

THE STRATEGY OF STRUCTURING INFORMATION ACCORDING TO ITS RELEVANCE IN MIND MANIPULATION

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The article deals with the linguistic means of mind manipulation and the strategy of structuring information according to its relevance. The author offers an overall classification of manipulation strategies and tactics and goes on to analyse how the strategy of structuring information according to its relevance is implemented in various communicative situations. The article focuses on giving a detailed analysis of the strategy and linguistic and extra-linguistic means used to manipulate the addressee. The author looks into the theoretical grounds of “the compliment sandwich” along with its practical application in communication, analysing a failed attempt of this act and offering an explanation why the act was unsuccessful. The author also demonstrates how an act of mind manipulation may be successful even after the addressee realises they have been manipulated, offering reasons for such an outcome. Special attention is given to the analysis of mind manipulation act where the target is guided by the manipulator from beginning to end, without realising of being manipulated. The article maintains that a successful manipulation act is based on a variety of techniques as well as the knowledge of the addressee’s personal traits and the dexterity of the manipulator. Verbal means are enforced by non-verbal ones producing the desired effect.

Keywords: mind manipulation; communication strategies and tactics; addresser and addressee; influence; communicative situation.

Introduction

Mind manipulation is an integral part of communication on all the levels of humans’ life. It ranges from interpersonal communication in family and professional discourse to mass communication involving political and advertising discourse. The means used by the addressers are the ones of natural speech along with the non-verbal means of communication. The dexterity of the manipulator is defined by the choice of such means within the major manipulation strategy and minor tactics the addresser employs. This article will look into the combination of manipulation means aimed at achieving the ultimate strategic goal.

The phenomenon of mind manipulation has been discussed by various scientists throughout the last century. It is a ubiquitous means used in multiple spheres of the life of the society studied by a number of disciplines: psychology (Dotsenko, 1997; Roberts, 2015; Lung & Prowant, 2002), linguistics (de Saussure, 2005; van Dijk, 2003; Lakoff, 2000; Potcheptsov, 2009), political science (Adams, 2005; Lasswell, 1969; Orwell, 1969; Chomsky, 1990), media studies (Danciu, 2014; Cook, 1992; Wilke, 2005; Holtz-Bacha & Just, 2017), etc. Effective means of influencing people are, on the one hand, analysed by researchers and, on the other hand, developed primarily by political strategists and their teams.

Along with van Eemeren (2005), we see manipulation in discourse as “intentional deception of one’s addressees by persuading them of something that is foremost in one’s own interest through the covert use of communicative devices that are not in agreement with generally acknowledged critical standards of reasonableness. It goes without saying that these devices can be more or less sophisticated and can be part of a more comprehensive strategy” (p. ix). The spheres of application of mind manipulation vary, with a strong emphasis on mass communication in research. However, interpersonal communication is an interesting field of research with few scientific works looking into mind manipulation.

The structure of the article is organised as follows. First, we describe the empirical material, offer background information on the subject of mind manipulation and the methods engaged in analysing the empirical material. The findings are presented against the background of illustrations using the samples from our empirical material. Finally, we draw the conclusion and make suggestions for further studies.

Methods

The research is based on the material of 15 original American TV shows aired over the last 10 years, namely: *Desperate Housewives*, *Devious Maids*, *Empire*, *Gossip Girl*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Hart of Dixie*, *Melissa & Joey*, *Mistresses*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Parenthood*, *Secrets and Lies*, *Suits*, *The Fosters*, *Underemployed*, *Younger*. The wide range of the empirical material gives grounds to validate the sampling granting conclusiveness to the research results. Overall, more than 200 scenes involving both verbal and non-verbal instances of mind manipulation in different contexts were analysed.

