

THE ARMENIAN CASE IN THE EYES OF THE LAST TWO US PRESIDENTS: A PRAGMALINGUISTIC STUDY

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The aim of the present article is to disclose some aspects of intentionality closely related to meaning in the US Presidents' speeches delivered to Armenian American citizens on the Remembrance Day of the Armenian Genocide. In the focus of the research are the speeches of Mr. George W. Bush and Mr. Barack Obama before and during presidency in the last one and a half decades.

The pragmalinguistic study of the research material has enabled us to bring out the discrepancy between the speeches made by both the presidents in the period of their pre- and post-presidential elections. It has been revealed that the speakers' communicative intentions before their elections and after are totally different, and this is reflected in the particular choice and arrangement of the linguistic units they use while describing and evaluating the horrendous genocidal events at the beginning of the 20th century.

Key words: Genocide, pragmalinguistic study, communicative intention, persuasion

Introduction

Although a hundred years have passed over the sufferings of the Armenian people caused by the genocidal events initiated by Turks at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, yet the Armenians of the world haven't stopped struggling for their rights demanding the official recognition and condemnation of the Armenian Genocide and making it a global issue. To make this come true, all the 193 legal governments of the world have to be guided by moral standards and admit the fact that a crime as destructive as a genocide has been committed against the Armenian nation and it should be condemned. It is true, of course, that more than 20 countries have officially reckoned and signed resolutions recognizing and condemning the reality of the Armenian Genocide. However, there are countries, among which is the United States of America, that still finds it difficult (the reasons might be either psychological, military or economic) to take appropriate steps for its recognition.

To have the USA among the countries accepting the truth of this genocide, the US President is expected to accept its reality and sign the resolution. And although Mr. Woodrow Wilson – the twenty eighth president of the USA, in fact, recognized the genocidal nature of the well-known events at the beginning of the 20th century and made great efforts to show both financial and moral support to the Armenian people made a target of extermination by the Turkish government,¹ the position of the last two US presidents concerning the question of the Armenian Genocide fluctuates between “yes” and “no” as reflected in their speeches addressed to the Armenian American community before and after their presidential elections.

Thus, the saddest truth is that though both of the US presidents of the last one and a half decades made constant promises to the Armenian Americans to recognize the Armenian Genocide as such and utter the word “*genocide*” in their speeches once elected as presidents, changed their attitude towards this global issue in their post-election period and it is

vividly reflected in their choice of the particular linguistic units used to describe this horrendous process of annihilation.

It has long and generally been established that the meaning of a particular linguistic expression is governed by rules of syntax, semantics and style, but the choice of that particular type is strongly affected by its pragmatic use. Pragmatics has made it possible to look at certain interesting and important issues in a new perspective laying emphasis on the users of the language, the links between text and context, interpretation of literal and implicit meanings, etc. The pragmalinguistic analysis, in general, is proved to be effective when applied to the study of the role of the threefold system “speaker-sign-listener” as basically important in providing scope for achieving various communicative intentions. The perception of the implicit meaning is largely promoted by the theory of speech acts and conversational implicature which are highly popular in linguistics in the recent decades.

In the present paper, an attempt is made to focus on the pragmalinguistic study of the pre-presidency and post-presidency speeches of both US presidents and reveal the intended meanings hidden in them. To be more precise, we consider to what extent the theory of pragmatics contributes to the perception and study of the communicative intentions in presidents’ speeches.

The following two passages present extracts from President G. Bush’s speeches delivered before his election for US Presidency and after. In a letter to his two Armenian friends at Harvard, Mr. Edgar Hagopian and Mr. Vasken Setrakian, the Texas Governor running for presidential elections wrote on February 19, 2000.²

... The Armenians were subjected to a genocidal campaign that defies comprehension and commands all decent people to remember and acknowledge the facts and lessons of an awful crime in a century of bloody crimes against humanity. If elected President, I would ensure that our nation properly recognizes the tragic suffering of the Armenian people.

(President Bush’s Letter, February 19, 2000)

... We all deeply regret the tragic suffering of the Armenian people that began in 1915 but this resolution is not the right response to these historic mass killings... Its passage would do great harm to our relations with a key ally in NATO and the global war on terror.

(President Bush’s Speech, October 10, 2007)

If we try to carry out a parallel study of the given passages from pragmalinguistic perspective trying to reveal the complex correlation between the word, the thing it denotes, the intention implied and the effect achieved, it will not be difficult to perceive the transformations in G. Bush’s speech after the presidential elections. For instance, the expression “*were subjected to a genocidal campaign*” in the first passage is replaced by “*the tragic suffering of the Armenian people*” in the second one. The use of the attributive word-combinations *tragic suffering, historic mass killings and awful crime* as substitutes for *genocidal campaign*, in fact, reflects the change in his political and moral attitude towards the issue of the Armenian Genocide. It is also reflected in his choice of the linguistic unit *decency* (*decent – right and suitable, respect,³ socially acceptable*), which he has attached so much importance to in his pre-election talk to Armenian Americans (*commands all decent people to remember and acknowledge the facts and lessons of an awful crime*

in a century of bloody crimes against humanity) and intentionally omitted in the above mentioned extract from his post-election talk. Instead of enhancing the idea of decency, so valuable from a moral point of view, he pushes forward the importance of harmless attitude towards their relations with Turkey – a key ally in NATO (would do great harm to our relations with a key ally in NATO and the global war on terror).

