

An Undesirable Circumstance

The Image of Bulgaria in International Media

Elena Tarasheva (Author)
Department of English Studies
New Bulgarian University
Sofia Bulgaria
etarasheva@nbu.bg

Abstract—The paper presents critical discourse analytical procedures applied to articles about Bulgaria published on the BBC website in the period 2008-11. It is part of a larger project attempting to elicit what image is created for Bulgaria by an international broadcaster such as the BBC.

Keywords—critical discourse analysis; transitivity; image; over-lexicalisation; typography

I. INTRODUCTION

Bulgaria became a member of the European Union (EU) in 2007. But ever since that time Bulgarians feel under a cloud – they are denied access to the Schengen zone, each year several sanctions are imposed on the country by EU organs, various countries maintain bans for Bulgarians to work in their countries, websites are launched inviting people to complain about Bulgarians etc. Another issue is that we seem to be thought of in tandem with our northern neighbor, Romania. Many of the shortcomings attributed to Bulgaria are commonly believed to be a reflex of its association with Romania. But where does this dislike for our country stem from? Could it be due to an image created by international media? I decided to apply discourse analytical procedures to find out.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) takes up the task of unraveling "opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" [1]. Media discourses have been shown to project attitudes to those portrayed which are not immediately visible to the naked eye, but which launch an image that can then be hardly ever challenged or disputed. The media image of a nation is important in view of the implosion of representation and reality [2] where representation becomes dominant as "simulacra" are substituted for a reality that has no foundation in experience.

The view of Language as a Social Semiotic [3] stipulates that linguistic expression reflects both the social and economic circumstances of the discourse, but also 'the meaning a culture assigns to itself and its components' [4]. As a result of that, studying the linguistic shape of the discourse people generate – its grammatical and lexical structure – throws light on

ideological premises which inform the discourse. Several studies in the transitivity of statements and the lexical choices made in specific discourses have led to unraveling ideological positions in the discourses. This is also what I intend to do here.

B. Why the BBC?

The BBC was selected as a medium which specializes in the coverage of world news. It is a public broadcaster committed to public service rather than commercial goals, according to the Royal Charter for the continuance of the BBC which currently regulates the functioning of the Corporation [5]. One of its proclaimed aims (4f) is: "Bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK". The Corporation claims objective reporting and, unlike other agencies, such as Reuters, has no focus on a specific field, such as economics.

The articles for this corpus were selected because of their topic - Bulgaria's bid to join the Schengen zone. Three were found altogether. They were published over a period of three years:

18 July 2008 "EU plans to block aid to Bulgaria" <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7512955.stm>

21 December 2010 "Romania and Bulgaria blocked from joining Schengen zone" <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-12055299>

9 June 2011 "Schengen zone: Delay for Bulgaria and Romania to join" <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13709768>

Expectations of bias on the part of the BBC are not high, because the UK is not part of the Schengen zone either and the nation is characterized by euro-skeptic attitudes rather than by sympathies for the EU. If at all, such can be expected about Bulgaria, whose citizens are restricted in their right to seek job opportunities in the UK.

III. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES

In terms of the linguistic parameters, Critical Discourse Analysis is based on Functional Linguistics where "experience is the reality we construe for ourselves by means of language" [6]. Thus features of syntax reveal what a writer makes of a social reality.

I focus mainly on three aspects of the discourse:

- Transitivity
- Over-lexicalization
- Terms of reference

In the course of the analysis other features crop up and are discussed accordingly, but the three major categories are defined and explicated below.

A. Transitivity

Transitivity is “the part of the grammar that constitutes a theory of how one happening may be related to another” [6]. Thus verbs which take objects (transitive) are contrasted with those that do not (intransitive), which, in turn, are semantically reinterpreted as process types: material, mental, verbal and relational - and ergative systems. Depending on the nature of the verbal process, the participants in those processes can be ACTOR, GOAL, SENSER, SAYER, CARRIER and VALUE on the part of the Subject. When presented as objects, affected participants can be OBJECT, FORCE, PATIENT, RESULT or BENEFICIARY.

