---

16 Ken Booth. (2005). "Beyond Critical Security Studies". In Ken Booth (ed.), *Critical Security Studies and World Politics.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, p. 262. Also see Robert W. Cox. (1981). Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10 (2).

politics aims at reaching consensus and common understandings, international system needs to transform into a system of communications and dialogic communities.

Second, in order to get closer to objective reality in IR, one needs to understand different accounts of the same reality. Who is telling the story of that "reality"? Whose discourse and texts? What is the social identity of the narrator? And what is the context in which the narrator speaks, from what perspectives and in what ways the story is unfolding? One needs to study not only what "realities" that the narrator has told, but also discern what "realities" that he/she has not told. In other words, one needs to be aware to what extents the "realities" that have been known in IR are close to truth, and what "realities" have been ignored and even erased intentionally. In this process, one can tell what the narrator's views on the reality and political intentions are, and how he/she engages in social activities through discourses. For instance, one may see how politicians and foreign policymakers make use of, and even manipulate, certain discourse to establish their political agendas and achieve certain foreign policy intentions and goals, including how they construct "threats" to national security and "diplomatic crisis". To some commentators, all insecurity is culturally produced. In other words, all insecurity is the product of social and political construction.[17]

Of course, as a form of social power, discourse alone does not accomplish a given foreign policy act. It has to perform along with other forms of social practice. Therefore, one needs to observe how discourse functions along with other forms of power (such as the compulsive, the institutional and the structural, etc.) in IR, and discover how they are mutually linked and interwoven. For example, in U.S. foreign policy, the Executive Branch headed by the President as part of the federal government, is often self-regarded as the chief narrator of external threats to U.S. national security. The President of the United States "controls the right of explaining the definition of crisis"; he prefers to take the initiative in the construction of certain crisis, rather than responds to the crisis constructed by others.[18] U.S. symbolic power and its military resources are mutually supportive and justifying: to engage a war needs discursive resources to justify the

17 Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson, and Raymond Duvall. (1999). "Introduction: Constructing Insecurity". In Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson, and Raymond Duvall (eds.) *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 1-33.

18 Amos Kiewe: "The Crisis Tool in American Political Discourse". In Ofer Feldman and Christ'l De Landtsheer (eds.): Politically Speaking: A Worldwide Examination of Language Used in the Public Sphere (Westpoint: Praeger, 1998), p. 80.

legitimacy and rationale of the war act, while discourse in turn needs military resources to support and prove it.

Third, IR is not only an arena in which states compete for distributions of physical capabilities, but also a place where states struggle for dominance of discursive power. Arguably, IR is fundamentally represented through means of language. Although international politics often witnesses wars and physical violence, it is more common that IR is constituted by language related events as such international negotiations, treaties, political statements, resolutions, policy speeches/debate, summit meetings, political pamphlets and public rallies. Besides, language can be used to help produce identity politics of Self and Others in IR, constructing sources of insecurity culture such as national security "threats" and "diplomatic crisis". A state responds to another state's foreign policy rhetoric as well as its deeds, because words themselves are also interpreted as part of the act. The shift of a state's foreign policy discourse may indicate the shift of its actual foreign policy practice.

Therefore a due attention to, and analysis of, discourse matters in IR studies. Language, not only an abstract system of signs but also a tool for social practice, should be taken as an independent unit of political analysis. Through empirical observations of language use in IR, one comes to be aware of the process of meaning production in which world politics is (re)constructed.

LEXICAL CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICS OF (IN)SECURITY

For a long time people have been making efforts to identify determinants of a State's foreign policy. Conventional IR theories would argue that a causal linkage exists between international system and a State's foreign policy behavior. Political realist ideology puts its focus on the objectiveness of external threats to national security, the distribution of physical capabilities among States, and the awareness of uncertain intentions and motives of other States. Material forces are highlighted to play important roles in either unsettling a prevailing power structure or maintaining a status-quo of that structure, or protecting one State from fears and dangers.

According to this ideology, culture-related elements such as language are minor phenomena that are secondary in IR studies. Even if language is taken into consideration, it is usually regarded as a tool in diplomatic negotiations, talks and mediations, and thus belongs to the domain of individual attributes or an abstract system of signs. As a result, the attention to discourse in IR studies has been marginalized and downplayed.