More or less the same picture can be observed in Mr. B. Obama's speech addressed to the Armenian American population. Two days before the California primary, the Illinois Senator Mr. B. Obama running for presidency declared:

... As a senator, I strongly support passage of the Armenian Genocide Resolution (H.Res.106 and S.Res.106), and as President I will recognize the Armenian Genocide. Genocide, sadly, persists to this day, and threatens our common security and common humanity... America deserves a leader who speaks truthfully about the Armenian Genocide and responds forcefully to all genocides. I intend to be that president.

(President Obama's Speech, 2008)

However, when Christy Parson, the Chicago Tribune journalist interviewed him in Ankara, Turkey on April 07, 2009 after Mr. B. Obama had already won the presidential elections and had become the US president, his answer to the interviewer's direct and clear cut question about his intention of recognizing the Armenian Genocide was:

What I want to do is not focus on my views right now but focus on the views of the Turkish and the Armenian people. If they can move forward and deal with a difficult and tragic history.....I know there are strong views in this chamber about the terrible events of 1915...

(President Obama's Interview, 2009)

The extract from Mr. B. Obama's pre-election speech with four distinct cases of the use of the term *genocide*, three of which appear in combination with the attributive use of *Armenian* clearly demonstrates his determination to recognize and condemn the Armenian Genocide which has been and still is a threat to *common security and common humanity*. Mr. B. Obama's firm belief and intention is rather openly and directly displayed in his speech which does sound honest. But, unfortunately, it only sounds so, for in the passage from his interview after the elections he starts maneuvering (not very successfully though) when he says: *if they can move forward and deal with a difficult and tragic history...* One wonders what he really means by **deal with** *a difficult and tragic history*. Does he really think it is possible to manage a history like that one, a history which is, unfortunately, more than tragic, a history of humiliation, robbery and genocide?

We believe Mr. President is well aware of the reality, both past and present. He must have read the articles and books describing and presenting the miserable state of the Armenian population in their centuries-old homeland under the Turkish yoke, including H. Morgenthau's books as of an eyewitness of the Armenian Genocide. After all what have dispositions of Armenia and Turkey on this question to do with his own attitude to it and his claim for presidency? An honest man is honest in all situations.

Thus, the interpretation of the so-called literal meaning is far from what the speaker intends

to convey. The intention of the “false pretense” of the recognition of the Armenian Genocide is not contained in the nominative meanings of the words, but arises from the pragmatic analysis of the extracts from the speeches of both presidents. In other words, the study at illocutionary and perlocutionary levels has made it possible to disclose their hidden intentions, namely to persuade the Armenian American community that they honestly share their concern for having the Armenian Genocide recognized and condemned internationally and accordingly get their votes and support in their presidential elections. Both G. Bush and B. Obama intend to ensure their electors that they are the right leaders who will always stand on the pedestal of justice and support morality. Being well-aware of the persuasive power of words and trying to achieve the intended impact on the listeners they made the appropriate choice of the linguistic units (*If elected president, I would ensure that our nation properly recognizes the tragic suffering of the Armenian people (G. Bush); as President I will recognize the Armenian Genocide (B. Obama)*). And as expected, the Armenian American society having struggled for the recognition of the Genocide for one hundred years was **positively affected** and impressed by the president’s words and consequently elected Mr. Obama as their president.⁵

The question I would like to raise here as an Armenian is: has the Harvard graduate president who bargained on the Armenian American votes during the California Primary before becoming president been afraid of the Turkish reaction or has he other reasons not to admit the Armenian Genocide? (*What I want to do is not focus on my views right now but focus on the views of the Turkish and the Armenian people*). That the recognition of the Armenian Genocide could create some discomfort in the relations of the USA with Turkey is clearly expressed and strongly reinforced in the speech of Robert Gates, the US Secretary of Defense:

70% of US air cargo destined for Iraq goes through Turkey, as does about one-third of the fuel used by the US military in Iraq. Access to airfields and to the roads and so on in Turkey would very much be put at risk if this resolution passes and Turkey reacts as strongly as we believe they will.

(Robert Gates, October 10, 2007)

Thus, it should be taken into consideration that 70 per cent of American military supplies into Iraq is maintained through Turkey’s Incirlik air base⁶ (Prof. Catherine Lutz, 2010) and the President has every reason to be afraid of the Turkish reaction.