By establishing in what syntactic positions ‘Bulgaria’ is included in the discourse, we can say how the texts construe the country and its international role. Additionally, the semantic function is indicative of the attitude taken by the author.

News is a discourse about a social practice which always takes place outside the context of that practice and within the context of another one. This process of including one social practice into another is a re-contextualization [7] or a sequence of communicative activities which make the social practices explicit to a greater or lesser degree. Social practices are things that people do, with greater or lesser degree of freedom, fixed by custom or prescription, or some mixture of these two. Thus international media re-contextualize an attitude to Bulgaria and disseminate it to the world – in ways that are too subtle to notice without conducting a scrupulous and principled study.

B. Over-lexicalisation

Fowler [4] defines over-lexicalization as an “excess of quasi-synonymous terms for entities and ideas that are a particular preoccupation or problem in the culture’s discourse.” As an example he gives various terms – often pejoratively used - of women or young people. Having established this semantic feature of media discourse, we can diagnose that there is a preoccupation with an issue in a culture if terms naming it recur in articles about it.

C. Terms of reference

Fowler [4] refers to this linguistic feature as *naming*. These are the linguistic phrases used to name an object. “Different styles of naming are conventionally associated with different social values in English, and in a systemic way; this is a highly charged sociolinguistic indicator, like the options between the second-person pronouns *tu* and *vous* in French, *du* and *Sie* in German.” He exemplifies the issue with calling Margaret Thatcher *Maggy* or *Mrs. Thatcher*. There is no absolute value

attributed to either: they show close familiarity or derogation depending on the concrete context of use. That is why linguistic features are not steadfast indicators by themselves; rather, having established such features, the researcher can begin their analysis in the concrete parameters of the context. Culture specifics should also be born in mind while interpreting the intent behind a choice of a term of reference. For example, shortened first names project foreign influence in Bulgarian, and most people would be embarrassed to have their shortened name used outside the close family and friend circle.

IV. RESULTS

The three articles quite exhaust what the BBC had to say on the issue of Bulgaria becoming a member of the Schengen zone over a period of three years. The attention given to the issue is, indeed, very little and the quantity would suggest that the BBC attaches little significance to it at all.

A. Transitivity

The first observation is that in all three articles ‘Bulgaria’ hardly ever features in subject positions and even less often – in the semantic role of agent of the action, or ACTOR. Whenever it does, the predicate is a modal expressing necessity or obligation - *need* or *have to*:

They said Bulgaria and Romania needed to make "irreversible progress" in the fight against corruption and organised crime.

Secondly, Bulgaria is subject to passive structures presenting the country as affected by the actions of the European Union or its organs:

Romania and Bulgaria blocked from joining Schengen zone (headline)

The rare occasions when Bulgaria is given the role of subject include cases when Bulgarian officials make statements and are quoted by the BBC, semantically characterised as SAYER:

Romania condemned the decision, while Bulgaria promised to "do its utmost" to remove doubts about its membership.

Bulgarian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Vessela Cherneva told AFP: "We are aware that the political situation in some EU member countries is complicated. For that reason, we will do our utmost to remove any doubts, including in the areas of the judicial system and society as a whole."

Bulgarian Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev dismissed the allegations

The first two examples additionally chastise Bulgaria by contrasting it with its neighbour Romania: while Romania takes a firm stand against Euro-criticism, Bulgaria gets away with murky claims; Romania reacts from its highest level (the President), while Bulgaria gets a spokes-person to voice the ambiguous position quoted.

Another issue is that the agencies chosen for reference by the BBC from Bulgaria are officials, representatives of the power bloc in the country. On one single occasion does the BBC evoke the opposition:

The opposition is preparing to table a motion of no confidence the day after the document is adopted in Brussels.

The document meant here is a scathing report of EU officials about Bulgaria criticising the government for bad management and poor practices.

The fleeting reference to opposition practices, however is isolated and there is no follow up to reveal its impact.

Further, the isolated cases when Bulgaria is bestowed agentive role also present negative action on the part of Bulgaria:

...the Bulgarian authorities have not fully explained or clarified the situation surrounding the irregularities and have not taken all necessary steps to correct them – which is a direct quotation of an anonymous EU official.

