

DOI 10.26886/2311-4517.2(87)2023.2

UDC 811.11-112:32.019.51

MANIPULATIVE POTENTIAL OF NUCLEAR RHETORIC IN AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Tetiana V. Chebotar, PhD in English Philology

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Institute of Journalism,
Ukraine

Nuclear rhetoric is used by political leaders and other public figures to discuss the prospects for the development of nuclear weapons, nuclear politics, and related issues. Nuclear rhetoric can range from rational discussions of policy options to hyperbolic political statements that incite fear, anxiety, and provoke global confrontation. The article describes media nominations associated with nuclear rhetoric and highlights their manipulative potential in modern American political discourse.

Key words: nuclear rhetoric, nuclear discourse, political discourse, media discourse, manipulation.

Кандидат філологічних наук, Чеботар Т.В. Маніпулятивний потенціал ядерної риторики в американському політичному дискурсі. / Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка, Інститут журналістики, Україна, Київ.

Ядерна риторика використовується політичними лідерами та іншими громадськими діячами для обговорення перспектив розвитку ядерної зброї, ядерної політики та пов'язаних з нею питань. Ядерна риторика може варіюватися від спокійних і раціональних обговорень варіантів політики до гіперболізованих політичних заяв, які викликають страх, тривогу та розпалюють глобальну ворожнечу. Стаття описує медійні номінації, пов'язані з ядерною

риторикою, та висвітлює їхній маніпулятивний потенціал в сучасному американському політичному дискурсі.

Ключові слова: ядерна риторика, ядерний дискурс, політичний дискурс, медійний дискурс, маніпуляція.

Кандидат филологических наук, Чеботар Т.В. Маніпулятивний потенціал ядерної риторики в американському політичному дискурсі. / Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка, Інститут журналістики, Україна, Київ.

Ядерная риторика используется политическими лидерами и другими общественными деятелями для обсуждения перспектив развития ядерного оружия, ядерной политики и связанных с ней вопросов. Ядерная риторика может варьироваться от спокойных и рациональных обсуждений вариантов политики до гиперболизированных политических заявлений, вызывающих страх, тревогу и способствующих глобальной враждебности. Статья описывает медийные номинации, связанные с ядерной риторикой, и освещает их маніпулятивний потенціал в современном американском политическом дискурсе.

Ключевые слова: ядерная риторика, ядерный дискурс, политический дискурс, медийный дискурс, манипуляция.

Introduction. Within the broad range of studies of political discourse there are linguistic inquiries devoted to thematic types of rhetoric that focus on certain socially important topics. Such examples are Cold War rhetoric, "green" rhetoric, conspiracy rhetoric or nuclear rhetoric, which is the object of this study. *Nuclear rhetoric* refers to the use of language by political leaders and other public figures to discuss the development and spread of nuclear weapons and nuclear potential. The *goal* of this article is to analyse linguistic features of nuclear rhetoric in modern American political discourse

and describe linguistic techniques used by politicians with the manipulative intent.

Nuclear rhetoric is used by political leaders, policymakers, military officials, and activists in discussions about nuclear weapons, nuclear energy, arms control, and non-proliferation. In the context of international relations, nuclear rhetoric is commonly used by nation-states to signal their intentions and capabilities to other countries. This can include explicit threats of nuclear retaliation, as well as a more subtle language designed to convey a sense of resolve and determination.

At the same time, nuclear rhetoric is also used to draw attention to the dangers of nuclear weapons and to advocate for disarmament and other measures to reduce the risk of nuclear war. Nuclear rhetoric can have significant effects on public perceptions of nuclear issues and can play a role in shaping policy decisions related to nuclear weapons. As such, it is important for people involved in these discussions to use language carefully and thoughtfully in order to minimize the risk of unintended consequences.

Presentation of the material. The central concept of nuclear rhetoric is the idea of *deterrence*, which presupposes that the possession and threat of use of nuclear weapons by one country can deter other countries from attacking it. Proponents of deterrence argue that it is necessary for maintaining peace and stability in the world, while critics argue that it creates an atmosphere of tension and can lead to a dangerous arms race.

Other important concepts of nuclear rhetoric are *nuclear option*, *nuclear exchange* and *nuclear war* which describe the most extreme political decision with drastic consequences for our planet. This type of language can contribute to a sense of panic and uncertainty among the people which can be illustrated by a metaphor *The Doomsday Clock* which demonstrates how close humanity is to self-destruction due to a possible nuclear conflict or nuclear Armageddon: *The Doomsday Clock remains at 2 minutes to*

'*midnight*' [thewashingtonpost].

In media discourse as well as in academic literature nuclear rhetoric is also referred to as *snukespeak*, which is formed on analogy with George Orwell's famous *newspeak*. The analogy is built on the assumption that if one could manipulate what was possible in language then one could manipulate or limit what was possible in thought [1: 401]. Consequently, manipulative potential is an inherent part and a characteristic feature of nuclear rhetoric.

S. Toten defined *nukespeak* as 'a language consisting primarily of euphemisms, jargon and bizarre acronyms which serve to cloud the nature of nuclear weapon systems, nuclear fighting systems, and nuclear war itself' [2: 253]. E. Schiappa similarly defined *nukespeak* as 'the use of metaphor, euphemism, technical jargon and acronyms to portray nuclear concepts in a 'neutral' or positive way [2: 253]. Classic examples of such euphemistic language are the names of the first atomic bombs dropped by the USA on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 (*Little boy* and *Fat man*), a nuclear weapon with an abbreviated name *BAMBI* or a ballistic nuclear missile *The peacekeeper*, developed during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. The latter nomination was even awarded a special *Doublespeak* prize as an example of evasive, misleading and euphemistic public rhetoric. As a result, words with positive or neutral connotation are used in nuclear rhetoric to improve the public perception of nuclear weapons [3]. Other examples of euphemistic nuclear metaphors which mean 'to attack with a nuclear weapon' are: *to push the button*, *to pull the nuclear trigger*, *to make the ultimate decision*, *a general nuclear response* [4: 24], which also contribute to creating a simplistic image of using nuclear weapons and do not reveal the danger of such a decision.

