Discourse, power and refugee policy

Parliament addresses on refugees and asylum from the perspective of methaphorology and Cultural Studies

Extended Abstract

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The paper analyses the use of metaphors in political speeches addressing the so-called "refugee crisis". The respective speeches were given in 2015 in the German parliament, the Bundestag, by members of the government and opposition parties. 26 speeches, held by chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), Volker Kauder (CDU), Siegmar Gabirel (SPD), Thomas Oppermann (SPD), Katrin Göring-Eckardt (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), Anton Hofreiter (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), Dietmar Bartsch (Die Linke), Katja Kipping (Die Linke) and Sarah Wagenknecht (Die Linke) were taken into account.

The paper starts with a brief summary of the discursive developments within the political and public debate on the topic of the increasing numbers of refugees arriving in Germany and its media reception. The key finding of this analysis is that the discourse itself became more and more self-referring and questions of rhetoric subtleties arose. In many respects the issue of responsibility came up, questioning the use of certain speech acts and rhetoric figures and their possible connection with a new discursive rawness but also with the rising number of hate-crimes committed against refugees and refugee accommodations. In this situation new rhetoric sensitivity seemed to be advised while at the same time populist movements in Germany (but also all across Europe) used such linguistic means to drive on an emotion-based schism. The success of those movements and/or parties led to an adaptation resp. creation of specific terms and phrasings which seemingly just described the situation in its "crisis-dimensions". But as we take a closer look on these expressions we find that there is a critical unexpressed meaning-constituting background responsible for the fact that the respective expressions are understood in a certain way. They have so to speak a metaphorical dimension and thus we consider them to actually be metaphors.

On this basis we took theoretical approaches into account that ranged from philosophical studies concerning metaphors and rhetoric itself (Hans Blumenberg and Andreas Hetzel), the sociological frame analysis (Erving Goffman), cultural studies (Stuart Hall) and discourse analysis (Jürgen Link) to neuro-linguistic frame analysis (Elisabeth Wehling). The benefit of bringing together these different approaches is that it allows us to analyse micro-dimensional phenomena (rhetorical figures and their use in political speeches) as well as their macro-dimensional embedding and effects.

From all the metaphors we could find in the respective speeches, we chose four for deeper examination: combating the causes of flight, the European community of shared values, securing the external borders and legislative package. We chose these four metaphors due to the frequency

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of their use in the speeches as well as their discursive coherence with the subject of the so-called "refugee crisis".

The claim for combating the causes of flight appeals to be very reasonable and agreeable. Moreover it expresses the determination and strength of the speaker. This superficial dimension of the metaphor however blocks out the many questions it leaves unanswered or even disguised, such as: Where exactly does this "combat" take place?

Does it focus on the actual conflict areas or is it about keeping refugee camps in other countries well enough equipped to stop people from leaving them and expanding their flight-route to "our" region?

Our analysis shows that there can be various motivations behind the claim for combatting the causes of flight and that there is no common understanding of that expression, even though it is used in almost every speech we examined.

This reveals a basic function of all these metaphors: they seemingly indicate an unequivocal subject while at the same time obscuring the concrete background, actions and/or consequences associated with them. The outcome can be very irritating as the example of the metaphor securing the external borders shows: one important subtext of this metaphor is a discourse about safety. Paradoxically the perspective switches very subtly from talking about help-seeking refugees and bringing them to safety to talking about violators of "our laws" and threats to "our society". This subtle but nonetheless significant change turns victims into perpetrators and declares safety as an exclusive right of certain people who themselves then are endangered of becoming victims of any claims for safety from "outside" this exclusive group of people. We conclude that basically the metaphor securing the external borders is strongly connected to a revenant discourse about safety which accompanies almost any migration-debate.

Our findings show that the systematic and profound analysis of the apparently trivial assumption that political rhetoric effects public opinion and vice versa, produces significant results in the field of an ethnology of contemporary "Western" national states and their interdependence, including their self-understanding as well as the complex dynamics of discourse and power within themselves and on a global scale. We conclude that the approach presented in our paper can get hold of dynamic socio-cultural negotiation processes in motion. With Blumenberg we argue that it is important to point to the metaphorical dimension of expressions used in political discourses, since these expressions can lose their metaphorical characteristics within the course of a discourse (i.e. by repetition) and could be taken for granted, leaving no scope for different expressions/metaphors triggering different frames and thus enabling different actions.

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