...Romania was marking time, while Bulgaria had gone backwards.

Both cases report very negative actions of the Bulgarian government – on the one hand, the government does not explain to the population what irregularities in the use of euro-funds have been found and what needs to improve, on the other, Bulgaria is accused of sliding backwards in its progress.

In the cases where Bulgaria is object, the verb is an observational one:

Experts from EU states who visited Romania and Bulgaria

Twice, however, the verb is strongly accusing:

France and Germany have decided to block Bulgaria and Romania from joining Europe's passport-free travel zone.

Overwhelmingly, Bulgaria occurs as a circumstance as can be seen in Table 1. Tesniere [9] juxtaposes **actant** and **circonstant**, and, as can be seen Bulgaria is never **actant** but always - **circumstant**.

TABLE I. PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

Nr	Main part	Prep. Phrase
1	fuelling EU concern about border security	in neighbouring Bulgaria and Romania
2	all adopted judicial reform measures	in Romania and Bulgaria
3	there are "powerful forces	in the Bulgarian government and/or other state institutions"
4	The European Commission is planning to block almost \$1bn in funds	for Bulgaria
5	The EU has already frozen hundreds of millions' worth of aid destined	for Bulgaria's roads and agriculture

Nr	Main part	Prep. Phrase
6	Costly projects to upgrade border controls are also under suspicion of fraud, raising fears	about Bulgaria's chances of joining the Schengen border-free area
7	there had also been a lack of progress	by Romania and Bulgaria

Example 7, however, is different – it introduces the doer of the action in a passive structure and thereby highlights the agency.

The events described are obviously negative in nature. However, the prepositional phrases in which the country name appears are also part of a grand mystification. The nominalization ‘delay’ hides the agency of who imposed the delay, in addition to the fact that the article reports that most EU members voted in favor of admitting Bulgaria and Romania, despite of which Bulgaria and Romania are still left outside the Schengen zone.

Nominalization is recognized as a transformation where “predicates are realized syntactically as nouns” [4]. “Nominalization is a radical syntactic transformation of a clause, which has extensive structural consequences, and offers substantial ideological opportunities.... Deleted in the nominal form are the participants (who did what to whom?), any indication of time – because there is no verb to be tensed – and any indication of modality – the writer’s views as the truth or the desirability of the proposition”.

Overall, Bulgaria is presented as a passive participant in EU activities. It is Subject to ascriptive claims about its state or to passive structures when Bulgaria is affected by the actions of others. The fact that Bulgaria is highlighted as the agent of regress or hiding negative facts from its people gives a particularly bad image to Bulgaria. And while the official authorities are accused of such wrongdoings, the opposition is only once and very vaguely mentioned at all. No positivity can be expected of such a presentation.

B) Over-lexicalisation

The first article contains repetitions of several **sums of money** Bulgaria lost, stands to lose, or has misused. The effect is to highlight the seriousness of the case:

The European Commission is planning to block almost \$1bn in funds for Bulgaria as a penalty for failing to tackle corruption and organised crime.

Almost \$400m (250 million euros) could be lost unless things improve by November.

Bulgaria, the EU's poorest country, stands to receive \$17bn in EU funds until 2011, and this is a serious warning that future funding is in jeopardy.

Earlier this week, Bulgarian newspapers published leaks of another report by the EU's anti-fraud office into suspected irregularities in the spending of some \$50m of farm funding.

As this is the first time Bulgaria is warned to observe EU rules, the BBC sees it fit to feature the magnitude of the losses Bulgaria stands to make if it does not respect EU guidance.

The second article over-lexicalizes two sets of expressions: the **reasons** why Bulgaria is denied access to the Schengen zone and the **effects** EU might suffer if Bulgaria and Romania join.