The research uses the tools of the generally accepted methods of linguistic analysis, which are subordinated to the main task of the work. We use (a) the cognitive-discursive approach to analyse manipulative effects on consciousness as an integral part in the process of cognitive activity of the recipient. We establish discourse implications and persistent connotations of specific linguistic units with manipulative

potential studying contextual semantics of lexical units using (b) stylistic and semantic-syntactic methods. In order to observe, analyse and classify certain linguistic cases of mind manipulation and carry out further interpretation in a certain communicative situation and systematise linguistic means of manipulation categorising them as particular manipulative strategies and tactics we implement (c) descriptive and interpretive methods of research.

Results and discussion

We distinguish a number of mind manipulation strategies and tactics (Dmytruk, 2006), which could be employed in different spheres of communication. We offer the following classification of strategies and tactics to manipulate the addressee (see Table 1).

Table 1

Mind manipulation strategies and tactics classification

Strategies	Tactics
truth evasion	labelling “shining generalisations” transfer use of neologisms
information distortion	repetition hyperbole diminution concept simplification silencing unfair shuffling fact fabrication shredding of a coherent picture
statement immunisation	reference to authorities the use of universal expressions
illocutionary force of utterances modification	categorical nomination non-categorical nomination
group identification	inclusiveness distancing
structuring information according to its relevance	providing important information at the beginning (and end of the message) the use of structures with an implicit potential

In this research, we are looking into the means of implementation of the strategy of structuring information according to its relevance, analysing the tactics that the addresser uses, as well as concrete verbal and non-verbal means that function as the means to achieve the ultimate goal of manipulation.

Interpersonal communication taking place in informal settings is unlikely to make use of crass manipulative tools. What should be expected in small, strongly consensual, and profoundly non-hierarchical societies, which Givón & Young (2002) call *the societies of intimates* (pp. 23-24), is that actual acts of mind manipulation among the members of such societies would be indirect, implicit and subtle. They are more likely to be solicitations of cooperation rather than attempts at direct coercive manipulation. The manipulation attempts in the given context are quite indigenous and delicate.

Our first step of the analysis rests on *Hart of Dixie* TV show. The series is based on everyday communication between close people in their own community. It makes it rather easy to look into the manipulation strategies employed by the communicants due to the knowledge of the characters and their patterns of behaviour.

One particular instance is providing important information at the beginning and end of the message tactics, which is also known as *the sandwich method*. As a rule, the sandwich method is typical of business environment, where criticism is not welcome in its pure form, thus various methods of constructive criticism are used. The top and the bottom of the sandwich are positive comments, and the middle part is the criticism itself. The idea behind the method is that human’s psyche works in such a way that the first and the last elements of the message are most likely to be remembered. This is what Aitchison (2003) calls *the bathtub effect* describing the memory for words.

Psychologists advising on business communication (Lazarus, 2011) recommend using the sandwich method to get an effective feedback. The wording of the message usually makes use of other means of mind

manipulation, for example, the use of the first person singular pronouns rather than first person plural ones, as this tends to distance the speaker from the listener. Thus, the criticism seems more remote and the chances of it being perceived more favourably increase. We label this strategy as the strategy of group identification and the use of pronouns are the means employed within the tactics of distancing. But it is not only the verbal information that makes the sandwich technique effective. The non-verbal constituent of the message is essential along with the verbal one.

The communication situation in the *Hart of Dixie* evolves around the relationship problems one of the main characters, George, is experiencing. He finds himself in the position of being unable to break up with a girl he is currently dating. His friend, Wade, volunteers to help him, assuring the main character that he is really experienced in breaking up with girls without hurting their feelings.

