

PROXIMIZATION: A METHODOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF LEGITIMIZATION STRATEGIES IN THE POST-9/11 US POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Piotr Cap
University of Łódź

1. Introduction

Almost six years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, memories of these petrifying events keep prompting questions about how America, the American public and the American government have been changing ever since, how and what new social attitudes have been evolving and what policies, both home and abroad, have been put in place to handle the post-9/11 reality. One obvious issue that emerges involves the US government's response to the attacks. What form(s) did it take? Was it legitimate? What steps, political and non-political, military including, were taken to make it appear legitimate? Finally, what strategies were pursued to *communicate* this legitimacy to the American and the world audience?

It is primarily the last question that lies at the core of this paper and defines its goals. Before we turn to a specific description of these goals, let us note that when President George W. Bush declared the worldwide War on Terrorism on the evening of 9/11, the American people were hardly filled with a spirit of vengeance, rather, they would expect the government to seek a balanced solution to the terrorism problem as a whole (cf. Silberstein 2004). This was echoed in one of the first eyewitness accounts of the day which was broadcast on Aaron Brown's CNN night edition:

[...] Americans will persevere. And you know what? I don't think we'll stoop to the level of these zealot, terrorist pigs. And we won't kill children and mothers. But you know what? I just hope Bush will do whatever is necessary to get rid of this terrorist vermin [...]

These words do not seem to give license to wage a war, at least not of the kind that broke out almost immediately in Afghanistan and eighteen months later in Iraq. In fact, the social picture of the late 2001 America shows multiple attitudes of

reluctance to engage in a retaliatory combat operation, even if the 9/11 perpetrators were to constitute the primary target (cf. Hendrickson 2002). But, as we know now, two foreign wars did follow. And while the prompt bombing of Afghanistan was an operation that, given the logic of an attempt to destroy the Al-Qaeda network, could be (and indeed was) perceived as justifiable by both the American people and the majority of the world community, the invasion on Iraq in March 2003 needed a much stronger rationale. The lack of a clear enemy of the Osama-like kind, the wobbly evidence of the possession of WMD¹ by the Iraqi regime, the apparently unsubstantiated claims of the relationship between Saddam Hussein and the Al-Qaeda group, the conceivable human and financial costs of going to war, the anti-war attitudes in the academic elites—all these were serious adverse factors to be surmounted by the Bush administration in the service of making the military involvement in Iraq legitimate. My primary objective in this paper will thus be (a methodologically oriented) analysis of the rhetorical legitimization of the Iraqi intervention.

2. Assumptions, goals and methods

Arguably, the Bush administration did everything that they possibly could in order to communicate to the American and the world audience that the ongoing military operation in Iraq (apparently, with no end in sight) has been justified and that it has been pursued in the vital interest of all the peoples abhorring the vision of the 9/11 ever repeating again. A consistent pattern of rhetoric was developed in the aftermath of the WTC attacks, aiming to justify military retaliation on account of the apparent imminence of danger facing the American citizens. To this day, the most salient premise of the White House rhetoric has been the construal of the terrorist threat as existing within the US borders. Unlike in the past, when America was going to *foreign* wars in Korea, Vietnam or, recently, Kosovo, the war has come “home.”

One cannot possibly underestimate the role of the evidence brought by the 9/11 attacks in such an argument. Although following the WWII the legitimization of each consecutive military involvement has drawn on the simplistic dichotomy of “us and them,” the latter party usually symbolizing some kind of adversarial or plainly evil ideology that could potentially jeopardize the American system of beliefs and values or, in the long run, threaten the lives of the American people, it was not until after 2001 that the ideologies of evil and terror could be claimed, by analogy, to have already been operating within the American territory. Consider the following excerpt from President Bush’s 9/11 prime-time speech:

¹ Weapons of Mass Destruction.

[...] Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts, right here, on the American soil. [...] Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. [...] Immediately following the first attack, I implemented our government's response plans. I've directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and to bring them to justice. America has stood down enemies before, and will do so this time and in the future [...]

