



Teaching Critical Thinking Against the Background of Basic Linguistic Research on the Lexis of Crisis Communication in Opinion-forming Mass Media

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Abstract

In the context of new global challenges in the form of various crises, whether the migration crisis (due to war, drought, etc.), climate or pandemic crises, the ability to think critically about issues is becoming more important than ever before. War not only affects life directly in the country where it is taking place, but also resonates in neighbouring and/or distant countries as well. War conflict causes human tragedies; fleeing to safety becomes a trigger for migration, which in turn provokes reactions in the place of their stay, thus influencing the mindset and behaviour of the countries that host migrants. It is worth examining these phenomena more closely, dispassionately and with emotional distance. The lexis of crisis communication is a resource worthy of investigation within English lexicology and stylistics and linguistics in general. It is a suitable opportunity to engage several aspects of linguistic training at once, namely literature search, anchoring of basic terminology within a systemic linguistics framework, and the establishment of research objectives with procedures with their subsequent application to the actual research process in the final qualifying bachelor thesis within the framework of bachelor study of Teaching English Language and Literature. By mastering essentials of academic research work, learners (students) are able to manage skills connected to data collection and their processing by means of classification, description, explanation, analysis, comparison, reasoning, and logical interpretation. As long as students can think and work autonomously and independently, they will be able to approach the problems they face in the future creatively and critically. This study highlights, among other things, the necessary shift from teacher-centred approaches to learner-centred activities on how this can be achieved. The study was supported by financial support from the Slovak grant Lexicogenetic Potential of Media Political Discourse on the Crisis VEGA 1/0748/21.

Keywords: *Lexis crisis communication, critical thinking, war lexis, mass media*

1. The Turn from Teacher-Centred Activities to Learner-Centred Approaches

The approach towards language teaching has been changing in the course of time. The English language has become a global lingua franca [1] and as such becomes enormously not only attractive for students to learn, but also it becomes an integral part of lifelong learning skills. The active, autonomous and self-confident student capable of critical thinking is the goal of the teacher's efforts. The turn of attention from a teacher to a learner in the form of shifting activities to the learner is an appropriate device to achieve a given goal, through which the learner can grow academically, cognitively, and personally as well. There are several methods how to achieve those intentions. Conceiving the final bachelor's thesis involves a combination of many appropriate methods to develop the aforementioned hard and soft skills. Supervising the student while writing her bachelor's thesis combines all the necessary methods.

2. Methods

Supervising any thesis inevitably combines various approaches, such as project-based learning linked to the problem-based learning together with a discovery-based learning at the same time [2]. It must be stressed that the bachelor's thesis is the first truly extensive academic text after writing their term papers, on which students have to work independently and over a long period of time. Time management, including consultation with a supervisor, must be a firm part of their work. And so setting objectives together with supervisor is usually the first step to success. It was decided to first observe theme-based articles in selected electronic British newspapers aiming at Russia's war against Ukraine, then organisational basis and methodological details of the overall research process [4]. For example, the principles of literature processing (correct forms of citation and paraphrasing), finding



and consulting the authoritative British dictionaries (OED, Cambridge, etc.), the discipline of two-phase data collection, etc. The role of a teacher in this learning process is to lead, explain, manage, and facilitate [5].

2.1 Research Aims and Definitions of Terms

At the very beginning of teacher-learner cooperation it is necessary to set objectives and then start a fact-finding mission in a library and to define terms and contextualize them within a general linguistic topic. That is why it was an absolute must to explain and define terms such as *lexis and lexis crisis communication*. *Lexis* according to Jesenská (2019) is the interrelated system of vocabulary in the form of words, expressions, and syntagmas. In other words, they constitute mutually well-related system of free (lexical and functional) morphemes and lexical units [6]. Genčiová (2020) explains *lexis crisis communication* as sharing information on any crisis situation (be it war, pandemic situation, migration waves or climate changes) among authorities, mass media or individual interlocutors [7]. For the context of the bachelor thesis, other significant terms had to be defined and explained as well. However, due to the limits of this paper, we refrain from presenting them in this study (synonymy, lexical stylistic devices – metaphor, irony, eu/dysphemism, etc., journalistic style, functional language style, etc.). The next objective was to find out frequency of ‘war’ lexis and analyse its synonyms and stylistic devices followed with findings word-formation processes which the lexeme ‘war’ undergoes (see part 3.).