- *Brunch with your grandma? (1) Yeah, that sounds... that sounds perfect. Yup, oh, okay. All right, (2) bye-bye now. It's just Shelby.*

- *The girl from BlueBellalooza? I thought you said your first date was (3) a disaster.*

- *It was. Then I went to apologise and that led to a second date, which somehow has led to a third date. All she does is talk about online discount shopping. She keeps on sending me links for designer ties at incredibly reduced prices. (4) [head down]*

- *So, why are you going to brunch at Grandma's?*

- *Because I don't know how to break up with her without hurting her feelings, Wade. (Hart of Dixie, S02E04, 00:03:43,122-00:04:12,868)*

The dialogue introduces the situation under analysis. Hesitative repetition (1) and staggering (2) signal inconsistency with the meaning of the utterance. The confusion that the main character is experiencing also manifests itself in his facial expression.

In our research, we analyse facial expressions using what Wierzbicka (2000) calls *the semantic analysis of human facial expressions*. She offers the joint approach of structural and semantic analysis and comes up with at least eight movements as meaningful minimal units of facial behaviour. In the situation analysed we can clearly see the "**brow furrowed**". According to the researcher, "the overall meaning of each facial configuration depends of course on all its components, and, arguably, on the interaction between the components as well, but in each case it should be at least compatible with the meaning that we wish to attribute to a particular facial gesture (e.g., the "frown") as such" (p. 169). In our case the furrowed brow, i.e. drawing the eyebrows together, along with the eyes expression, which are raised and wide open, we can see what Ekman and Friesen's call the "**sadness-brow**" (Ekman & Friesen, 1984). This facial expression looks like this in the graphic representation of emojis: 😞, and has the basic meaning of a worried face (Danesi 2017, p. 24).

The other communicant cannot understand why George keeps dating the girl. His amusement is underlined by a lexeme with strong negative connotation (3). George gives his reasons and ends with lowering his head (4), which is a general sign of sadness. Wade offers his help by giving him advice on how to manipulate a girl into the break-up.

- *Well... (5) as luck would have it, you have hit upon my (6) area of expertise. My friend, allow me to introduce you to "The Compliment Sandwich."*

- *Compliment Sandwich?*

- *On top, you've got your bread: Nice little piece of flattery like, uh, "Your beauty (7) humbles (8) a simple man like me." Then quickly get to the meat: "But you and I both know (9) the timing isn't right for us." And then before she has a chance to argue, you hit her with one final compliment: Uh, "(10) A woman as perfect as you deserves it all." That's a compliment sandwich. Do it. Or 15 years from now, you'll be wearing a discount tie when you leave Shelby at the altar. (Hart of Dixie, S02E04, 00:04:12,870-00:04:53,959)*

Wade presents himself as an expert by using an idiomatic expression (5) and professional language (6). He explains in plain terms what manipulation tactics he is offering and supports it with specific means of its implementation. The general idea of what a compliment sandwich is complies with the criticism sandwich employed by psychologists and business consultants (Von Bergen, Bressler, & Campbell, 2014; Daniels, 2009; Nelson & Quick, 2013). Rather than just saying what you don't like, you should sandwich the negative between two pieces of positive. Thus, a good criticism sandwich has three ingredients. The speaker has to start with something good, then add the criticism and add a positive closer. Being positive at the beginning and end can be very effective in the way the criticism is perceived. Von Bergen, Bressler, & Campbell (2014) contend that in comparison to being critical, a criticism sandwich makes the supervisor feel more comfortable protecting the worker's ego in bringing up positives while still addressing unwanted or ineffective employee behaviour (p. 2). The effectiveness of point-blank criticism is much lower because such way of presenting the information makes the addressee alienate and find flaws with the addresser's

argumentation. It leads to a conflict and counter-effective communication. By using the technique of a criticism sandwich the speaker includes the addressee into their inner circle (inclusiveness tactics), gains their trust and makes them primed to listen to what the speaker has to say. At the same time, it saves the addressee's face, which also adds to the general constructive atmosphere and leads to a positive effect.

