

## (Concept of) Rectification of Names and Putin's War-time Euphemisms

\*Givi Amaglobeli

In the given paper, the notion of rectification of language in the Chinese philosophical tradition is discussed, which will be linked to the concept of political discourse in general, and specifically to the use of euphemisms in the language of politics. In addition, we will attempt to apply practical examples from the current Russian political discourse to the discussed concepts.

**Key words:** rectification, euphemism, Confucius, Putin, discourse, war

### **Political use of a formalized language**

In the Chinese tradition, the "correctness" of language has always been considered a source of moral authority, political legitimacy and stability. The (formalized) language of politics has always had significant instrumental loads, because its (language) control was the most suitable way of expressing and transmitting the orthodox state ideology. Beginning with ancient China, language has always played a crucial role in the **construction of a virtual symbolic order and a claimed socio-political reality**.

In the Chinese approach, the uniformity of language also determines the stability of reality, which is the ability of language to determine reality. In other words, if the speech is correct, the (social) reality will also be stable.

Confucius meant that names, and therefore language, embody norms and have a performative function: the art of governing the State is based on the axiomatic principle of giving correct names to things and acting accordingly. This is one of the fundamental ideas of his political theory: Confucius argued that a good government is obtained only when all the relative duties, defined by their names, are maintained. This is the reason why, when one of his disciples asked: 'What does it mean to govern?' Confucius gave a univocally clear answer: 'To govern means to rectify the names (*zhengzhi, zhengye* 政者, 正也).

A crucial political strategy is to lead by correct example. Confucius argued also that a ruler able to 'rectify names', could set a clear example for his subjects to follow. When the ruler's behavior was in line with the standards defined by his words, the ruler was thought to literally embody codes of proper social behavior.

During Mao Zedong's era the 'correct names' theory was fully implemented through the mechanism of vertical propaganda. A logocentric model of representation of a **claimed reality** was fully enforced through the definition of a common set of rules and conventions shared by the speaker and the listener. These rules were pervasive, to the point where they became encoded in the patterns, style, syntagmatic bonds and lexical items typical of formalized language. Speech followed the expressive devices of regulated discursive formations: inculcated from top-down it carried an intrinsic performative power. (M. Marinelli, 2009)

Classical Chinese philosophers were not interested in the semantics of language. They were more interested in the pragmatics of language. Rather than semantic truth (and falsity), they were interested in pragmatic plausibility and relevance — the degree to which discourse/reasoning is accepted by society.

According to classical Chinese philosophers, language establishes/determines the forms of acceptable behavior in society. Language regulates what and how to do things in a social context. Chinese philosophers of the classical period interpreted language as a means of guiding social behavior in order to achieve social harmony.

Which names (*ming*) should be used to define social interactions and how to regulate those interactions by their (names) means were central questions for Chinese philosophers of the classical period.

In the philosophy of language and the speech act theory, performative utterances are propositions that not only describe a given reality, but also change the social reality they describe.

Confucius insisted that the correct use of language is essential to the order and harmony of society, and that the conditions by which language is correctly used devolve upon determining how names (*ming*) designate objects, events, and actions. However, the correct use of names is not simply a matter of attaching labels to a preexisting domain of things independent of human affairs. That is, it is commonly recognized that Confucius viewed language as having not simply a descriptive function, but a fundamentally performative one as well. Attributing names to objects is not a matter of describing the world, but of influencing it in a way that causes certain modes of interaction and existence to be realized. Therefore, the ordering of society must begin with the ordering of names. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2016)

Xunzi attributes a significant source of disorder in society to a particular linguistic condition, which he associates with a series of flawed acts like “splitting names,” “making up new names,” and “throwing into disorder established names.” One’s ability to understand and negotiate reality (*shi* 實), according to the *Xunzi*, depends on the quality of our names or *ming* 名 (broadly construed to include categories and distinctions) made in language. Where numerous distinctions crowd around the same reality (be it an object, a relation, a character, a role, and so forth), the designation between *ming* 名 (names)

and *shi* 實 (reality) breaks down to result in chaos and confusion. (Language in Classical Chinese Philosophy, The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

It is worth noting that the Confucian (linguistic) strategy of rectification of names/concepts is still used by the Chinese ruling party. For instance, Social Sciences in China have undergone the process of political rectification under the rule of Xi Jinping. As part of China's control over the intelligentsia, there has been greater focus on molding the social sciences, including law, economics, political science, sociology and ethnic studies, to be politically correct. ...“They were worried that they had lost control over the narrative, and that there were too many critical voices emerging within university classrooms in China.”...“It's about discourse control. Only the things that the state wants discussed get discussed but it is not done in a very coercive manner; it is more encouraged through strategic funding projects and research in those areas,” Often a rectification takes out entire groups of people and sends them somewhere for re-education. There could be very harsh measures associated with rectification. (Y. Sharma. 2019)

As the above examples show, the language rectification strategy can be used by totalitarian regimes to repress individuals/groups with different/opposing views.