And now let us turn to a necessarily longer quotation which comes from the president's address at the American Enterprise Institute, delivered on February 26, 2003, the mere three weeks before the first US troops entered Iraq on March 19:

[...] We are facing a crucial period in the history of our nation, and of the civilized world. On a September morning, threats that had gathered for years, in secret and far away, led to murder in our country on a massive scale. As a result, we must look at security in a new way, because our country is a battlefield in the first war of the 21st century. [...] We learned a lesson: the dangers of our time must be confronted actively and forcefully, before we see them again in our skies and our cities. And we will not allow the flames of hatred and violence in the affairs of men. The world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values, because stable and free nations do not breed the ideologies of murder. [...] Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction are a direct threat to our people and to all free people. [...] My job is to protect the American people. When it comes to our security and freedom, we really don't need anybody's permission. [...] We've tried diplomacy for 12 years. It hasn't worked. Saddam Hussein hasn't disarmed, he's armed. Today the goal is to remove the Iraqi regime and to rid Iraq of weapons of mass destruction. [...] The liberation of millions is the fulfillment of America's founding promise. The objectives we've set in this war are worthy of America, worthy of all the acts of heroism and generosity that have come before [...]

At a glance, one can see a functional, goal-oriented continuum underlying the two performances. It is almost as if the AEI speech fulfils the promise made at the end of the 9/11 address, to trace down the perpetrators and thus prevent any future threats. Importantly, by referring to "our skies and our cities", as well as to the country being "a battlefield," Bush invokes an analogy between the 9/11 tragic events and the possibility of such events (or even more tragic, given the nuclear element at stake) occurring again should there be no action from the government on the current Iraqi issue. The justification for going to war in Iraq is thus built on the recurring closeness and imminence of danger facing the American people, which this time stems from the alleged possession of WMD by the Iraqi regime and, consequently, by easy access to these weapons for terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda.

In this paper I will give a brief and necessarily tentative pre-proposal for an analytic model to serve as a viable handle on the post-9/11 war-on-terror rhetoric, taking select instances of the language of the Iraq war as a case in point. Approaching the concept of legitimization in a broad theoretical sense of a combined enactment of the political speaker's right to be obeyed and of the linguistic justification of actions following this obedience, I will be particularly interested in *the model's capacity to explain*,

- i. how the described '9/11 analogy' and the concept of 'direct threat' have been used to legitimize the intervention in Iraq, and,
- ii. what steps have been taken to maintain the stance of legitimization after it became clear that the intelligence reports on the Iraqi possession of WMD failed.

Since, as can be seen from the two excerpts above, the White House pro-war rhetoric has been relying heavily on conceptualization of the terrorist (nuclear) threat in terms of a physically close phenomenon, I employ Chilton's original (2004) and Cap's revisited (2005, 2006) notion of *proximization* to serve as a controlling concept for defining the internal structure of the model, encapsulating all the legitimization related techniques. In short, thus, the advocated model recognizes legitimization (of the post-9/11 foreign military involvement) as a macro function of all the war-on-terror rhetoric. The function of legitimization is enacted by utilizing the persuasive power of proximization, a concept which assumes "putting the discourse addressee in the center of events narrated to him/her" (cf. Chilton 2004) and which will be described as such in more detail below. Finally, there are language constructs whose strategic combination triggers proximization. All the three levels, involving the constancy of the legitimizing function, the ongoing presence of proximization pattern serving legitimization, and the consistent use of language making up a given proximization aspect or strategy, must be seen to interrelate in their collective contribution to the aura of justification, in order for the proposed analytic model to prove theoretically sound.

3. Proximization

The concept of proximization has originally (cf. Chilton 2004) been developed to account for situations in which the speaker (political actor) seeks legitimization of his actions by alerting the addressee to the proximity or imminence of phenomena which can be a "threat" to the addressee (and the speaker, too) and thus require immediate reaction. In other words, the speaker solicits approval of his actions by placing the addressee close to the source of the threat or,

alternatively, by picturing the threat as close to the addressee. In Chilton's view, proximization has an intrinsically spatial character; the addressee is located in the "deictic center" of the event stage, from which setting he conceptualizes external phenomena in terms of physical distance holding between their source and his own location. If we apply the spatial aspect of proximization to account for the geopolitical context of the early stages of the Iraqi conflict, we observe that the Bush administration has been utilizing the notion of "direct threat," in order, first, to alert the addressee to the proximity of nuclear danger stemming from the alleged possession of WMD by the Iraqi regime, and second, to enhance the perception of this threat by building the analogy between the current situation and the events of 9/11 when the previously underestimated danger indeed materialized and physically affected the addressee.