The pragmatic means that Wade offers is flattery, which is carried out with the help of specific vocabulary. The lexeme *humble* (7) has a derogatory meaning: if something or someone humbles you, they make you realise that you are not as important or good as you thought you were (Collins Learner Dictionary). Thus, the speaker praises the addressee and diminishes themselves (8). The next step is the essence of the message, which should be delivered quickly, because the time factor plays the key role here. The speaker gives the reason for the break-up (9), which is quite neutral and could be applied universally. It makes the reason for the break-up applicable in a variety of situations. The last part of the sandwich (10) appeals to the self-esteem of the woman being complimented, which should elicit a positive response. Along with giving instructions on how to manipulate a woman into the break-up, Wade also manipulates George into putting his advice into practice by presenting a visual image of the unavoidably unhappy future awaiting for his friend. The appeal to visual imagination strengthens the effect of the message making mind manipulation potentially more effective. All the three stages of the compliment are supposed to come in one piece, otherwise, the manipulation strategy will be ineffective.

The next scene we are going to analyse is the one showing George implementing the manipulation theory in the conversation with the girlfriend.

- *I wanted to talk.*

- (11) *Oh, yay, I love to talk.*

- *I know.*

- (12) *I mean, I could just talk and talk and talk and talk and...*

- *Yeah, yeah, me first. (13) So, um... Shelby?*

- *Mm-hmm?*

- (14) *I just wanted to tell you that well, your beauty humbles a simple man like me.*

- (15) *What's that supposed to mean?*

- *What? It's a compliment.*

- *Oh, sorry, I wasn't sure. My last boyfriend was bit of a jerk, so, I guess I'm compliment-starved. That is so nice.*

- *Anyway...*

- (16) *What do you mean by "beauty" specifically? I mean, I know we all have these parts about ourselves that we like and we don't like, and it might be fun to see if we agree on all mine.*

- *Well, um... You have skin. You have great skin.*

- (16) *Mm-hmm, and what else? (Hart of Dixie, S02E04, 00:19:07,065-00:19:54,810)*

The conversation is not developing in the direction George has been planning because of the unexpected reaction of the addressee. Shelby keeps interrupting him due to her personal traits of character (11, 12). On the other hand, the speaker's hesitation (13, 14) prevents him from effectively implementing the manipulation intention, where the timing is critical. The girl's response to the compliment disrupts the manipulation attempt.

According to Pomerantz (1978), who was the first researcher to discuss compliments from the pragmatic perspective, Americans face two dilemmas when responding to compliments: (A) they have to agree with the speaker, and (B) they have to avoid self-praise (p. 82). To mediate this conflict, recipients of compliments resolve to a variety of solutions: (1) Acceptance, (2) Rejection, and (3) Self-praise avoidance. What Shelby does in the communicative situation being analysed is rejecting the compliment by asking a question, which falls under the category of non-agreement, with the taxonomy of question, according to Herbert (1986, p.79).

The addressee's reaction could be explained by the imposter syndrome, which is the belief that the person's achievements are illusions, that their professional position is due to luck or someone's colossal mistake and it characterises the internal work experience of many women (Pinker, 2009, p. 184). Women are more liable to suffer from the syndrome, especially if they are successful and hard-working. The addressee falls under this category as she runs her own business, is independent and well-qualified professionally. The conviction of her own worthlessness does not make her grateful for the manifestation of affection she receives but makes her satisfied with nothing less than the proof of devotion (Winn, 2000, p. 84-85).

After the addressee makes sure the compliment was meant by the addresser, she starts fishing for other compliments, asking for details and specifications (16), still feeling unsure due to the imposter syndrome.

Her reaction leads to the failure of the manipulator's attempts as the compliment sandwich technique calls for the fulfilment of all the requirements.

Finally, the dialogue, where the speaker has the third attempt at carrying out the manipulation act, demonstrates that even when such stipulations for the effective mind manipulation act as the right wording and the right timing are observed, the manipulation can still be a failure due to the addresser's incompetence (17).