The most frequently used nouns that collocate with the adjective

nuclear in modern English according to the Corpus of Contemporary English are: *weapons, power, program, war, energy, bomb, deal, arms, threat*[5]. Consequently, the center of the semantic field of nuclear rhetoric in American political discourse consists of such concepts as *nuclear war, weapon of mass destruction, nuclear politics, nuclear technology* and *global threat*. Below is the list of the most frequently used English nouns in collocations with the adjective *nuclear* within each of the mentioned semantic concepts of nuclear rhetoric.

- *Nuclear weapons* - weaponry, bomb, arsenal, arms, warheads, bombs, missiles, submarine, blast, explosion.
- *Nuclear politics* - program, deal, proliferation, ambitions, forces, disarmament, issue, non-proliferation, deterrence, watchdog, negotiations, arms race, safety, policy, talks, agreement, option.
- *Nuclear war* - threat, crisis, attack, terrorism, strike, activities, terrorist.
- *Nuclear technology* - power, energy, waste, plant, reactor, facilities, fuel, test, industry, capability, material, device, research.
- *Nuclear disaster* - accident, holocaust, winter, annihilation.

In English media discourse, nuclear weapons are often referred to with a plural noun *nukes*: 1) *With Iran, first prevent the nukes* [www.defenseone.com]; 2) *North Korea threatens to build more nukes* [www.latimes.com]; 3) *Next-gen nukes* [www.grist.org]. The lexeme *nuke* can also be an adjective as in such collocations as *nuke plant, nuke pact, nuke deal, nuke program, nuke talks*. In addition, the lexemes *nuke/nuclear* appear in a number of hyphenated complex adjectives, for example, *nuke-free, nuclear-free, nuclear-armed, nuclear-powered, nuclear-capable, nuclear-weapon-free*. The jargonism *nuke* is used in collocations with the verb *to get* and *to use* (*to get a nuke, to use a nuke*) in the meanings of “to build a nuclear bomb” and “to use a nuclear bomb”, respectively.

The phrase *to nuke something* means “to bomb something with the help of a nuclear weapon”. In a proposal to use nuclear weapon to divert the destructive hurricanes from the territory of the USA, president Donald Trump said: *Why don't we just nuke them?* [Trump 2019]. In another media headline, there is an occasionalism *to out-nuke*, which means “to win the nuclear arms race”: *There's no chance China will out-nuke the United States* [forbes.com]. It is worth mentioning that the verb *to nuke* is used in today's mass media in a figurative sense too (it means “to destroy/eradicate something”), as in the title of the article about the fight against the coronavirus pandemic: *Think a vaccine will nuke Covid?* [www.irishtimes.com].

An idiomatic phrase *to go nuclear*, apart from its direct meaning (“develop or use a nuclear weapon”), also has two figurative ones: “to become angry, lose control” and “to use measures against an opponent”: 1) *A year of Trump vs Kim: rhetoric gone nuclear*. 2) *Donald Trump is about to go nuclear on Hillary Clinton* [newrepublic.com]. In the second example the idiom *to go nuclear* characterizes an aggressive verbal behavior of D. Trump in the presidential debates with H. Clinton. In the first sentence, there is a play on words centered around the figurative and direct meanings of the idiom. In this case a phrase *rhetoric gone nuclear* means both “nuclear rhetoric” and “rhetoric that goes out of control”. Another example is a transformation of a phraseologism *to push the envelope* (“go beyond what is permitted, to take risks”) in the media headline *Pushing the nuclear envelope: North Korea's missile diplomacy* [theguardian.com], which means “leading a risky nuclear policy”.

Conclusions. Nuclear discourse is explicitly political. A characteristic feature of nuclear rhetoric is a conscious attempt of politicians to facilitate the continued production and deployment of nuclear weapons in propagating the national self-defence, as opposed to propagating war,

which in its turn provokes a continuous nuclear 'arms race' in the world. It's important to note that nuclear rhetoric can have real-world consequences, and inflammatory language can increase tensions between countries and lead to a heightened risk of nuclear conflict. In order to minimize these risks, it's important for leaders and policymakers to choose their words carefully and avoid language that could be interpreted as aggressive or threatening.

References:

1. Wilson, John. (2001). Political discourse. / The handbook of discourse analysis. Ed. By D. Tannen. Blackwell Publishers. URL:
http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/content/BPL_Images/Content_store/WWW_Content/9780631205951/020.pdf
2. Schiappa, Edward. (1989). The rhetoric of nukespeak. Communication monographs, Volume 56. URL:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248924920_The_rhetoric_of_nukespeak
3. DiNitto, Rachel. (2021). Atomic metaphors, victims, and the contestations of nuclear discourse. URL: <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/11/962>
4. Allan, Stuart. (1989). Talking our extinction to death: nuclear discourse and the news media. Canadian journal of communication, vol. 14, No. 1. URL:
<https://cjc.utpjournals.press/doi/pdf/10.22230/cjc.1989v14n1a479>
5. www.corpus.byu.edu