The excerpt from the AEI speech features a large number of lexical realizations, or "triggers," of spatial proximization. They include such items and phrases as "secret and far away," "all free people," "stable and free nations," "Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction," "direct threat" and "flames". Some of them define the elements/members of the deictic center as such ("all free people"), while some others define entities which can potentially enter the deictic center and threaten or destroy its members ("Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction," "flames"). As the gap between the former and the latter is seemingly closing due to the presence of the 9/11 analogy, the spatial proximization appears successful in its role of soliciting legitimization for the government's reaction to the evolving threat.

However, in addition to Chilton's (2004) findings on the spatial character of proximization, I argue (cf. also Cap 2005, 2006) that a fully-fledged proximization theory, equipped with enough explanatory power to account for a variety of legitimization related phenomena, must necessarily involve two other dimensions, i.e. temporal and axiological. Temporal proximization involves construing the events which take place in the spatial dimension as momentous and historic and hence of central significance to the discourse addressee, as well as to the speaker. It needs to be made clear that, under the proposed triadic approach, the speaker belongs to the deictic center (the anchor point for all conceptualizations) no less than the addressee does; otherwise, it would be reasonably difficult to have both parties unanimously subscribe to the course of action which the speaker attempts to legitimize. This observation holds true for all the three aspects of proximization, spatial, temporal and axiological. Returning to the temporal aspect, I shall claim that its contribution to the integrated proximization model lies in its capacity to provide the analysis of actions or events bringing about physical consequences (in other words, space-dynamic events like the projected use of WMD by Saddam Hussein or the US intervention in Iraq seen as a preventative measure) with a retrospective insight which allows generation of inferences or analogies such as the 9/11 analogy mentioned before. Additionally, a combined spatial-temporal analysis

possesses a heuristic value; for instance, the study of the speaker's description and the addressee's construal of current events (viz. the American military involvement in Iraq) which are happening as a result of previous events (viz. the 9/11 "lesson") may lead to anticipation of recurrence of a similar cause-and-effect pattern in the future, with the same or a different adversary involved. Finally, in my approach there is the axiological aspect of proximization, too. It consists in the addressee's interpretation of alien ideological beliefs and values relative to the axiological background of the self, or the dominant ideology of the State, in our case the US. Here, the proximization of "threat" is neither a physical phenomenon (viz. the conceivably destructive consequences of the use of nuclear weapons by the Iraqi government) nor a temporal one (viz. the unfolding of the state of affairs which makes the above scenario possible); it rather involves the narrowing of the distance between two different and opposing ideologies whose clash could lead to the events defined within the other dimensions.

All in all, such a model of proximization, a much-revised version of Chilton's (2004) theory, consists in the speaker's continual endeavor to impose upon the addressee the conceptualization of the suggested adversary in terms of an entity which gradually enters, along the spatial, temporal and axiological lines, the addressee's "territory" in the deictic center. For an overview of the functioning of this integrated proximization strategy, let us consider the concept of the "ideologies of murder" invoked in the AEI address:

The world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values, because stable and free nations do not breed the ideologies of murder. [...]

The mention of the "ideologies of murder" serves to establish an axiological frame defining the essence of the dictatorship-based functioning of the states opposing the US ideology of "freedom," "democracy," etc. The components of this frame are the implicitly communicated antithetical concepts of "regime," "dictatorship" and "oppression" which, presumably, give rise to violence and terror as the natural outlets for the anger and frustration of the oppressed. The assumption behind the composition of the frame is that the ideologies of anger and hatred have a tendency to grow and expand (cf. the use of the word "breed") if nothing is done to prevent them from being enacted by authoritarian figures such as Saddam Hussein in Iraq. This is how the proximity of threat to free states like the US is communicated within the axiological dimension. In addition, it is implied, by the use of "the" [ideologies of murder] that places like world terrorism harbors where the anger and hatred turn into concrete plans to destroy the "enemy" (most of the countries of the "civilized" West and the US in particular) have indeed evolved worldwide and that it is their existence that constitutes the very physical threat (cf. the spatial aspect of proximization). Let us remember that immediately following the 9/11 attacks, Bush's explanation of the terrorists' "rationale" to strike has been

the envy of the American way of life, the freedoms guaranteed to citizens living in a state ruled by law:

[...] Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts, right here, on the American soil. [...] America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. [...] The world now knows the full evil and capability of international terrorism which menaces the whole of the democratic world. Blind in their hate and envy of our freedoms, the terrorists responsible have no sense of humanity, of mercy, of justice. [...]

