

Political Message Design: Insights into Professional Practices

Journal Article

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Professionalization has been one of the key developments in the field of political communication in recent decades. In this context, message design plays an increasingly important role. The term refers to a collectively performed practice of creating, implementing and evaluating patterns of sayings and writings to promote political organizations and their goals. This contribution presents insights into the research on those practices as well as into the methodology for their investigation.

1. Professionalization of Linguistic Political Communication: Several Consequences

Professionalization has been one of the key developments in the field of political communication in recent decades: the notion focuses on the organized and systematic application of scientific as well as practical knowledge to reach specific objectives in a sustainable way (Kamps 2007; Jun 2009; Sarcinelli 2011). Political organizations, through the professionalization of their political communication, react to the growing need for legitimacy in society by strategically planning their communication to make their voices heard and their interests count in the public sphere (Tenscher & Esser 2015). In this context, professionalization thereby includes the combination of public and non-public communications such as campaigning and lobbying; it also includes the use of analytical tools and procedures, as well as the enhancement of internal knowledge resources by external experts (Kamps 2007: 71-72; Jun 2011: 277). Overall, the term captures some of the main features of the present practices of communication in an

environment of "Public Governance", where collective agency is due to permanent negotiations on the interorganizational and inter-personal level (Osborne 2010: 8-10).

Accordingly, professionalized political communication can be understood as strategic political communication (Holtzhausen & Zerfass 2015) – and thus as a practice that crosses the borders of traditional disciplines (e.g. marketing, public relations) and can be successful only if it is compatible with the controversial environment of the public sphere (ibid.). Consequently, language plays a crucial role in strategic political communication insofar as politics, as well as communications management, consists of "language games" in terms of situated semiotic practices involving personal and collective actors (Holtzhausen 2002; Girnth & Spiess 2006; Kilian & Niehr 2013; Klein 2014; Girnth 2015; Deppermann et al. 2016). This may explain why the genuine linguistic task of message design is gaining in importance within the context of the strategic process of political communication, as it does in other professional communication domains (Moffitt 2004; Krippendorff 2006; Hallahan 2007: 11; Huck-Sandhu 2015).

Until now, commonly used concepts of message design model appropriate practices by presuming features of the reception of the messages by mass audiences. These features include primacy of attention, interest, desire and action (see the so-called AIDA model), as well as the primacy of motivation, ability, opportunity (see the so-called MAO model, Moffit 2004: 348, 352). Although such concepts claim universal validity, they provide little evidence of how to craft a message for specific purposes linguistically in a given situation with the typical tasks of strategic communication. In such situations, professionals are rather confronted by a "collapse" of their linguistic and communicative routines and have to undergo a complex "matching exercise" with the aim of adapting their linguistic expressions to the discursive conventions of their audiences (ibid.: 354).

2. The Strategic Task of Message Design: A Framework

On that basis, we understand message design as a collectively performed practice of creating, implementing and evaluating patterns of sayings and writings to promote po-

litical organizations and their goals – under the condition that they are multimodally performed and richly varied in concrete situations (Luginbühl & Perrin 2011; Stücheli-Herlach & Perrin 2013; Stücheli-Herlach 2017). In professional domains, such patterns are usually called "Corporate Messages" or "Key Messages" (Stücheli-Herlach & Perrin 2013: 25-28; Huck-Sandhu 2015). These terms refer to the fact that appropriate communicative contributions connect organizational as well as broader social contexts and their structures of meaning. Accordingly, they serve as a tool for practices of organizational communication in general (McPhee & Zaig 2009: 29-33) as well as of communication policy and management (Bruhn 2005: 105-107). In terms of the pragmatics of discourse (Schneider & Barron 2014) and organizational communication (Cooren et al. 2014), we call such contributions strategic "discourse acts" in order to model not only their linguistic nature but also their embeddedness in organizational and social practices and their accomplishments (i.e. "discursive agency", see Cooren et al. 2014: 4).