- *Shelby, look. I don't want to go out with you. I mean, you are... you are totally awesome. But I don't want to see you again. (17) I got the sandwich backwards.*

- *You don't want to see me again? What?*

- *Look, it's just that I don't really like talking about discount shopping or pillow shams or all the eating disorders that your friends have or, well, pretty much anything that you like to talk about so much. (Hart of Dixie, S02E04, 00:36:18,526 00:36:49,873)*

The girl doesn't even realise that she is being broken up with because the information she receives is confusing and incongruent. In fact, the manipulator uses the ***poisonous sandwich***, when the initial stage and the final stage contain negative information, whereas the positive information is given in the middle. The addressee reacts accordingly, because negative information is the focus of the utterance and is best perceived. The girl's reaction consists of non-verbal components: facial expression (brow furrowed, corners of the mouth lowered, eyes lowered: 😞), which is generally recognised as an angry face (Danesi, 2017, p. 24) and a slap in the addresser's face, which show her anger.

The compliment sandwich method is effective only when all the stipulations are realised, that is (a) the wording that makes the addressee accept the compliments due to the positive connotations and general praise as well as the negative part/criticism; (b) the timing, because the stages of this tactics cannot be performed separately; (c) the knowledge of personal traits of the addressee or the understanding of the typical psychological mechanisms that come into action under the given circumstances; and (d) the dexterity of the manipulator to deliver the means of manipulation using the right verbal and non-verbal means.

The next example of the mind manipulation act we are going to analyse is based on the same tactics, providing important information at the beginning and end of the message. This situation differs a lot from the one described above because we deal with (a) professional discourse and (b) the communicators are open with each other. The target of the manipulation realises he is being manipulated and the manipulator reveals his intentions, confirming the target's suspicions. Yet, the manipulation act is successful because the addresser achieves his goal even after he has disclosed his intentions.

- *Good, 'cause I have a plan.*

- *Let's hear it.*

- *We go to the last place they'd ever expect and we offer to merge.*

- *Where?*

- *Fletcher Engines.*

- *(18) Are you crazy? We go to Fletcher, they're gonna kick Dominic out, Jack gains power. Might as well have let McKernon get bought out in the first place.*

- *(19) Then the only other option that's even remotely possible is we take them private.*

- *(20) That actually might work. Come to think of it, why the hell didn't you just say that to me in the first place?*

- *Because I knew you'd shit on whatever my first idea was and that you'd be open to the backup.*

- *You're telling me you set up a straw man idea to manipulate me into liking your real idea?*

- *Yep. (Suits, S05E09, 00:16:09,436-00:16:42,300)*

The first idea that the addresser offers is not the one that he really wants his boss to accept. But he knows his addressee, so he knows that the first idea is likely to be rejected, and it really is (18). The manipulator employs the strategy of structuring information according to its relevance by providing the information that he expects to be taken unfavourably at the beginning. The next idea he presents (19) is the one he expects to be accepted. The recipient reacts favourably this time, expressing cautious agreement (20). However, being an experienced lawyer with good skills of reading into people's intentions, the addressee immediately realises that he had been manipulated into agreeing to the second idea. The manipulator shares his reasons for doing so because he knows the addressee and can expect his frankness to be taken favourably admitting he has used a straw-man fallacy (see Talisse & Aikin, 2006).

The act of manipulation which involves the use of the strategy of the structuring information according to its relevance is successful due to the fact that (a) the tactics the addresser employs is adapted to the addressee's psychology in terms of reacting to the ideas presented to him; (b) the wording of the second idea leads to the perception of the idea as a unique one; and (c) the knowledge of personal traits of the addressee, who accepts the idea even after realising he has been manipulated.

The communication situation we are going to analyse next demonstrates an effective act of manipulation where the addresser gets the desired result using the strategy of structuring information according to its relevance and a number of tactics. The addresser, who holds a high position in hospital, wants to give away his recently obtained responsibilities of the head of a medical contest.