Finally, the axiological and spatial proximization strategies salient in the application of the “ideologies of murder” catch-phrase get complemented within the temporal domain. One of the implicit messages in “the world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values, because stable and free nations do not breed the ideologies of murder” is that the growth of the ideology of destruction in terrorist groups can be traced back to the period of inaction following the initial recognition of the evolving threat. From the 9/11 viewpoint, the roots of international terrorism spreading from the Middle East region can be attributed to the US being previously too soft on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan or the UN being unable to properly execute its 1991 resolution on the disarmament of Iraq. As usual in the time of national catastrophe, the leader of the state involved is expected to admit at least *some* degree of blame on the part of his own government (or on behalf of the preceding governments) and this is exactly what can be found in Bush’s tacit assumption of temporal perspective on the evolution of antagonistic beliefs and values.

4. Conditions for operation of the Spatial-Temporal-Axiological model of ‘legitimization via proximization’

Let us recap the findings so far. Under the proposed model, legitimization is seen as the principal goal of the political speaker seeking justification and support of actions which the speaker manifestly intends to perform in the vital interest of the addressee (cf. pursuit of the “war-on-terror”). While not detracting from the importance of factors related directly to the persona of the speaker such as charismatic leadership projection or positive self-presentation, the major factor affecting the success or failure of legitimization is the speaker’s ability to follow a consistent, tripartite proximization strategy, involving space-, time- and axiology-based conceptual shift of alien and normally antagonistic entity onto the addressee’s own mental and physical territory in the deictic center, from which both the addressee and the speaker view the external events. As has been seen from

the brief overviews of the concepts of “9/11 analogy” and “ideologies of murder”, the STA proximization *always* involves functional interaction within or between its bottom-level language constructs. In other words, a phrase such as “ideologies of murder,” carrying primarily a heavy axiological load, will *never* be conceptualized in isolation from the spatial and/or temporal aspect of the notion it addresses. The latter aspects may be seen to exist within the “anchor” phrase itself,² but they can also be found operating in the adjacent phrases, whether overtly or by implication (consider “free nations,” explicit reading vs “oppressed nations,” implicit or “follow-up” reading; “do not breed,” explicit reading vs “do breed,” implicit or “follow-up” reading).

The existence of functional interaction between the language realizations of the three aspects of proximization is the first of the two necessary conditions for the operation of the STA-based model of legitimization, which, given the crucial role of the integrated proximization strategy in producing legitimization, can simply be referred to as *the STA model*, capturing thus both the global legitimization effect and the very internal structure of proximization triggering this effect. The second condition is more complex and can be summarized as follows:

If, over a period of time, a text involving proximization is followed by another proximization-driven text, produced by the same political speaker, in relation to the same issue and with the same overall goal but against so different a contextual background that it has affected the selection of bottom-level lexical items to the extent that the new text displays a considerable lexical divergence from the old or “previous” one, then any ensuing decrease/increase in manifestation of one type of proximization must mean, respectively, an increased/decreased salience of another type.

This means that, if we take the WMD threat, aggravated by the operation of the “9/11 analogy,” to constitute a major premise in the US pro-war stance in the early stages of the Iraqi intervention, the loss of this premise in the later phase manifestly produces a need for rhetorical compensation from another type of proximization. Since the spatial aspect of proximization lost its salience after the intelligence failure became evident, the ensuing legitimization pattern had to draw much more heavily on another aspect, in fact, the axiological one. Consider the following excerpt from President Bush’s speech given at the Whitehall Palace in London on November 19, 2003:

[...] By advancing freedom in the greater Middle East, we help end a cycle of dictatorship and radicalism that brings millions of people to misery and brings danger to our own people. By struggling for justice in Iraq, Burma, in Sudan, and in

² That is, a phrase from which analysis of a given, most salient aspect of proximization (here: axiological) starts.

