

REVIEW

by Prof. Dimitar Vatsov, PhD,
Department of Philosophy and Sociology, NBU,
professional field 2.3 Philosophy

on the PhD thesis
"Linguistic Features of Fake News"
by Ruslana Margova
for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree PhD
in professional direction
2.1 Philology (General and comparative linguistics)
Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski",
Department of General, Indo-European and Balkan Linguistics

Ruslana Margova's PhD thesis "Linguistic Features of Fake News" has a total volume of 238 pages. It is structured in twelve chapters, and this numbering includes the Introduction and the Conclusion. Each of the chapters is divided into additional numbered paragraphs for clarity. The bibliography consists of over 400 titles in Bulgarian, English and French, which are used in the text of the dissertation. The text is author's and the citations are duly made. The abstract and the contributions to it accurately reflect the content of the text. Seven scientific publications on the topic of the dissertation are presented. All formal requirements for participation in the competition have been met. I have no conflict of interest with the candidate.

X X X

The main task of Margova's study is to find such linguistic (grammatical, but not only) features that serve to spread disinformation in the media and, accordingly, can serve to detect it. A special task is to check to what extent certain evidential forms in the Bulgarian language (renarrative, inferential and dubitative) do a similar job. Thus, according to its task, the dissertation is interdisciplinary: it crosses the border between linguistics and media studies bilaterally.

In addition, the problem of fake news and disinformation in the media is extremely acute today, and perhaps precisely because of this, it spills over into a very wide field – its boundaries are not well-defined. That is why Ruslana Margova is undertaking a large-scale effort to cover the problem in its breadth.

To mark its breadth, she uses the term 'fake news', but to avoid the blurring of meaning characteristic of a number of contexts of use of this term, she synonymizes it with 'disinformation'. "Disinformation" today is the stricter term - it implies 1) purposeful (intentional) production and dissemination of 2) false (untrue) information. But disinformation is also a more rigid term - it cannot cover some forms of propaganda and distorted information.

Therefore, the author first reviews the concepts used in media studies nowadays when the distortion of information is problematized. Many different sources have been collected, and through description of the uses of the concepts in them – in Chapter Two – a sort of short glossary of terms addressing the problem has been compiled. This glossary is an useful tool and should be cited as a contribution. Further, I would recommend deepening the analytical work on it: not simply to collect and list the uses (which is the main present contribution), but also to see more carefully in a comparative plan where the intersections are in the meanings of the individual concepts, and where they confront each other. Thus, the concepts will also be better operationalized as tools for empirical analysis.

The following chapters – the third, fourth and fifth – review a number of basic views on misinformation (but also on truth) in journalism, the social sciences and humanities, and philosophy. Thus, the researcher demonstrates broad awareness, but she also goes deeper sometimes (say, in an analysis of the cooperation maxims in Grice's) and succeeds (with the help of Bulgarian scholars such as Nitsolova) in securing additional analytical tools for the main task.

As a matter of fact, Ruslana Margova acquires the most serious analytical tools through a careful study of the Bulgarian linguistic tradition, treating the forms of mediated evidentiality in the Bulgarian language and in a comparative plan. Here, a comprehensive review has been carried out, in which the analytical contributions of both older authors such as Gerdzhikov, Mirchev, etc., as well as the newer

interpretations of the problem of the functions of renarrative by Nitsolova and Tarpomanova, to which the doctoral student adheres, are highlighted. After all, it is precisely on the basis of this careful reconstruction that it becomes possible to ask the main research question: can the renarrative be seen as a marker for disinformation in media publications.

Accordingly, the main contribution of the work is to show that it can. And also - through an analysis of a database of 621 media headlines, as well as comprehensive analyzes of 10 instances of renarrative use in publications - Margova shows some of the pragmatic functions that the use of renarrative in the media, and especially in media headlines, can play: to hide the author, to remove responsibility for verifying the truth of the information, etc.

However, this substantial contribution, it seems to me, also leads to an exaggeration or, to put it another way, to an inaccurate generalization. In the text of the dissertation, without saying it explicitly, one gets the impression that the renarrative *always seems* to "perform one pragmatic function, and that is to deceive. Precisely this form can also be indicated as a grammatical marker for disinformation." (Abstract, p. 37). Or "it may be assumed that information presented by renarrative can rarely be reliable." (Dissertation, p. 148)

However, this is not the case: renarrative can serve not just to make credible but also completely true statements. I will offer a brief analysis with the resources of philosophy of language to serve for interdisciplinary debate and possibly for a refinement of the apparatus further on!

Utterances that use renarrative are meta-performatives – they are utterances (performatives) that ex post cite or retell other/former utterances (performatives). However, what is characteristic of the renarrative is that it enthymematically omits the speaker who is being quoted - either because the speaker is unknown, or because it is clear (from the context) who he is, or - if it is in a title - this can be specified later. In any case, the grammatical construction itself clearly shows that it was not the actual speaker, but someone else – x – who made the utterance that is now being quoted.

Let's briefly analyze the title from case study 7 in the dissertation: "Petkov negotiated with Kamala Harris cheap gas since June" as a

speech act according to John Searle's formula: f (p). Here, the illocutionary force of the actual statement (of the media - Club Z in this case) is not expressed by an explicit performative verb, but can be easily reconstructed: *We report* (f) **that "Petkov negotiated with Kamala Harris cheap gas since June"** (p). Here we don't remove the quotation marks, because they indicate that something in the propositional content is missing – because a renarrative is used! If we are to fully analyze the propositional content, we must add what is enthymematically omitted by the renarrative: *We report* (f) **that x said that Petkov negotiated with Kamala Harris cheap gas since June** (p).

Can we now verify that this propositional content is true? We can, for example, using a simple semantic theory of truth: It is true that x said that Petkov had negotiated with Kamala Harris cheap gas since June, if this is directly verified. And it is verified in the article by direct reference to the government press service. Club Z is telling the truth - x really has said that. A completely different question is whether what was said by the government press office is true - whether the propositional content of the former performative, which is now being quoted by Club Z, is true. The government press office may be lying, but Club Z is quoting completely truthfully what they say.

In this case, the renarrative works not to instill doubt or uncertainty in what the government press office said - but to show maximum journalistic neutrality and service of truth: the journalist from Club Z hyper-precisely shows that he is quoting (in the headline) and exactly what he is quoting (in the text). It would be different if he had used the dubitative in the title - then he would have sown doubt! But now the journalist is making a truthful statement, which however refuses to sanction the truth or falsity of what he quotes.

I say all this not to dispute that renarrative can and often is used to push a lie, i.e. for disinformation. On the contrary, it is an important observation. However, I believe that this observation can be more carefully modalized: and possibly an additional typology can be made – a typology of the cases in which the renarrative, as well as the other linguistic markers indicated in the thesis, work as speech devices for disinformation; and respectively of the cases in which they do not work

like that. Because in itself – as a grammatical form – the renarrative is not a marker of misinformation.

In conclusion: The dissertation "Linguistic features of fake news" meets the academic criteria of the current competition. I expect the doctoral student to take a position on the substantive problem I posed during the defense. On the basis of her achievements so far and her answers during the public defense, I will vote for Ruslana Margova to be awarded the educational and scientific degree Doctor in professional field 2.1 Philology. Scientific specialty: General and comparative linguistics.

Sofia,
June 15, 2023

Sincerely:
Prof. Dimitar Vatsov, PhD