2.2 Data Collection

The collection of relevant data was excerpted from the reliable British daily (see 2.3 below) in the first phase of research. *Sketch engine*, the specific research corpus tool for processing the data, was important in the second phase of research. All excerpted war-related articles from *the Guardian* (2.3) had to be inserted into the tool and processed in accordance with criteria that had already been predetermined (3.).

2.3 The Guardian

The British newspaper *Guardian* was chosen as a reliable and globally accessible source of data due to the other several significant criteria [3]. It is the British quality daily with a long historical tradition reporting on current issues such as migration crisis, pandemic situation of Covid-19 and/or ongoing Russia’s war. In aforementioned issues the daily has set up a separate column and/or section for quick accessibility to the readership [8]. The rubric *Ukraine invasion* has its firm place among other current headlines and sections. It also places a high value on the quality of work, verification of information and credible investigative reporting.

3. Research Description, Explanation and Comparison of Results

The time framework of observing and excerpting the data from *the Guardian* was limited to the two weeks with an interval of one year. The war-related articles were excerpted from Feb. 24th to March 2nd, 2022 and a year later, from Feb. 24th until March 2nd, 2023. The student’s aim was to map the synonyms of lexeme ‘war’ and to find out and analyse the collocations including the examined lexeme together with metaphors in selected articles and process it by the means of Sketch Engine. The amount of data was enormous in both years (see the table 1 and table 3 below).

<i>The Guardian</i>	No of articles	No of words in total	No of norm pages	Frequency of lexeme ‘war’	Other lexemes found in Sketch engine with high frequency functioning as synonyms to ‘war’
2022	358	297.061	1.005	884x	<i>Ukraine</i> 2.384x, <i>Russia</i> 2.063x, <i>Putin</i> 1.342x
2023	69	65.910	223	396x	<i>invasion</i> 146x, <i>conflict</i> 80x, <i>attack</i> 59x, <i>aggression</i> 32x
In total	427	362.971	1.228	1.280x	

Table 1 Quantitative data analysis in *the Guardian* (data taken from [8] and [3])

It turned out that we had to filter a lot. The analysis has shown that out of 67 results which thesaurus in Sketch engine provided as synonyms of ‘war’, only 13 were semantically related [3]. However, under other circumstances, findings would be different. In the context of Russia’s 2022 invasion to Ukraine synonyms to ‘war’ in the *Guardian* articles were *Ukraine* (attacked country), *Russia* (current aggressor), *Putin* (as the main person responsible for the invasion) – all three showing a high frequency of occurrence. Other synonymous expressions found by means of Sketch engine were:



aggression, assault, attack, conflict, crises, fighting, invasion, operation, offensive, strike [3]. After this we went on with seeking collocations with found synonyms. Thus expressions as *Putin's invasion / war / attack / operation* were found in articles (yr 2022). Concerning the lexical stylistic devices, metaphors, metonymy, irony and other were found as well (see table 2 below).

<i>The Guardian:</i> lexical stylistic devices	Dysphemism	Simile	Synecdoche (metonymy)	Metaphor
2022	'...Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine is an unprovoked outrage and a heinous violation of international law...'	'...of Blaming Nato and the EU for Putin's invasion of Ukraine is like blaming a child for a bully attacking him when the kid says he'd like to join his mates as a member of the local football club.'	(totum pro parte) 'This is Putin's war, not Russia's, but how can Russia speak? ' (pars pro toto) 'dipped their hands in the blood of Putin's war'	'Ukraine invasion: How Vladimir Putin built his career on waging war - The Russian president's career is steeped in blood '
2023	'António Guterres, said Russia's invasion one year ago had brought " living hell " to the Ukrainian people through "widespread death, destruction and displacement".'	'Even before Russia's full-scale invasion, I often heard people refer to Ukraine as Europe's back yard .'	'... the Kremlin wheeled out children ...'	'Putin's genocidal war is turning my country into a graveyard'

Table 2 Qualitative data analysis in *the Guardian* (data taken from [8] and [3])