As strategic discursive acts, those contributions aim at mutual understanding and influence of the actors of organizational

communication: they are oriented toward the customization of presuppositions by reproducing a "common ground" (Warnke 2009: 126-135) respectively toward the isotopical structures of public discourse (Spiess 2011: 220-224). But due to the controversial environment of the public sphere, the strategic impact of those contributions is always uncertain (Kuss et al. 2013: 212-214). The notion of "strategy" therefore does not allege that those contributions are always rational and technical actions. Rather they should be denoted as "design" acts in the sense of collective, reflective, experimental and iterative processes of problem-solving (Krippendorf 2006; Grand 2012). This notion of "design" is used also in linguistics to describe processes of text production (Perrin 2008) or content strategies in the domain of online communication (Bucher 2013: 69-77), for example.

The practice of message design consists of several specific arrays of discursive activities that serve to contextualize, form and realize linguistic contributions by actors and agents of an organization (Stücheli-Herlach 2017). This categorization of discursive activities is owed to the dimensions of the "medialinguistic mindset" proposed by Perrin (2013: 69). This mindset-model po-

stulates several "activity fields" assigned to the language environments, functions and structures. We categorized strategic discursive activities that try to reduce uncertainty in relation to the environments as "contextualization", those that try the same in relation to the functions as "formation" and those that try the same in relation to the structures situated as "realization":

- *Contextualization*: Activities that aim at adapting communicative distributions of an organization to their co- and contexts in the environment so that they gain attractiveness in complex systems of the environment (Larsen-Freeman 2008), appropriateness and meaningfulness (van Dijk 2008: 19). These include, for example, activities to ensure the appropriateness of discursive actions regarding organizational routines, or activities to imbibe communicative contributions with collectively shared meanings in the sense of their orientation toward what can be called common sense.
- *Formation*: Activities that aim at shaping and reshaping patterns of text and talk that are convenient for relevant func-

tional genres of a specific domain and thus provide sufficient connecting points for subsequent contributions and their own contextualizations (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2008: 161-195). Those contributions, therefore, serve as tools to scale the message and levels of discourse over time. Such activities include, for example, the embedding of contributions in narrative and argumentative "super-structures" of public discourse (van Dijk 1978/1980: 128-159) as well as their condensation to succinct claims, slogans or storylines.

- *Realization*: Activities that aim at producing written and spoken contributions to political communication so that they meet the structural tasks of specific situations and use the semiotic resources of different modes and media that are functionally convenient in these situations. These include the production of templates for written or spoken contributions, information leaflets, debates and other genre-specific products of political communication (Stücheli-Herlach 2013) as well as the creation of clips, statements or testimonials to convey the message in diverse forms.

With the objective of professionalizing the field of political communication, we have developed a framework that allows practitioners to process political message design in a knowledge-based way (Stücheli-Herlach & Perrin 2013: 25-34). The framework describes crucial criteria of linguistic processes and products that serve as a basis for success-oriented "corporate messaging" (Huck-Sandhu 2014). According to the model, these patterns should take up familiar discursive formations such as schemes of interpretation (the activities of contextualization in diverse environments). They should take the shape of narrative forms and allow argumentative justifications (the activities of functional formation). And they should be formulated in a way that suits the requirements of situations which are typical for the domain of political communication such as presentations of policy programs through factsheets or the preparation of public debates by means of FAQ and Q&A papers (the activities of structured realization) (Stücheli-Herlach & Perrin 2013: 27; Stücheli-Herlach 2013).

On the one hand, the framework describes relevant components of the tacit knowledge of successful reflective practitioners (Schön 1983; Stücheli-Herlach 2012).

On the other hand, it can be used as a practical guideline (Perrin 2013: 266-271) for the handling of daily tasks by managers of political communication.

3. Problem-Solving in Practice: Instructive Cases

The latter has been tested by Executive Master students for years in the framework of the "Political Communication" certificate which is part of the Executive Master of Communication Management and Leadership Program at the School of Applied Linguistics of the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW). Several students have applied the explicit framework in their qualification work with the aim of solving linguistic problems in the field of strategic political communication. In this contribution, we present selected case studies and their results and discuss how their insights can be used to gain knowledge in the field of applied linguistics for professional political communications.