- *Uh, Bailey wants me to oversee her (21) big contest. And... and (22) I am flattered, honestly. (23) But, uh, at this age, I'm... I'm not sure I can handle it. (24) I guess I'm just feeling my seasons, you know?*

- *Um, you... you know, if you need some help, I...*

- *(25) Oh, well, it's not a matter of help. I mean, someone needs to do everything. I mean, you name it.*

(26) They have to handpick the judges and set deadlines, schedule presentations, and the whole kit and caboodle.

- *Wait. Um... I could do it?*

- *Oh, no. No.*

- *No?*

- *No, no. I couldn't possibly ask you. You... you really mean it?*

- *Yeah. Yes. Yes. Yes, sir. Yeah. I-I won't let you down, sir.*

- *Well, thank you. (Grey's Anatomy, S14E09, 00:37:29,239 00:38:20,357)*

First, the addresser uses laudation to characterise the contest (21), thus making it sound important, but still manageable. He admits that this is an honour (22), which is supposed to evoke the addressee's desire to be at least part of it, appealing to the desire to be included into the inner circle of the chosen ones in their professional circle. In this way, the manipulator uses the group identification strategy. This initial part, where he mentions the contest and characterises it and his role in it, is the information he wants to put stress on. This is followed by the sentence introduced with the conjunction *but*, which indicates the speaker's reluctance to be responsible for the contest (23). The interjection (*uh*) and repetition (*I'm... I'm*) are supposed to demonstrate the addresser's hesitation, which, in fact, are the means of implementing the manipulation strategy of illocutionary force of utterances modification, through the tactics of non-categorical nomination. This utterance is accompanied by non-verbal means of mind manipulation: the speaker is touching his side showing how stiff his back is, wearing a painful expression on his face. The use of the metaphor he devises (24) underlines the truthfulness of his words and creates the general atmosphere of trust. At the same time, the metaphor allows the speaker not to look weak and old.

When the addressee tries to tentatively offer her help, the manipulator pretends to reject the offer, using negative statement (25). At the same time, he actually continues to laud the contest and the role of the organiser, enumerating important decisions they have to take (26). He uses an informal expression with rather a vague meaning at the end to make the responsibilities sound easy and shorten the distance between him and his target. Thus, the manipulator applies the strategy of truth evasion by means of using words and expressions with vague, unclear meaning. The manipulation target is tricked into believing that the addresser does not want to oversee the contest solely due to personal reasons, without realising what a difficult and responsible job it is. She offers to take over the contest organisation, but the addresser realises that it will look suspiciously if he agrees to her offer right away. He declines her offer at first, but then quickly agrees, with a tinge of incredulity, before the addressee changes her mind. In this case, he applies the strategy of structuring information according to its relevance in three different ways. First, when he lauds the contest making its organisation a coveted aim for the addressee, starting and ending with positive information, giving negative information in the middle; second, when he rejects the offer to help him, because he actually wants more than help; and third, when he rejects the offer to oversee the whole contest to make his rejection more credible.

Conclusions

The analysis of communicative situations offered above demonstrates the variety of ways to manipulate the recipient and make them act on the information they receive. The focus of the analysis is the strategy of structuring information according to its relevance. The tactics that is applied to implement the given strategy is the one of providing important information at the beginning and end of the message. However, the research has shown that the more sophisticated the manipulator is, the more means of manipulation they use, resorting to other strategies and tactics within the main one. In order to fulfil a successful act of mind manipulation the addresser should take into account the addressee factor, be precise with their timing and demonstrate general dexterity in approaching the target, otherwise, the act of manipulation will be a total failure or will be uncovered by the addresser too soon.

The theoretical and practical significance of the obtained results is determined by their contribution to socio- and pragmalinguistics. This study may be effective for determining the means of mind manipulation and helping the communicants recognise manipulation attempts and protect themselves against being

manipulated. Our future works will focus on the further study of means used by the manipulator in interpersonal communication.

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