Reasons:

it was "premature" to let them join Schengen in March 2011

... and raised concerns about an "overly swift" adherence to the Schengen area.

needed to make "irreversible progress" in the fight against corruption and organised crime.

there had also been a lack of progress by Romania and Bulgaria in reforming their judiciary

Bulgaria had gone backwards

It should be obvious that "premature" and "overly swift" refer to untimely admission to the Schengen zone. However, the semantic structure of the phrases is undeniably ambiguous: 'premature' is the binary pair of the quality 'mature' [6] but why is it that Bulgaria is at the negative end, given that according to the same article most members voted that Bulgaria and Romania meet the technical criteria to join the Schengen zone, the article attempts no explanation. More interestingly, the quality "overly swift" presents a negative quality because of the intensifier 'overly', since the antonyms to *swift* are definitely negative: *delayed, slow, sluggish*. However, the statement does not make it clear whether 'swift admission' would be acceptable, or 'slow', or 'overly slow'. The discussion of the precise timing should be done in terms that are objective and unadorned by vague modification of the type which leaves the impression that something is wrong without explaining what.

The second set is a great deal less straight-forward. While 'irreversible progress' would imply that there was some progress, the second phrase denies progress through the negative determiner "a lack of". Yet another phrase alludes to the opposite of progress – going backwards. The conclusion should be that is EU officials know of progress in Bulgaria, they do not make it clear what it is in actual fact.

Effects:

"Grave consequences" (sub-head)

"grave consequences for the European Union's security"

The repetition here is literal from the phrase as coined in the original document and quoted in the report, but elevated to the level of subheading and additionally highlighted by the respective typographic conventions. The extended phrase explains that the consequences affect the security, which dramatizes the case further, without being specific what precisely the threat is. Moreover, according to Halliday and Methiessen's [6], 'grave' is not a taxonomic value, but a scalar presenting a scale of seriousness. Therefore, it cannot make a

claim what the consequences might be but can only qualify them.

Another fact worth mentioning is that most qualifications are given between inverted commas. Apart from using the quotation marks to denote a direct quotation, the typographic convention has been shown to achieve distance from the qualification [8]. On this occasion, the BBC quotes phrases from a Franco-German declaration and the words of a Bulgarian spokes person, which warrants the quotation marks. The Bulgarian spokesperson's claim to "do its utmost" is just as unspecific and elusive as the explanations what seems to be wrong with Bulgaria. A wish to hedge from such statements on the part of the BBC would be fully justified; moreover all three articles specify that the UK is not part of the Schengen zone, either.

Other BBC articles about Bulgaria detail findings which evoke criticism: 150 unresolved cases of mafia killings since 1989 and overwhelming corruption. In those articles there are no qualifications between inverted commas and the attributes used are of the taxonomic variety. Thus the articles for this corpus additionally raise the issue of the ambiguous nature of EU documents countered with equally unclear replies by those accused.

The last article sounds most arcane about the reasons why Bulgaria cannot be admitted to the Schengen zone. Several phrases name the negative effects of immigration, without making it clear that what is being feared is not immigration from Bulgaria and Romania to other EU countries, but the fact that Bulgaria does not provide sufficient border control to stop immigrants from Arab countries:

an influx of illegal migrants from North Africa led to a dispute over which country should handle them

The effect is reinforced by several sentences which can be classified as typical non-sequitur:

Only minimal border checks are carried out within Schengen, though the treaty requires the member states to apply uniform controls on the EU's external borders.

From further details the reader is confused whether the reason for blocking Bulgaria from the Schengen zone is the fact that it cannot stop the influx of immigrants from non European countries, or Bulgaria's inability to implement the required reforms:

Mr Leers said "it is imperative that all adopted judicial reform measures in Romania and Bulgaria are effective and irreversible".

Therefore, the cases of over-lexicalization show that in the first article the publisher of the text is pre-occupied with the amount of money to be lost by Bulgaria in connection with its failure to follow EU directives. In the second article the preoccupation is with the vague terms of accession to the Schengen zone, while in the third article the emphasis is on the influx of immigrants – not from Bulgaria, but from North Africa and the Arab world, siphoned through due to ineffective border control on the part of Bulgaria as an external border of the EU.

C) Terms of reference

Although Fowler uses the term 'naming', I prefer 'terms of reference', because 'naming' is often used to denote evoking entities through negative epithets, or bad names. What I explore is the technical means of referring to Bulgaria – be they negative, positive or neutral. The pronominal substitutions are omitted because they do not contribute to the researched subject.