One case study elaborated general instructions for the media work within a campaign by analyzing media articles about the People's Initiative "against Mass Immi-

gration" (Enderli 2016). The question posed was why the discussion could not be led away from the topic of immigration toward a European issue. A second case study was related to the public communicative activities of the diplomatic Delegation of the European Union in Switzerland (Libiszewski 2012). A third case study analyzed official press releases in the context of a governmental consultation process concerning an amendment to the ordinance on the national languages of Switzerland. Finally, a fourth case study investigated parliamentary votes to support a popular initiative that demanded to regulate all wages in a way that the highest reward would never be larger than the twelvefold of the lowest ("1:12").

The design of these case studies follows an approach of transdisciplinary action research (Perrin 2012). This methodology aims to gain knowledge by triggering a process of mutual learning between practitioners and scholars. The entanglement of different types of knowledge – such as tacit, academic and expert knowledge – creates so-called transformation knowledge. This type of knowledge allows one to identify, develop and implement solutions to practical problems (ibid.: 6) and pave the way for mid-

range theories about situated practices in specific domains (ibid.: 9).

Qualification works of the Executive Master Program mentioned above can be implemented in the form of a strategy concept or a case study. In both cases, they identify a practical problem of strategic political communication and develop possible solutions in the course of the interaction between the students on the one hand and the scientific instructors on the other. By doing so, joint problem definitions and possible solutions emerge from the collaboration of practitioners and scholars, the latter at least in the form of a thought experiment combining the knowledge raised from positive-deviance cases (as "good practice") and the practical, so far tacit, knowledge about real situations and organizations of the "deviance" practitioners seeking practical improvements.

What is created by this process is what we call "experimental transformation knowledge". It generates valid propositions about the typical characteristics of practical problems in the field, as well as the characteristics of conceivably handy and sustainable solutions to those problems, i.e. what we call prototypical solutions. In exceptional cases such as the "EEAS CH" case presented

below, those prototypical solutions can be implemented in a way that is documented and thus can be evaluated (Libiszewski 2015).

In this way, these qualification works can be treated as case studies on typical problems and prototypical solutions and contribute to reliable and relevant transformation knowledge in the discipline of applied linguistics. We structure our consideration in the form of an embedded multiple case design (Yin 2009: 46) as given in Table 1.

4. Practical Problems and Prototypical Solutions of Message Design

Consequently, we present key findings regarding the typical characteristics of practical problems and prototypical solutions, designed by positive-deviance practitioners in collaboration with the supervising academic teachers. The units of analysis derive from the theoretical framework presented above.

Table 1

		<i>Multiple Contexts and Cases in the Swiss Political Arena</i>	
		<i>Intermediary Communication</i>	<i>Government Communication</i>
Embedded Multiple Units of Analysis	Cases I-II	Campaign against the "Volksinitiative gegen die Masseneinwanderung"	Diplomatic Communications of the EU
	Contextualization	I.A	II.A
	Formation	I.B	II.B
	Realization	I.C	II.C
	Cases III-IV	Media Messages Concerning the Languages of the Country	Parliamentary Communication on Managerial Wages
	Contextualization	III.A	IV.A
	Formation	III.B	IV.B
Realization	III.C	IV.C	

4.1 Campaign Against the "Volksinitiative gegen die Masseneinwanderung"

I.A Contextualization: Practical Problems and Prototypical Solutions

The author (Enderli 2016) perceived that the discussion in the media was all about the topic of immigration. But the Initiative "gegen Masseneinwanderung", launched by the Swiss People's Party ("SVP"), was actually more extensive. However, the media scarcely wrote about the connected European poli-

cy issues. The author postulated that his organization should communicate fewer "hard facts" in the form of "naked numbers". It should communicate more consistently on the relations between those numbers. The critical framing of the people's initiative as "Abschottungsinitiative" did not work. This became very obvious as the responsible committee called the initiative "Masseneinwanderungsinitiative" and received much attention on issues such as the increasing stress of "density" perceived by the population.

I.B Formation: Practical Problems and Prototypical Solutions

The counter-campaign barely communicated stories about their issues and propositions. Their arguments were rather abstract. One of the main messages was that Swiss prosperity is threatened by the claims of the people's initiative. This was underlined argumentatively by opponents, instead of telling stories about the future of an integrated Switzerland. The same goes for the value of the bilateral agreements between Switzerland and the EU. According to surveys, they are well accepted but lack meaning for many people. What was needed were emotive stories narrated within the general campaign. These would have been attractive for journalists and tangible for people. The value of the bilateral agreements should be shown by concrete examples from everyday life. They can serve as a good foundation for the next campaign.