### **The use of euphemisms in political discourse as a form of "rectification".**

Below we will examine the use of euphemisms in political discourse. In our opinion, this is a kind of linguistic practice/strategy aimed at specific political-ideological tasks.

First of all, let us give a simple definition of the term euphemism. Euphemism – a mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing.

A clear example of the euphemisms usage in political discourse are the ones used in formal discourse by the current Russian government, specifically by its leader, Vladimir Putin. Below are some examples of euphemisms used in contemporary Russian political discourse:

- War - a special military operation
- Explosion - хлопок (minor blow)
- Airplane crash - unplanned emergency (hard) landing

- Economic recession - negative growth
- Fire – controlled spots of smoke
- Retreat/flight - radical reduction of military activities; goodwill gestures; regrouping.
- “de-Nazification” – de-Ukrainization
- Military Objects: - Civilian / infrastructure - indiscriminate and overwhelming artillery attacks
- Evacuation - Resettlement

What is interesting here, is that Putin often uses words to mean exactly the opposite of what they normally do, for “warmongers manipulate and use language as one of their weapons. Political battles are often fought over language rights. Language issues are often inseparable from other struggles”. (L. Barnes, 2008)

For example, he calls war (started by him) a "peacekeeping mission". According to his reasoning, he started the war to stop the war. He labels acts of war “peacekeeping duties.” He claims to be engaging in “denazification” of Ukraine while seeking to overthrow or even kill Ukraine’s Jewish president, who is the grandson of a Holocaust survivor. He claims that Ukraine is plotting to create nuclear weapons, while the greatest current threat of nuclear war appears to be Putin himself.

“When he says, ‘I want peace,’ this means, ‘I’m gathering my troops to kill you.’ If he says, ‘It’s not my troops,’ he means ‘It’s my troops and I’m gathering them.’ And if he says, ‘OK, I’m retreating,’ this means ‘I’m regrouping and gathering more troops to kill you.’”

The above examples automatically evoke literary (and not only) allusions from George Orwell’s political thought:

**“War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.”**

According to Orwell, totalitarian regimes perversely warp language to gain and retain political power. There is a clear connection between language and political power. Therefore, we can argue that language shapes politics, and conversely, politics determines the language used. Just as language can

illuminate thought and regenerate politics, so too language can be used to obscure thought and degenerate politics. "If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought."

Limit language and you limit thought, or so the theory goes. Thus, the Russian Parliament passed, and Putin has signed, a law that could result in criminal charges for using the Russian word for "war" to describe the Ukraine war.

The result is "doublethink," which occurs when a fractured mind simultaneously accepts two contradictory beliefs as true. The slogans "War is peace," "Freedom is slavery" and "Ignorance is strength" are paradigmatic examples - when one uses language to obscure meaning to manipulate others. (M. Satta, 2022)

If we take into account all the above-mentioned theoretical reasoning, we can assert that the current Russian government, through specific linguistic strategies (in particular: using euphemisms in formal discourse), is trying to create an alternative reality in which Russian ships are not sunk by Ukrainian missiles and Russian bases are blown up by accident. As a result of such a linguistic strategy, a significant part of the Russian population actually believes that the Russian army is carrying out a noble liberation mission in Ukraine, fighting against the Ukrainian Nazis, who are bombing and mass murdering their own civilians.

Words are known to influence how individuals and groups of individuals perceive reality. For example, since 2014, in the Western media, Russia's military aggression against Ukraine was described mainly in euphemistic language, where Russia was not described as a real aggressor and invader. Moreover, many Western political or business interest groups have accepted and put into practice Vladimir Putin's (political) barbarisms for their own short-term goals and profits.

Even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Western media and political spectrum avoided even naming Russia as a party to the conflict. Instead, they referred to the "Ukraine war", "Ukraine conflict", "Ukraine at war" or "the situation in Ukraine" - failing to acknowledge the very state responsible for unleashing death and destruction in the heart of Europe. Unfortunately, the war is still largely described through euphemisms. (R. Finnin, T. Grant, 2022)

The war in Ukraine, we are often told, is a “civil war” involving “rebels” fighting the central government in Kiev. Such restrictive, inaccurate terms greatly misrepresent the conflict, which has already killed over 6,500 and displaced at least 1.4m Ukrainians. Too often, the crisis is talked about as if it's entirely internal to Ukraine, a domestic affair presumably brought on by language politics, identity clashes and historical grievances.

Labelling such a crisis a “civil war” serves no purpose of diplomacy or journalistic balance. It is a failure to serve the public interest. The war needs to be described as it really is. It's absurd to call the Donetsk and Luhansk authorities “rebel” administrations when they would not have come into being and would not continue to function without Russian backing. (R. Finnin, T. Grant, 2015)

It is likely that this is the application of the framing technique by the current political administration of Russia. Framing is a psychological technique that can influence the perception of social phenomena, a political or social movement, or a leader. Research in political psychology has shown that framing works through making certain beliefs accessible in memory upon exposure to a particular frame. Once certain beliefs are activated through the mechanism of framing, they affect all the subsequent information processing.