However, IR studies should not be confined in its interests merely in the account of physical aspects in IR. Despite the fact that IR is featured by the pursuit of national interests, mutual deterrence, military alliances, and balance-of-power games, it is also a place of struggling for dominance of ideas and discourse among States. To bring language back into the field of IR studies is to indicate that a State can do things by means of words in its foreign policy, and even construct selectively an international "reality" that may benefit its own national and security interests.

So it is imperative to reveal and expound the possible linkage between language in use and IR. In this aspect, the Copenhagen School in Europe has made intellectual contributions to associating the conception of securitization and the "speech act" theory, assuming that the articulation of security is a crucial form of security action. In a political community, States cultivate their mutual understandings and trusts through normative and discursive means, by which they reach their consensus of discussing their common external threats and taking collective measures to tackle them.[19] The feature of the securitization lies in its "discursive structure". In security discourse, certain things are socially, politically and lexically constructed and "dramatized" as "security problems".[20] In other words, security problems can be written or spoken rather than an objective reality. Something becomes securitized through the function of language.

Apparently, the study of security made by the Copenhagen School draws its intellectual insights from the "speech act" theory. The conception of 'securitization' relies on the core idea that speech is a form of human act. According to this School, the narration and description of security is a crucial aspect of politics of security. It is these narratives and descriptions that provide potential possibilities for policymakers to take succeeding foreign and security policy performances.

As the process of security narratives is mainly performed linguistically, the construction of security problems or threats can be one of a lexical nature. In other words, sources of security problems and dangers can be derived from, and constructed by, discursive accounts and interpretations rather than from real or objective conditions. Since "(in)security" is not necessarily an objective condition, security threats can be caused not only

---

19 Barry Buzan and Ole Waever. (2003) *Regions and Powers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 491.

20 Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, Jaap de Wilde. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, p. 26.

by the shift of distribution of external physical capabilities but also by the articulation of particular political discourses.

That said, the conception of 'securitization' is also influenced by the strategy of postmodernist "textual" analysis, that is, the construction of "security problems" is understood in texts rather than contexts. It can be argued that if discourse is a kind of social practice, the meaning of a particular foreign and security policy discourse is made sense of in a particular (in)security context, and the social effects caused by such discourse among States should also be taken into consideration. When policymakers articulate their national foreign and security policy ideas, they try not only to make their audiences understand them, but also to establish political and social identities between the States they represent and the States or other forms of actors involved. Therefore, the meaning of the foreign and security policy discourse is determined not merely unilaterally by the articulators or their purely physical acts, but also mutually by intersubjective acts of the articulators and the audiences in a specific context in which politics of (in)security cultures exists.

Therefore, language is always a "key and independent object of research" in the field of foreign and security policy.[21] By doing so, one is to transcend the conventional idea that the function of language is merely for communication, and to highlight its crucial function of describing, interpreting and constructing national threats and dangers. A State can establish and then operate its system of foreign policy discourse to construct security threats and dangers, incidents, and even diplomatic crisis for political purposes, including maintaining its own political identity and legitimizing its use of strategic resources or violent means to "fight against enemies".

To put it concretely, a State can manipulate political discourses technically to "demonize", "criminalize", "destroy" or even "eradicate" its antagonistic State. By taking advantage of discourses rather than traditional material forces, one State compels other States to do what they would otherwise would not. Thus, the (im)proper use of language is closely linked to the construction of politics of (in)security. In other words, language may be a type of source that creates cooperation or confrontations. Therefore, some security issues that seem "natural" and "objective" are actually the products of social, political and lexical construction.

---

21 Henrik Larsen. (2004). "Discourse analysis in the study of European foreign policy". En Ben Tonra and Thomas Christiansen (eds.) *Rethinking European Union Foreign Policy*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 64.

So the essence of international politics lies in not only competing for physical power and distribution of material capabilities, but also for the struggle to dominate discourse. In other words, States especially major States are always competing for the dominance of shaping and determining meanings and interpretations of facts and events in world politics. Some States take advantage of their discursive dominance to silence other voices and control the ways by which international affairs are told and interpreted, and by doing so to legitimize their foreign and security policy acts. In this process, the struggle for dominance of discourse matters in a State's foreign and security policymaking.

Then discourse as social practice has its ethical and normative implications in IR. Politics of (in)security, it can be contended, is related with the use and abuse of language. If foreign and security policy discourse can do things, a systematic design and implementation of a language policy and strategy constitute an integral part of a State's foreign and security policymaking. And it matters as to how to avoid improper use of language that may cause unwanted potential confrontations and conflicts between States.