Yet, we, Armenians, should bear in mind that as a senator Mr. Obama mentioned that he strongly supported the passage of the Armenian Genocide Resolution (H.Res.106 and S.Res.106), and as President he “*will recognize the Armenian Genocide*” (President Obama’s Speech 2008). Moreover, Mr. Obama’s statement “*I intend to be that president*” makes me believe that he is supposed to sign the Genocide Resolution, or else the Armenian Americans have to vote for another candidate for presidency, who, both in his speech and actions, will remain faithful to his political principles before and after presidency.

In a nutshell, it should be noted that the speeches of both presidents were not sincere because as Kent Bach⁷ claims “*an utterance can succeed as an act of communication yet communication is one thing, sincerity another.*” (Bach 2015:4). Both presidents gave speeches and made promises on the issue of the Armenian Genocide but neither of them was sincere enough to put his words into action. As Bach notes, “*Communicating is as it were just putting an attitude on the table; sincerity is actually possessing the attitude one is expressing.*” (Bach 2015:4).

Conclusion

To sum up, it should be noted that language is universal, the conditions of its use are innumerable and, in fact, the meaning of a linguistic expression is revealed in its use. In this respect, speech acts are of particular interest as the performance of a speech act, in particular that of an illocutionary act, is a matter of having a certain communicative intention in uttering certain words. One of the clearest expressions of the dependence of meaning on speaker's intentions is to be found in the speeches of the last two US presidents. Both presidents were able, due to the persuasive power of their speeches, to reach their political goals, namely to assure the Armenian American citizens that they would admit the fact of the Armenian Genocide, and as a result gained their votes during the elections. In the extracts from their speeches the intended meaning is not compatible with the literal meanings of the words and expressions that are used, i.e., there is no direct coincidence between sentence meaning and speaker meaning and the process of appropriate comprehension necessarily involves drawing particular inferences on the part of the listener to derive the speaker's intended meaning.

Thus, the textological analysis of various interpretations on the issue of the Armenian Genocide is an absolutely new and important perspective laying a special emphasis on the pragmalinguistic study of the language units in terms of speaker's/author's persuasive impact and the listener's/reader's appropriate perception.

NOTES

1. <<http://www.armenian-genocide.org/wilson.html>>
President Ronald Reagan also described the events as "genocide" in his speech on April 22, 1981. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian_Genocide_recognition>.
2. (2000) *Governor Bush's Letter*. Available at: <www.anca.org> [Accessed November 2012].
3. See Cf. Hornby A.S. *Oxford Advanced Dictionary of Current English*. Oxford: OUP. 1974, p. 223.
4. See Cf. *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 3-rd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 360.
5. (California votes for Mr. Obama in 2008/5 were as much as 8,274,473 and 7,854,285 in 2012 /6. It should be mentioned that the Armenian community of LA is one of the largest of the Armenian communities in the diaspora and counts as much as 214,618/7)
6. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/oct/10/usa.iraq1>>
7. <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/timestopics/topics_armeniangenocide.html>

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11. (2012) *Armenian Genocide Recognition*. Available at: <http://Armeniapedia.org/Armenian_Genocide_Recognition_html> [Accessed March 2012].
12. (2012) *Election Speeches and Remarks*. Available at: <www.presidency.ucsb.edu> [Accessed November 2014].
13. (2012) *President George W. Bush Addresses his Remarks*. Available at: <georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov> [Accessed November 2014].
14. (2015) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <JSTOR database> [Accessed January 2015].

**Հայկական հարցը Ամերիկայի վերջին երկու նախագահների տեսանկյուններից.
լեզվագործարանական քննություն**

Սույն հոդվածը նվիրված է Հայոց ցեղասպանության արժարժումների լեզվագործարանական յուրահատկությունների քննությանը: Հետազոտության կիզակետում են Ամերիկյան նախագահներ Ջ. Բուշի և Բ. Օբամայի նախընտրական և հետընտրական ելույթների տեքստարանական քննությունը: Հոդվածում փորձ է արվում մեկնողական մոտեցման շրջանակում տեքստային մեխանիզմների քննության ճանապարհով վեր հանել անհամապատասխանությունը երկու նախագահների նախընտրական և հետընտրական ելույթներում խոսողի համոզողական ներգործման և լսողի ընկալման դիտանկյուններից:

**Армянский вопрос с точки зрения последних двух президентов США:
прагмалингвистическое исследование**

Данная статья посвящена изучению прагмалингвистических особенностей интерпретации Геноцида армян. В центре исследования – текстологическое изучение пред и после выборных выступлений президентов США Дж. Буша и Б. Обамы. В статье выявляется неадекватность в обоих президентских выступлениях с помощью исследования текстовых механизмов в рамках интерпретационного подхода, с точки зрения персуазивного воздействия говорящего и адекватного восприятия слушателя.