In addition, we link the mentioned discursive strategy (use of euphemisms in political discourse) with the Chinese concept of "rectification of names" elaborated at the beginning of the text, suggesting that there is a specific relationship between these two. We can assume that the given example of the use of euphemistic language by the current Russian government represents an attempt to "construct the desired socio-political reality".

We use the following theoretical material to interpret the above-mentioned practical examples of linguistic manipulations used in today's Russian social reality.

In general, the function of lying is to obtain social/political benefits, which implies the ability to exploit others in conflict situations. Through lies, individuals avoid the truth, make it difficult to convey it, exaggerate certain facts and question others. In the context of social behavior, a distinction is made between pro- and anti-social lies. Therefore, not all lying is defined as an antisocial act. The purpose of

pro-social lies is not to harm other individuals in any way. (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015). Other types of lies can cause different levels of social losses. (Vrij, 2008). When lying, a liar misrepresents something (a fact) in order to gain some advantage that he/she would not gain otherwise. In this context, lying is defined as an ordinal function of language.

First of all, the phenomenon of lying is considered as an ordinary linguistic behavior that has a specific function for the speaking individual. Based on a number of empirical data, the mentioned function is considered to be a type of evolutionary strategy that gives a certain advantage to a (speaker) individual. Lying/deception can be used for both prosocial (strengthening social bonds) and antisocial purposes. Our interest here is the role of antisocial lies in political discourse in general.

In our opinion, the euphemistic language employed by the Putin regime is a prime example of anti-social lies.

According to this hypothesis, the speaker (transmitter of the signal) may gain a benefit by disrupting the normative relationship between the receiver of the signal and reality, while the receiver of the signal himself receives a significant loss as a result of such errors-distortions (Searcy and Nowicki, 2005). According to the same perspective, communication is defined as a kind of interaction within which the transmitted information produces functional results mainly for its transmitter: "Communication occurs when the transmitter of information affects the sense organs of the recipient of information in such a way that the behavior of the latter (receiver) changes in favor of the former." (Dawkins and Krebs, 1978, p. 283).

Also, within the context of communication, tactical lies are distinguished. This particular form of deceit, or tactical deception, is typically observed as the concealment of a thing, behavior or an emotion. A tactical deception is defined as "acts from the normal repertoire of [an] agent, deployed such that another individual is likely to misinterpret what the acts signify, to the advantage of the agent". In the case of tactical lying, false (warning) signals are used deceptively to obtain access to increased food supplies or reproductive opportunities (N. Oesch, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

The euphemistic language introduced by the Putin regime is a prime example of anti-social lies. This type of use of euphemistic language is a kind of attempt to "construct a desired socio-political reality". The current Russian government uses a specific euphemistic language to soften the perception of their aggressive actions and its severity in general public. Through specific linguistic strategies (in particular: using euphemisms in formal discourse), politicians try to create an alternative reality they want. The result of such discursive politics is "doublethink", which is formed in individuals when a divided consciousness simultaneously accepts two mutually exclusive notions as true.

## References

M. Marinelli. Names and Reality in Mao Zedong's Political Discourse on Intellectuals. 2009, Journal of Global Cultural Studies.

<http://journals.openedition.org/transtexts/268>

Logic and Language in Early Chinese Philosophy. First published Tue Sep 13, 2016; substantive revision Tue Nov 6, 2018. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chinese-logic-language/#ConfOrdeName>

Language in Classical Chinese Philosophy. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

<https://iep.utm.edu/home/about/>

Y. Sharma. Ideological „rectification“ hits social sciences research. 2019.

<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20191212160548739>

L. Barnes, 2008, Language, war and peace: An overview.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10228190308566188?journalCode=rlms20>

M. Satta, Putin's brazen manipulation of language is a perfect example of Orwellian doublespeak, 2022.

<https://theconversation.com/putins-brazen-manipulation-of-language-is-a-perfect-example-of-orwellian-doublespeak-178865>

R. Finin, T. Grant, West must beware the language of appeasement and see Russia's war on Ukraine for what it is. 2022.

<https://theconversation.com/west-must-beware-the-language-of-appeasement-and-see-russias-war-on-ukraine-for-what-it-is-180914>

R. Finnin, T. Grant. Don't call it a civil war – Ukraine's conflict is an act of Russian aggression. 2015.  
<https://theconversation.com/dont-call-it-a-civil-war-ukraines-conflict-is-an-act-of-russian-aggression-46280>

Levine, E. E., & Schweitzer, E. M. (2015). Prosocial lies: When deception breeds trust. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 126, 88-106.  
[https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1360&context=fnce\\_papers](https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1360&context=fnce_papers)

Vrij, A. (2008). *Detecting lies and deceit: Pitfalls and opportunities* (2nd ed.). New York: Wiley.  
Searcy and Nowicki, *The Evolution of Animal Communication: Reliability and Deception in Signaling Systems*. 2005.

Dawkins and Krebs, *Animal signals: mind-reading and manipulation*. 1978

N. Oesch, Deception as a Derived Function of Language, *Front. Psychol.*, 27 September 2016  
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01485/full>