I.C Realization: Typical Practical Problems and Prototypical Solutions

There are more popular votes on European policy issues to come. To be well prepared for these campaigns, the author suggests

three general directions on which the model for media work can be built. They include the recommendations to tell more stories instead of showing numbers as well as a proactive framing ("priming") of pro-European issues.

4.2 Public Communications of the EU Member States in Switzerland

II.A Contextualization: Practical Problems and Prototypical Solutions

In the case of the public communications of the Delegation of the European Union in Switzerland (EEAS), the author conducted interviews and a media content analysis. He concluded that there was a lack of intensity and coordination of public statements by the embassies of EU member states in Switzerland. Based on these findings, he created a message design project. This project faced diverse challenges of the integration of its members, who initially had serious concerns about the obligation to use "top-down" messages. In answer to this, the author created the title "communicating diversity in unity" for his project. This was in accordance

with an established frame of collective European identity.

II.B Formation: Practical Problems and Prototypical Solutions

In the course of the discussion among the project members, different drafts of common key messages were developed and evaluated. The author calls this process "condensation", based on a technical term in linguistics denoting the search for content-rich and formally concise discursive acts (Baer 2007). In one key moment, the group changed its statement about the EU member states from the third person plural into the first-person plural. In the same spirit, they replaced the adjective "sovereign" states by "individual" states. By these two exemplary decisions, they allowed the speakers and writers to identify with the future strategic message ("The EU is a community of 28 individual states who share basic values. We have decided to pool our sovereignty in selected areas so as to achieve common objectives together," following Libiszewski 2015: 15).

II.C *Realization: Typical Practical Problems and Prototypical Solutions*

When it came to implementation in the daily work of communication management, there was still some opposition to the obligation to use templates as recommended by the scholars as well as by the project head. The latter accordingly thus created a document in which he drew a so-called "magic triangle" as a set of possible stories and arguments to be extracted as linear paths through diverse "narrative fields" of this triangle (for more details see Stücheli-Herlach 2017: 161-162).

4.3 Media Messages Concerning the National Languages

III.A *Contextualization: Practical Problems and Prototypical Solutions*

Switzerland is officially a multilingual country and is therefore in need of an advanced, tailor-made concept for language teaching in mandatory education. Coordinated by the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK), the Swiss Cantons have been working on harmonizing language teaching since 1975 but have not yet

reached a solution. In July 2016, the Swiss Federal Council initiated the consultation process on the amend of the Ordinance of the National Languages. In this regard, two press releases were issued on July 6, 2016, one by the General Secretariat of the Federal Department of Home Affairs (FDHA) on behalf of the Federal Council and the Swiss Federal Office of Culture (FOC), and one by the EDK. Faced with a highly controversial environment, the government presented three possible versions for a future law to harmonize language teaching in Switzerland. It was argued that the different possible versions react to different starting positions and needs of the cantons. Instead of declaring a final solution and risking a serious democratic conflict, the government opened a discussion about different possible solutions.

III.B *Formation: Practical Problems and Prototypical Solutions*

The author (Kindt 2016) of the case study analyzed the "design" of the press releases in order to learn something about message design for the deliberation-based culture of Swiss half-direct and federalist democracy. She compared the two press releases to

identify the characteristics of strategic discursive acts in this controversial context. The FDHA/FOC press release was aimed at the general public, but at the same time did not refrain from positioning itself politically, given its argumentative structure. Different from the EDK press release, it offers no invitation to discussion. By using highly connotational terms such as "multilingual", "ensuring the second national language", "mutual understanding of the language communities", "national solidarity", and "economic advantage" among others, the argument for a federal regulation of the issue is consequently enhanced. The buzzword phrases mentioned above form a system of values which can hardly be challenged. The EDK's press release, on the other hand, agrees with the system of values unfolded by the government. But it argues that the objective of harmonization could be reached without intervention by the federal government. By doing so, it completely conceals the history of the government's proposal. Instead of recognizing this, it claims that the cantons are able to organize language teaching by means of the concept of "competences" and argues with comprehensive expert knowledge. Overall, the comparison of the two press releases shows

how the formation of the strategic messages of the actors follows the logic of political "language strategies" (Klein 2014) and "argumentation maneuvers" (v. Eemeren 2010), as necessary in this context.