MAKING ENEMIES: U.S. RHETORIC OF "AXIS OF EVIL"

On January 29, 2002, American president George W. Bush went to Capitol Hill to deliver his first State of the Union Address. The main content of the address is about the U.S.-led anti-terrorist war after 9/11. Even U.S. domestic issues were framed and interpreted within the context of the "war on terror". In that address, President Bush coined a term of "axis of evil". He asserted that there were some States backing terrorism and pursuing for weapons of mass destructions, and that especially North Korea, Iraq and Iran as well as their terrorist cliques constitute an "axis of evil" which are threatening peace and stability of the world.[22] Soon the rhetoric of "axis of evil" was officially introduced into the system of post-9/11 U.S. foreign policy discourse.

In order to extend the scope of the "war on terror" and launch a new era of global fighting against terrorism, the Bush administration deliberately designed the rhetoric of "axis of evil". It not only reflects the Bush

---

22 George W Bush Delivers State of the Union Address (January 29, 2002). See http://www.whitehouse. gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html. It is said that many people were surprised when they heard that the Bush Administration put Iran on the list of "axis of evil", and there was a serious debate over whether to withdraw Iran from the list. See Mel Gurtov. (2006). *Superpower on Crusade: The Bush Doctrine in US Foreign Policy.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, p. 146; Warren I. Cohen. (2005). *America's Failing Empire: U.S. Foreign Relations since the Cold War*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, p. 167.

administration's awareness of the complexities and difficulties of the global war on terrorism, but also heralds a signal of shifting U.S. national security strategy after 9/11. Despite seeking to avoid further violence by destroying preemptively enemies and rivals before they could obtain lethal weapons and means of launching attacks, the Bush administration employed the rhetoric of "axis of evil" and "did" following things.[23]

First, the rhetoric drew an exclusive boundary of binary images between an "evil world" and a "civilized world", and there was no room for a "gray zone" in between. Second, the rhetoric successfully allowed the U.S. to create new enemies in its extended scope of "war on terror". By doing so the U.S. could maintain its political identity as 'civilized' and its enemies as the "uncivilized" of the world. Third, the rhetoric helped "justify" and "legitimize" the U.S. government's acts of exerting physical power to tackle the "evil" States. U.S. presidents in modern eras have become increasingly aware that production of political identities of the 'Good'-and the 'Evil' in IR can help construct conflicting values between the U.S. and the States it does not like, and thus it is easier for the U.S. government to unify domestic public opinions and mobilize ready-for-war resources. It is believed by most American people that the 'evil' as God's archenemy must be confronted and eradicated.

However, the things that were done through discourse by the Bush administration faced challenges. First, there are doubts about whether the existence of an 'axis of evil' in world politics today is a reality. North Korea in Northeast Asia is culturally and ideologically distant from Iran and Iraq in Middle East, and has no direct link with them in this sense. Moreover, Iran and Iraq were mutually hostile and waged a cruel and tragic war each other for eight years in the 1980s.

The allegation of the two Arabian States' connection with terrorist Al-Qaeda was also under question. Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was a "secular" leader and imposed harsh rules and measures on religious issues at home, the harshness causing relationships between Iraq and terrorist Al-Qaeda to be "tense and antagonistic". Iran, labeled by the U.S. as a key supporter of Islamic terrorism, identifies the majority of its people as Shiites, who are fundamentally different from Taliban and Al-Qaeda whose members and followers are mainly Sunnites. So a linkage between Iran

---

23 Until the summer of 2002, President Bush had repeated the necessity of U.S. military preemptiveness in his series of speeches. Soon the doctrine of pre-emptive attack was officially written into U.S. National Security Strategic Report.

and Al-Qaeda is ethnically not quite "probable".[24] If there is some similarity among these three States —North Korea, Iran and Iraq— it is that they are all enlisted by the United States as 'States supporting terrorism', and they share strong anti-U.S. sentiments by complaining about its hegemonism in the world.

Second, although North Korea, Iran and Iraq are all "rogue" States in the eyes of the United States, they are not in serious opposition to U.S. appealing for a global war against terrorism. North Korean government issued an announcement of its anti-terrorist position in the wake of 9/11 and signed an international agreement of not supporting terrorism. In Iran, its president and many other groups of people also denounced the 9/11 attacks and expressed sympathy for the victims of American people. Moreover, the Iranian government unexpectedly backed U.S. military campaigns in Afghanistan and arrested some Al-Qaeda members and even authorized "American search-and-rescue operations on its soil".[25] Iraq was probably the only Muslim country that did not denounce the 9/11 attacks, but there was not clear evidence to show that Iraqi regime had direct contacts with terrorist Al-Qaeda. Third, in the name of crusading "evil" forces, the United States launched a war against Iraq as a sovereign State, and is ethically and morally unacceptable in the world.

