

# Distinctive features of the temporal system of moral discourse exemplified in German-language media texts

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**Abstract** – This research is devoted to studying the specifics of the moral discourse temporal system of German-language media. Moral discourse is a specific means for the functioning of morality in a language. The study considers moral discourse to be a complex communicative phenomenon reflecting the basic elements of moral consciousness. Moral discourse is built at all levels of language. One of the linguistic ways of expressing moral discourse, which is found at the grammatical level of the texts, is temporality. It is proven that the temporal space of discourse is organised with prepositions, demonstrative pronouns, adjectives, participles, cardinal and ordinal numerals, adverbs of time and conjunctions. They contribute to the chronologically detailed reproduction of the sequence of events and create a sense of reality, as well as simulate the documentary account of events. The temporal distinctiveness of moral discourse emphasizes the continuing role of morality: its rules and regulations can be applied to past, present, and future. In the temporal system of moral discourse, the present tense plays the prevailing role, even when describing events that took place in the past. This fact suggests that moral norms are acknowledged to be of timely character and continuing value.

**Keywords**— *moral discourse; discourse; temporality; German-language media.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The processes of globalization that have engulfed the post-industrial world provoke changes in conventional societal attitudes, as well as having a negative influence on morality as one of the fundamental forms of collective consciousness, where morality is a key dimension of human existence and a measure of human values. Here appear characteristic features of modern society indicating a crisis of morality, such as negating traditional human values, putting material interests ahead of the spiritual ones,

commercializing social relations [1], and weakening prohibitions in private life [2]. Researchers of a range of moral issues claim that in current conditions humanity is losing developmental prospects, while at the same time, acquiring a number of vexing problems. These manifest themselves in the spontaneity of social processes, the increasing rate of destruction of cultural and natural human habitats, in the loss of a sense of the meaning of life, and the absence of a considerable part of spiritual values.

The linguistic domain draws attention to such levelling out of values, as well as in outlining the contours of the linguistic implementation of the moral component the present stage of people's lives. Moral discourse expresses an understanding and interpretation of this transformative reality from the point of view of morality.

Discourse as one of the main categories of communicative linguistics and modern social sciences is a complex and multidimensional object of research.

When describing the current state of linguistics, we first must realize that scholars are increasingly interested in studying various types of discourse: mass media [3], [4], [5], [6], scientific [7], [8], [9], critical [10], evaluative [11], ethical [12], religious [13], [14], legal [15], political [16], [17], [18], [19], [20], [21], insincere [22], pedagogical [23], humorous [24], medical-pedagogical [25], artistic [26], advertising [27], and sports discourse [28].

A large number of works devoted to discursive problems, however, indicate neither its full scope nor find a unified approach to its study and definition. On the contrary, the authors of numerous studies interpret the phenomenon of discourse through different scientific systems, so that the very concept of "discourse", as V.I. Karasik says, "became broader than the concept of 'language'" [29].

Probably, such a large number and sophistication of discourse definitions stems from the variety of existing concepts of discourse. Thus, V. E. Chernyavskaya, speaking about philosophical-historical, literary and linguistic concepts, highlights the following:

- the English-American linguistic tradition that understands discourse to be coherent speech, focusing on interactive communication between the sender and the recipient of a message;
- the cognitive-oriented tradition of discursive analysis by T. van Dijk and his followers, centred in Amsterdam. Van Dijk's understanding of discourse has entered linguistic research and is widely used, especially in Russian scientific works devoted to this topic. Within this approach, research focuses on the pragmatic side of understanding the coherence of discourse and strategies of generating and perceiving speech. However, it represents but one possible approach to interpreting the phenomenon of discourse;
- the German school of discursive analysis, founded by Uts Maas, Siegfried Jaeger, and Jurgen Link, is an advanced research direction. It takes the French historian, sociologist and linguist Michael Foucault's ideas as a basis. Discourse analysis in the works of these scholars is an ideologically oriented analysis of the text, allowing the exposure of relevant socio-historical information from the text [30].