The first observation should be that Bulgaria, more often than not occurs in the coordinated phrase 'Bulgaria and Romania'. When this is not the case, a clause is added comparing the two countries. The comparisons, as shown above, are entirely in favor of Romania. Notable, however, is the fact that the only signed article is written by a Romanian, Oana Lungescu, introduced as the BBC's European affairs correspondent. Thus the fears of many Bulgarians of being associated with Romania to their detriment appear fully justified.

Secondly, appositions attributed to the country name are:

Bulgaria and Romania - EU members since 2007
Bulgaria, the EU's poorest country.

Both present facts about the country. The first focuses on how late Bulgaria managed to gain admission to the European Union and has direct relation to the timing of its claim for the Schengen zone. The second proceeds from statistics and has relevance for the topic of losing access to EU funds. Neither projects positive attitude, both position Bulgaria negatively in the minds of the readers.

In the third place, other references leading back to Bulgaria include the phrase:

"make sure the generous support it receives from the EU actually reaches its citizens and is not siphoned off by corrupt officials, operating together with organized crime"

These are the qualifications in a report about Bulgaria, but the fact the BBC report chose to quote them is significant about the attitude to Bulgaria. And further:

"powerful forces in the Bulgarian government and/or other state institutions" who are not interested in punishing the corruption.

Even more significant is the qualification given to the report about Bulgaria, which will purportedly stop the subsidies from the EU and suspend the country from the Schengen zone:

The commission's nine-page report, due to be published next week, is possibly the most scathing ever written by the EU executive about a member state.

This qualification is strong enough about the image Bulgaria cuts – the country most severely criticized by the EU.

Further, we find references to specific Bulgarian people who are mentioned in the coverage of the country. They include the then Prime Minister Sergey Stanishev. Apart from being quoted to reject claims about Bulgaria, his government is called "beleaguered":

the troubles of Mr. Stanishev's beleaguered government

Their troubles, indeed, were many and the government failed to win re-election. But the BBC fails to draw a distinction between Mr. Stanishev's government and Bulgaria. Indeed, the other figure named as projecting the image of the country is the interior minister in the same government:

But earlier this year, the powerful interior minister was forced to step down after revelations he had secretly met two alleged crime bosses and some of his officials were leaking confidential information to mafia suspects.

There is no denying the facts – particularly the factual reports rather than the damaging but empty qualifications from the EU reports. However, no Bulgarian would wish to be associated with the crimes of one of the best hated governments of Bulgaria – the unprincipled tripartite coalition between communists, Turkish nationalists and royalists. The image created for Bulgaria is extremely negative – there is no respite for the damning facts in the BBC reports. That is why the BBC can be accused of being relentlessly critical of Bulgaria, without a ray of sympathy or positive counterbalance.

CONCLUSIONS

In effect, we see Bulgaria as a passive recipient of quite aggressive but inarticulately voiced measures from the EU. The BBC does not provide much reassurance about the reasonability of EU policies. Yet, the profile Bulgaria cuts is one of inefficiency, passivity and several negative features of government.

REFERENCES

- [1] R. Wodak "Critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis" in Verschueren et J, Ostman JO, Blommaert J, eds. Handbook of pragmatics Amsterdam: Benjamins 1999 .pp. 204-210.
- [2] J. Baudrillard, Simulacra and simulation, translated by S.F. Glaser Ann Arbor The University of Michigan Press. 1994.
- [3] M. A. K. Halliday Language as a social semiotic. Edward Arnold: 1978
- [4] R. Fowler, "Language in the News: Discourse and ideology in the press," Routledge: 1991
- [5] The BBC Royal Charter 2006. http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/about/how_we_govern/charter_and_agreement/index.shtml
- [6] M.A.K. Halliday and C. Matthiessen, construing Experience through meaning Continuum:1999.
- [7] T. van Leeuwen, "The analysis of social actors". in C.R. Caldas-Coulthard and M. Coulthard (eds) Texts and practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis, pp. 32–70. London: Routledge 1996.
- [8] T.A. van Dijk, Racism and the press. London: Routledge.1991.
- [9] L. Tesnière, Éléments de syntaxe structurale, Klincksieck, Paris 1959.