Putting North Korea, Iran and Iraq together by coining the term of "axis of evil" has worsened the politics of insecurity in both Northeast Asia and Middle East, and dragged post-9/11 U.S. foreign and security policy into difficult positions in these two regions. In Northeast Asia, for instance, North Korea was implementing gradually the U.S.-North Korea Framework Agreement signed in 1994 and was expected to reduce and finally cease its nuclear weapon program. The shift of U.S. foreign policy discourse and practice towards North Korean during the Bush administration triggered further insecurity and instability on the Korean peninsula, which turns out to be one of the most difficult and dangerous issues in the first decade of the 21st century world politics.

In Middle East, Iraq's nuclear program had been severely damaged during the first Gulf War in 1991 and was under watchful eyes and close su-

---

24 John W. Dietrich (ed.) (2005). *The George W. Bush Foreign Policy Reader: Presidential Speeches with Commentary*. New York: M.E. Sharp, p. 46. Also see John Newhouse (2004). *Imperial America: The Bush Assault on the World Order*. New York: A Division of Random House, Inc., pp. 69-70.

25 John Newhouse. (2004). *Imperial America: The Bush Assault on the World Order.* New York: A Division of Random House, Inc., p. 4 .

pervisions of the United Nations. However, the Bush administration was determined to launch a military invasion of Iraq in 2003, causing untold numbers of people falling into the victims of the unwanted war and the occupation of the country. As to Iran, as mentioned above, shortly after 9/11 Iran did cooperate with U.S. military maneuvers in Afghanistan. But the rhetoric of "axis of evil" ruined the chance for further improvement of the bilateral relations between the two countries and in the end damaged Iran's domestic politics agenda as well.

Upon entering the 21st century, the whole world found itself in a scenario with relative peace and stability. The United States was still enjoying its status of sole superpower in a post-cold war era. Despite his alleged inexperience in international affairs, George W. Bush was easily elected as U.S. president in 2001 albeit with some controversy. However, in the time when Bush was re-elected in 2004, the whole world, the United States and Bush himself had changed fundamentally. The politics of (in)security, especially in Middle East and Northeast Asia, turned to be more fragile and risky. In the United States, due to neoconservative policies in launching wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq and hawkish positions towards North Korea nuclear issue, many American people felt again that they themselves, their families, and their country were in a less secured environment. Although the U.S. was still regarded as the most powerful in the world, it became increasingly aware that a superpower had both advantages of pursuing its own (inter)national interests and disadvantages of confronting constant challenges and risks. As to Bush himself, he began to identify himself as a "war time president" during the 2004 presidential campaign.

Apparently, by employing the rhetoric of "axis of evil" to extend the scope of "war on terror", the United States made new enemies and triggered its renewed hostilities and conflicts with the concerned States. Actually, when the United States put a lexical label on North Korea, Iran and Iraq, these States would interpret its meaning and respond to it negatively and operatively, for the rhetoric of "axis of evil" was understood as constituting part of American foreign and security policy ideology and practice after 9/11. The fact that the Bush administration later cast away the rhetoric from U.S. foreign and security policy discourse indicates that American government finally realized that such kind of the term had caused more troubles and dilemmas than security.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The article has explored the theme of discourse as social practice and discursive meaning in IR by selecting U.S. government's rhetoric of "axis of

evil" as an empirical case. It takes "speech act" theory as a point of departure, that is, the function of language is not merely as the instrument for human communication and exchange, or as the "mirror" that reflects objects and events, people use language to engage and accomplish social activities and to "do" various types of things.

"Linguistic turn" in IR studies, to some extent, compensates for the lack of adequate concerns with social relations of power in the "sociological turn" in current IR studies. By stressing social and linguistic construction of "realities" in IR, the discourse studies reveal how power relations functions in social processes. One recognizes through the study of the meanings of signs that discovery, accumulation, categorization, production and consumption of IR "knowledge" is mainly conducted by linguistic practice as an important aspect of human social activities. However, discursive practices are conducted not in a pure and naive environment, but closely related to social relations of power.