Analysing various points of view on the problem of discourse typology in contemporary linguistics, it is possible to draw the following conclusion: Due to the fact that discourse is a communicative category, various communicative variables can be relevant for its classification. Therefore, we can point out the following types of discourse:

- by participants: institutional (political, diplomatic, administrative, legal, military, pedagogical, religious, mystical, medical, business, advertising, sports, scientific, stage and mass information), personal (existential, everyday language);
- by the emotional position of the agent (hate discourse, politeness discourse, etc.);
- by the relationships of the participants of the discourse (specific, private, conflict, democratic, hate, etc.);
- by the emotional and psychological tone of communication (sad, sentimental);
- by the purpose of communication (social, communicative, political, conflictive, authoritarian);
- by need (political, religious, conveying mass information, gluttonous, pedagogical, scientific, humorous, polemical, legal, military, business, street language, medical, medical-preventive, historical-cultural, pedagogical);
- by the communication channel (media discourse, electronic, television, epistolary, etc.).

It is also possible to divide discourse into different types through the knowledge presented in it (mostly by the type of concept). According to this criterion, there are, for example,

such types of discourse as religious, sympathetic, racist, mystical, and love discourses. For our purposes, it this category that encompasses moral discourse.

The analysis of moral discourse can encompass at least two discursive components. One is a moral vocabulary or lexicon (e.g., terms such as good, bad, admirable, shameful, expedient, and useful). Such vocabulary “expresses moral judgments of others’ violations and explains one’s own moral violations – to justify them, apologize, or declare intentions to do better” [31]. The present study, however, focuses on the role of a less obvious component: syntactical features [32] or a comparison of views on syntax in moral expressivism). We have chosen to examine the role of temporal markers because of their possible relationship to motivation. Moral discourse frequently involves rhetorical functions as well as the making of moral judgments. Indications of time can strongly affect one’s sense of the vividness or reality of a situation [33], and hence of the relevance of correct judgment and action.

Following Van Dijk's idea of discourse being a communicative phenomenon comprising goals and aims of its participants and other extralinguistic factors, together with the text [34], allows for an integrated approach to the study of the discursive space of morality and analysis of its features at different language levels. Our aim is to study the temporal space of moral discourse as one of the modes of its linguistic actualization. This objective involves the following goals: identifying and describing markers of temporality, as well as their specificity in the discourse of the German language press.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS (MODEL)

The research takes, as its empirical material, texts devoted to moral issues, selected from modern German-language media texts (about 5,000 pages) through the continuous sampling method (*Die Zeit*, *Focus*, *Der Spiegel*, and *Die Welt*).

To achieve these goals, this research uses the methods of linguistic analysis of texts, discourse analysis, and content analysis.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since the system of verbal tenses primarily expresses the temporal meaning of the sentence, we first use verbal tense frequencies to understand our research results.

In the analysed sentences 1420 out of 2 248 predicates are in the present tense (45 of them are in the the Präsens Konjunktiv), 601 are in the Präteritum and 167 are in the Perfect. The share of the Plusquamperfect and Future predicates is presented by 44 and 16 predicates respectively. According to this data, we find that in the moral discourse of German language media the present tense, so-called “historical present tense”, prevails. The use of the tense is a kind of stylistic device, “used in oral and written narrative in order to make the story more figurative or dynamic” [35].

The predominant use of the present tense in news media moral discourse portrays moral norms as real, not virtual: they exist in the present reality and are a measure of its evaluation.

In addition to verbal tenses, we find other ways of expressing temporality German language media moral discourse. The research shows that grammatical means involved in the formation of the temporal system of moral discourse are quantitative and ordinal numerals, prepositions, demonstrative pronouns, adjectives and participles, and temporal adverbs and conjunctions.

The markers that include cardinal numbers refer to the different duration of the action. This characteristic of time, called discreteness in the German language, finds its expression in the examples of moral discourse: it can be measured in seconds (*in einer Sekunde*), minutes (*in 7 Minuten, nach 20 Minuten*), hours (*zwei Stunden später, mehr als 4 Stunden, 2 Stunden lang*), (*nur 5 Tage später*), months (*3 Monate später, seit 2 Monaten*) and years (*vor 60 Jahren, vor über 10 Jahren, seit 2 Jahren, in 3 Jahren, 18 Jahre lang, fast 20 Jahre, gut zweihundert Jahre*).

Quantitative numerals indicate the age of the discourse participants (*mit 16, mit 18, mit 32, mit 56*), a period of the day (*7 Uhr morgens, um 5 Uhr morgens, um 8.16 Uhr morgens*) and year (*im Juli 1968, im Sommer des Jahres 1985, im Jahr 2000, 1997, seit 1941, zwischen 1998 und 2002, erst 2010, im November 2003, all von 1999 bis 2002*).