Zimbabwe, we give hope to suffering people and improve the chances for stability and progress. [...] Had we failed to act, the dictator's programs for weapons of mass destruction would continue to this day. Had we failed to act, Iraq's torture chambers would still be filled with victims, terrified and innocent. The killing fields of Iraq—where hundreds of thousands of men and women and children vanished into the sands—would still be known only to the killers. For all who love freedom and peace, the world without Saddam Hussein's regime is a better and safer place. [...]

Apparently, with the cornerstone of the spatial proximization strategy missing, Bush extends the scope of the pro-war rhetoric to cover a broader geopolitical spectrum. There is an extended representation of countries to be construed collectively as harbors of values endangering the axiological backbone of the US audience and the majority of the world audience. The language used draws on the increasingly drastic imagery ("torture chambers," "killing fields"), seeking a natural common ground for rejection of the alien ideologies. Legitimization of the ongoing military presence in Iraq is thus claimed in the following way: alien ideological concepts ("dictatorship and radicalism") are shown to inspire actions which come in *increasingly direct* conflict with the basic axiological principles shared by the members of the "deictic center."

As is the case with the AEI speech, the analysis of the text of the Whitehall address finely illustrates the dynamic character of the (pre-)proposed STA model. The "S," "T" and "A" parameters of analysis are designed to complement one another in accounting for the global legitimization effect; furthermore, their complementary capacity is a factor in keeping up with the macro function of the political performance in case there is underrepresentation of one of the three proximization aspects.

5. Extensions of operation of the STA model of proximization. What kind of analytic awareness do the construction and implementation of the STA model require?

Evidently enough, I have so far been reluctant to state definitively that the proposed model will or will not operate beyond the field of the war-on-terror rhetoric, which in this paper has constituted its primary scope of application. However, since the intrinsic structure of the STA model involves accounting for sociopsychological variables, which, by their very nature, define larger social and political audiences, the chances are that the model could indeed be utilized in analysis of the phenomenon of (political) legitimization as a whole. In such a situation, consideration of the currently downplayed factors like charismatic leadership projection or positive self-presentation on the part of the political speaker might turn useful.

The current pre-proposal for the STA model draws on not merely linguistic variables, but also on those involving the domains of related disciplines, such as politology, psychology, and social sciences. Such a cross-disciplinary approach to the study of political language entails questions about the mutual relations between the particular layers of analysis. In particular, it prompts considerations of which of the analytic parameters are methodologically superordinate and which have a merely auxiliary value. The apparent problem with a cross-disciplinary analysis of political language is that there is hardly any visible one-to-one correspondence between the analytic components derived from the different disciplines. For instance, the general strategy of proximization, which the latter can be described as a cognitive and sociopsychological concept, is not to be equated with any particular linguistic form. It is rather a combination of specific language forms that can contribute to proximization, but even in this case, it cannot be guaranteed that the language forms involved will address simultaneously all the three aspects of proximization, i.e. spatial, temporal and axiological.

Mindful of these limitations, I shall argue that although resolution of most methodological difficulties such as the above can possibly be sought in adopting a hierarchical model of analysis where, like in the STA model, the upper-level, controlling parameters of analysis (viz. legitimization, proximization in general) break down into a set of mediating variables (viz. the three aspects of proximization) and, finally, into multiple sets of bottom-level variables (language items), there may still occur problems with a possible overdetermination of analysis by the upper-level parameters (cf. e.g. Beaugrande 1997). In view of this, due attention must be paid to the consistency of balance between utilizing the upper-level parameters (such as, again, the overall strategy of proximization) as entities which signpost the direction of analysis *a priori*, and their controlling potential, i.e. the capacity to verify, in an *a posteriori* manner (and against the global function, i.e. legitimization), the critical findings from the study of specific language forms at the very bottom level. It seems the chief task of the prospective research to keep the described balance in place for the successful operation of the STA model. A feasible working assumption might be that the essence of the macro functions of legitimization and proximization identified in particular instances of the investigated discourse can unfold as a result of “updates”: for instance, the empirical checking of the data involving spatial proximization will result in a hypothesis about the proximization pattern characterizing the given chunk of text as a whole, but the hypothesis will be open to subsequent redefinition upon the study of these parts of the text’s data which possess primarily temporal and axiological load.

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