The study revealed in this article has provided an understanding of the relationship between discourse, meanings and IR as follows. First, by taking discourse as (in)security practice, it broadens the perspectives of explaining and interpreting sources of security threats and conflicts in IR studies. It transcends the conventional idea of taking narrowly physical forces as sources of security threats and conflicts.

The focus of attention to discursive practice in IR makes linguistic elements, which have long been marginalized and downplayed now become indispensable unit of political analysis in IR studies. Discourse is a powerful factor in IR, and discourse analysis is a crucial methodology in IR studies. Since language and IR are mutually relevant, then language should be taken as a necessary unit of analysis in IR studies. As both a system of signs and a form of social power, language not only expresses meanings, but creates meanings as well. Therefore, in understanding and realizing the role of language or discourse in IR, one cannot leave aside the exploration of meanings produced by linguistic signs.

Second, the article argues the position that States use language to conduct various kinds of foreign policy and security activities, and achieve their policy goals and strategies, among others, through discursive practice in IR. A particular foreign policy and security discourse can either produce effects of promoting security environment or become sources of creating culture of insecurity one way or another. A State may "defame", "destroy" and even "decapitate" linguistically its enemies or rivals, and, in discursive means, may force others to do things otherwise they are not

willing to do. It shows that politics of discourse performs social interaction in IR, and discourse as (in)security practice has characteristics of power.

Third, international politics is not only the field of competing for material power and interests among States, but also the site in which States struggle for dominance of controlling discourse and meanings. In IR, the given meaning of discourse is produced in a certain social and political context. It can be argued that there exists causal relationship between politics of discourse and hostilities and conflicts among States in IR. That is the reason why a State should be very much concerned with what another State especially it's rival or enemy has said, and responds to what that State has rhetorically articulated rather than what it has physically acted.

So designing good language policy or strategy is a crucial factor that may guarantee stability and harmony and avoid probable conflicts and violence in IR. The last but certainly not the least of conclusions is that, the study of IR is not merely the study of discursive practice and meanings of linguistic signs, but rather emphasis should be made that IR cannot be properly understood without a proper understanding of discourse and meanings created by linguistic signs.

Bibliography

Costas M. C. (2004). *States of Political Discourse: Words, regimes, seditions*. London: Routledge.

Campbell, D. (1992). *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Debrix, F. (2003). *Language, Agency, and Politics in Constructed World*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.

Chilton, P. (1996). *Security Metaphors: cold war discourse from containment to common house*. New York: P. Lang.

Chilton P. & C. Schäffner (eds.). (2002). *Politics as Text and Talk: Analytical Approaches to Political Discourse*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Bourdie, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power* (ed. John Thompson) (trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson). Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Collet, T. (2009). Civilization and civilized in post-9/11 US presidential speeches. *Discourse and Society*, 20 (4).

Dietrich, J. W. (ed.) (2005). *The George W. Bush Foreign Policy Reader: Presidential Speeches with Commentary*. New York: M.E. Sharp.

Donahue, R. T. & M. H. Prosser (1997). *Diplomatic Discourse: international conflict at the United Nations. Addresses and analysis*. Conn: Anlex Pub Corp.

Dunmire, P. L. (2009). '9/11 changed everything': an intertextual analysis of the Bush Doctrine. *Discourse and Society*, 20 (2).

Edkins, J. (1999). *Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bring the Political Back*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Fierke, K. M. & K. E. Jørgensen (eds.). (2001). *Constructing International Relations: The Next Generation.* London: M.E. Sharper.

Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.

George, J. (1994). *Discourses of Global Politics: A Critical (Re)Introduction to International Relations.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.

Hansen, L. (2006). S*ecurity as Practice: discourse analysis and the Bosnian War.* London: Routledge.

Jarvis, D.S.L. (2000). *International Relations and the Challenges of Postmodernist Defending the Discipline.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Larsen, H. (1997). *Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis.* London: Routledge.

Newhouse, J. (2004). *Imperial America: The Bush Assault on the World Order.* New York: A Division of Random House, Inc.

Onuf, N. (1989). *A World of Our Making.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Smith, S., K. Booth & M. Zalewski (eds.) (1996). *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weldes, J., M. Laffey, H. Gusterson & R. Duvall (eds.) (1999). *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities and the Production of Danger.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

M. C. Williams (2007). *Culture and Security: Symbolic power and the politics of international security.* London: Routledge.

CONfines

Artículos