There were cases when several devices were found in one sentence. For example, hyperbole, dysphemism, and metaphor: *Meanwhile, elsewhere on the political right, there is something even more awful: the meek apologism for Putin seen lately in the **endless excuses** [hyperbole] for the Ukraine invasion proffered by Nigel Farage - who **moronically** [dysphemism] reduces Ukraine's plight to the consequences of Nato and the EU **poking the Russian bear with a stick** [metaphor]' [3]. The bachelor student herself was capable to identify all those devices. In 2023 became metaphors a firm part of discourse as well, e.g. there is personification, metonymy (synecdoche), and irony included in the following sentence: *'At the climax of the pageantry in Moscow to mark the first anniversary of the start of Vladimir Putin's full-scale war in Ukraine, **the Kremlin wheeled out children** [personification, metonymy] from Mariupol in occupied south-east Ukraine to "**thank**" their invaders [irony]' [3] and [8]. In terms of quantitative analysis of the stylistic devices the most common was euphemism when 'war' was referred to as *antiterrorist operation, aggression, invasion, (military) operation*, etc.**

<i>The Guardian:</i> lexical stylistic devices	Yr 2022	Yr 2023
Euphemism	249	50
Metaphor	6	2
Dysphemism	4	2
Personification	2	2
Hyperbole	3	0
Synecdoche pars pro toto	3	0
Synecdoche totum pro parte	1	0
Rhetorical Question	1	0
Simile	1	1
Irony	1	0
Total	271	57

Table 3 Lexical stylistic devices (quantitative analysis) in *the Guardian* (data taken from [8] and [3])

Regarding the word-formation processes of 'war' lexeme, it turns out that derivation prevails (see table 4):

The Guardian: WFPs						
2022	'war' 888x	'anti-war' 33x	'post-war' 14x	'pro-war' 2x	'cyber-war' 2x	'pre-war' 1x
2023	'war' 396x	'anti-war' 13x	-	-	-	'pre-war' 4x

Table 4 Word-formation processes of 'war' (data taken from [8] and [3])

Other words including the morpheme 'war' were also found in the corpus in 2022 and in 2023, too. These were *warfare, warship(s), warplanes, warheads, warmonger, wartime, war-torn, war-winning*,



war-hit, *war-era*, and *warrior(s)* [3], [8]. Majority of those were coined by means of compounding when putting together two free morphemes (*wartime*, *warheads*, etc.). In total, for both years, 15 cases of derivation and 10 cases of compounding were found.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The paper describes the cooperation between the supervisor and her English language student based on mutual trust and open mindset towards new ideas when writing final BA thesis on *lexis of crisis communication in quality papers* against the background of basic linguistic research to make the student apply critical thinking on the current issue of Russia's invasion to Ukraine. This aim was to achieve by the following steps: setting objectives, finding appropriate primary and secondary literature, defining basic terms in the linguistic context, data collection from preselected newspaper (*The Guardian*), data processing (observation, excerpting, filtering, sorting, description, analysis, explanation, comparison, interpretation, taking a stance and expressing an opinion). Student's enthusiasm and academic input was enormous. She found out, that even though Great Britain does not share the common border with Ukraine, the first week of war, *The Guardian* published over 300 war-based articles and during the same time a year later nearly 70 articles, though there were other significant issues to be reported about (at least a year later). The BA student working on her bachelor thesis made very good use of this opportunity to learn skills she did not know before. She was able to set objectives, identify and observe chosen phenomena in selected newspaper, process collected data by means of quantitative and qualitative analysis when applying Sketch engine tool, classify, order, sort out, compare, etc. Her problem-solving skills got improved by using creativity, cognition, and academic approach. She has to be able manage her time and work. And though following her supervisor's advice step by step, it was not always properly understood. However, the point is not to write a flawless thesis, but to find her own path during the process of learning when keep on trying. Her statistics was too simplistic (see tables 1, 3, and 4) because she did not apply the frequency per million words – in that case the data from 2022 would be comparable to the date from 2023. Also her potential to recognize all word-formation processes and lexical stylistic devices was not adequate enough. In this she still had shortcomings. However, she worked hard indeed, to face all research challenges herself bravely and conscientiously. She became capable to read native speakers' newspapers on current issues, take a clear stance and form an opinion, come to conclusions, present and defend her thoughts and ideas in the academic English in front of university defense committee composed of her university teachers, and accept attitudes of others. After reading her supervisor's and opponent's reviews, she managed to prepare for her defense as well as possible. And she was successful, as the aim is not to be perfect, but to follow academic ethics and keep on effort. The decision to shift the focus and responsibility of the work from the teacher to the student was ultimately a good one for both parties involved.

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