Chapter 7

Elite Communication and Legitimization of Violence during Inter–Group Conflicts

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ABSTRACT

A comparative content analysis was conducted across communication from elites involved in inter-group conflicts across two decades and from four different countries (the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Myanmar). A thematic coding scheme was developed using themes identified in the previous literature, Susan Benesch’s proposal on dangerous speech (2012) and perspectives from Social Identity Theory (1981). Coding and analysis revealed that across countries and temporal spans, elites bolster in-group and out-group distinctions and identity through their language choices, but typically avoid outright dehumanization as commonly assumed. Moreover, they excessively create non-falsifiable statements about current, past, or future events; and employ allegations against the intentions, plans and activities of the out-group. These non-falsifiable statements make a bulk of their speech or broadcasts. Several additional themes were identified as well which point to contextualization of communication.

INTRODUCTION

Studying communication between and within groups during times of conflict has been a scholarly and legal endeavor particularly since World War II. Over the years, a multitude of studies have appeared trying to understand the nature of such discourse and/or examination of particular, individual, political speeches occurring during these periods, however, rarely have scholars have focused upon thematic similarities in the discourse of empowered individuals across speeches, cultures, and temporal spans. Moreover, careful comparison of speech themes across countries and different instances of genocide has almost never been done (some comparative exceptions are Desrosiers, 2010; Lydic, 2010). A majority of existing literature on communication during violence does not appear to have a clear systematic

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analysis of messages (e.g., speeches or broadcasts), but rather, critical assessments of scattered political narratives including inputs from disciplines other than communication.

It has been suggested that inflammatory speech, where humans are equated with vermin, can be a “prelude to murder” (Benesch & Abramowitz, 2013). This is not hyperbole, given the evidence of violence in Kenya and Rwanda following the public dissemination of such speeches. In this context, the failure to examine consistent speech themes during times of intense inter-group conflict is remarkable, from both theoretical and practical perspectives. In terms of communication theory, it would seem essential to have a deeper understanding of the particulars of messaging that might play at least some kind of role in triggering subsequent violence. From a practical perspective; speech acts during conflicts may have two consequences: firstly, they might act as precursors to violence and in extreme cases genocide. Secondly, certain groups may bear psychological or social harms such as humiliation, fear or expulsion. This makes it pertinent to understand the dynamics of such dangerous speech so that a timely identification can lead to important preventive or controlling measures, such as inhibiting speakers and/or inoculating audiences (Benesch, 2012). Thus, it is both theoretically and practically important to investigate thematic patterns within such speeches.

This chapter uses an inductive approach to assess data and find the topical themes present within the speech of empowered individuals during various periods of genocide and mass violence in order to construct a coding scheme that might be useful for future events. In doing so, themes identified in the past literature, Susan Benesch’s framework on dangerous speech (2012), and Tajfel’s Social Identity Theory (1981) were used to develop a coding and classification scheme. The focus was on public speeches and broadcasts made by elites in four countries: Myanmar (Burma), Rwanda, former Yugoslavia and Sri Lanka. This study examined the presence of common themes (or lack thereof) which legitimized violence in elite communication in geo-political entities where incidences of intra-state, inter-group conflicts occurred over time.

BACKGROUND

The following section delineates some important themes which have been repeatedly identified in the literature on communication during conflicts. Appendix 1 also details the studies.

1. Myths and Symbolism: Scholars have suggested several characteristics that typify the communication of elites during intergroup conflicts, such as myths - which are modern versions of old stories or stories created a new, ethnic symbolism, narratives and rhetoric to fuel hatred and recruit volunteers (Bozic-Roberson, 2004; Kaufman, 2001). For instance, Serb nationalists in their rhetoric against other ethnic groups created a myth of a battle fought between Bosniaks and Serbs in the fourteenth century in Kosovo, which then was used to claim that Serb lands were invaded by Turks and made them (Serbs) into victims of violence (Mann, 2005). However, scholars believe that this was a false account used in war rhetoric; designed to create “ politicization of ethnicity” – the efforts made by then Serbian president Milosevic to use ethnic identity as the basis of argumentation and identification in his political narratives (Bozic-Roberson, 2004; Mann 2005)

Some work on rhetoric outside of Rwanda and former Yugoslavia has looked into elite communication during violent conflicts. Roy and Rowland (2003) found in Hindu rhetoric accusations against
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