III.C Realization: Typical Practical Problems and Prototypical Solutions

The author of the case study could not analyze other expressions of the messages beyond the press releases. But she examined specific tasks and functions of government press releases such as the necessity of transparent and appropriate information. In this respect, her study revealed great differences between the argumentative "soundness" (v. Eemeren 2010) of the two texts, pointing out that the one by the EDK lacks some crucial features of explicit argumentation.

4.4 Parliamentary Votes to Support a Popular Initiative on Wages ("1:12")

IV.A Contextualization: Practical Problems and Prototypical Solutions

In his case study, the author (Härvelid 2016) investigated parliamentary votes to support the popular initiative on wages mentioned above. He analysed the verbatim records of 32 votes by 31 members of the Swiss Parliament belonging to the Swiss Social Democratic Party ("SP") respectively to the Green Party ("GP"). His investigation showed that the parliamentarians used keywords that were well known from earlier public debates on the same issue, such as "Abzocker", respectively "Abzockerei", as well as "Exzesse" or "Lohnexzesse" and "schamlose Bereicherung". By doing so, parliamentarians tried to connect their claims to the strong public support for a former popular initiative on the same issue that used the same keywords.

IV.B Formation: Practical Problems and Prototypical Solutions

The parliamentary votes often reproduced specific, but shared patterns of "policy stories". Four patterns could be identified, and they were used in 20 percent of the votes each. Most often the votes used the stories about ethical and social aspects of compensation. In contrast, economical aspects, although regularly thematised in the media, were rarely mentioned in the votes. Another finding was that the stories were quite often not told to an end. Typically, they lacked some information about the future and an expected "reward" for the implementation of the initiative.

IV.C Realization: Practical Problems and Prototypical Solutions

As a consequence of the fact that this investigation was on parliamentary votes only, it could not be examined how the messages of the parliamentarians were reproduced and varied in different situations. But it was a noticeable finding that there was a great variety of stories and arguments in the votes whereas references to a common story or main argument were

relatively rare. According to the principles of message design, one could conclude that the supporters of the “1:12”-initiative did not communicate in a really successful way. To be more convincing in the next debate about managerial wages, parliamentarians should analyse the public discussion about wage differences and elaborate one common policy story, which contains social and economic aspects and which appears in every statement in connection with different characters and is underlined with a good range of arguments. This story should be told in diverse ways with different characters in various situations. And it should show vividly what life would be like after the implementation of the debated concern.

5. Conclusion and Outlook

The case studies show that scientific knowledge about language use in the field of political communication can accelerate and improve problem-solving in the daily business of political communication. Furthermore, they can serve as examples for the evaluation and further development of relevant scientific knowledge by communities of practitioners as well as scientific scholars as

considered appropriate for applied linguistics (Knapp & Antos 2011; Perrin 2012). As such, they deliver insights into how “discursive acts” of political organizations or their members (Spiess 2011) emerge, i.e. how they are crafted by professionals in complex contexts of the present medialized political arena.

These insights to improve problem-solving and to understand professional practices by means of a joint effort of scholars and practitioners can be viewed as follows.

As far as the dimension of *contextualization* is concerned, the case studies reveal the importance of the adaptation of strategic messages not only to external (Case I), but also to internal (Case II) contexts as well as to the dynamics of controversial public debates (Case III and IV). Regarding the dimension of functional *formation*, they reveal the necessity of using storytelling devices (Case I), especially appropriate forms of subjectification and personalization (Case II) as well as strong value-based “common grounds”, symbolized for example by strong buzzword phrases (Case III). But the use of such devices can also make certain gaps in political concepts and stories transparent (Case IV). Finally, in the dimension of *structured realization*, the case studies

emphasize the challenge of delivering key messages proactively (Case I), of offering diverse narrative and argumentative options to the organization members (Case II) as well as the challenge of fulfilling specific expectations of pertinent genres of communication, for example in the form of democratic governmental communication (Case III).

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