As for time markers containing ordinal numbers, they mostly indicate the date of any events or the regularity of their occurrence: *am 15. Oktober 1996, am 19. Juli 1979, am 22. Mai 2003, am 13. April 2004, im ersten Jahr, nach den Anschlägen vom 11. September, seit dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*.

Based on the foregoing, it is understood that the use of temporal markers in the moral discourse of German language news media, containing quantitative and ordinal numbers in their structure, indicates accuracy, scrupulousness, and the desire for detailed and chronologically correct representation of events. These markers create a sense of reality, as well as simulate the documentary account of events. This is probably due to the specifics of morality itself. Morality is a complex but holistic system. The content of its structural elements is precisely defined, and the observance of moral norms is mandatory for all members of the society. Nevertheless, moral norms cannot be made absolute. Although being universal and requisite, they can change their emphasis since society continuously developing with changing conditions. And in this context, evaluativity plays an important role as an essential property of morality. Morality always supposes approval or condemnation of social life phenomena involving the behavior of an individual, group, work team, etc. Evaluativity identifies if a given behaviour or motive meets the requirements of morality, while also taking into consideration specific circumstances and possibilities for people's actions based on recognized moral values [36].

Thus, we can infer that an objective moral assessment of the event becomes possible only due to its detailed examination. In the type of discourse under study, this feature is realized in the accurate and detailed description of an event through analysing temporal markers with structurally embedded quantitative and ordinal numerals.

As previously mentioned, prepositions also serve as temporary markers of moral discourse (e.g.: *ab, an, bei, für, in, nach, seit, vor, während*), demonstrative pronouns (e.g.: *diese, dieser, dieses, jene, jener, jeder*), adjectives and participles (e.g.: *ganz, kommend, lang, nächste, uralt, vergangen*).

Analysis of this empirical material shows that the importance of temporal markers in the news media moral discourse:

- Can be directly related to time, including its length or its division into parts, e.g.: *am Nachmittag, beim Abendessen, am nächsten Morgen, den ganzen Tag, an diesem sonnigen Frühlingssonntag, am Mittwoch, in jenen Tagen, am Wochenende, diese Woche, vergangene Woche, im Februar, im März, im März dieses Jahres, Monat für Monat, seit einigen Monaten, ab dem Kommenden schuljahr Seit dem vergangenen Jahr, vor Jahr und Tag, seit dem Sommer vergangen Jahres, Viele Jahre lang, im vergangenen jahrzehnt, seit jahrzehnten, in einer kritischen Zeit, Lange Zeit, seit uralten Zeiten*; and

- May not have a direct temporal meaning. From this perspective, it indicates an event or time interval, for example: *am Ende seiner Karriere, seit diesem Kampf, während einer Vergewaltigung, nach jedem Mord, nach jedem Verbrechen, in der Oktoberrevolution, nach dem Herztod der kommunistischen Utopie, bei Amtsauftritt, seit in Europa die Grenzen offen sind, nach der Atomkatastrophe, zu Beginn des berufsverkehrs*.

Adverbs of time represent nother group of temporal markers (*abends, bald, damals, danach, dann, erst, früher, gerade, gestern, heute, immer, inzwischen, irgendwann, jetzt, kurz vorher, lange, manchmal, morgens, nie, niemals, neuerdings, oft, schon längst, selten, später, stundenlang, viel später, wenig später, zeitgleich*) and conjunctions (*als, Dann, nachdem*). These language units, in turn, can also be divided into two groups according to:

- Frequency (*nie, niemals, selten, manchmal, oft, immer*), and

- The time when an event takes place (*damals, schon lange, neuerdings, bald, längst, bevor, früher, gestern, vorher kurz, wenig später, später viel, seit langem, später, irgendwann, jetzt, heute, gerade, zeitgleich, dann, danach*).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The analysis of temporal characteristics suggests the following conclusions in reference to their role in the moral discourse of German language news media:

- The research shows that grammatical means involved in the formation of the temporal system of moral discourse are quantitative and ordinal numerals, prepositions, demonstrative pronouns, adjectives and participles, adverbs of time, and conjunctions. They contribute to the chronologically detailed reproduction of the sequence of events and create a sense of reality, as well as simulate the documentary account of events. The chronological accuracy of moral discourse is determined by the specificity of morality itself, to be exact, by such an essential peculiarity as evaluativity. Making a moral assessment requires taking into account the specific

circumstances described with temporal markers structurally containing quantitative and ordinal numerals. The temporal distinctiveness of moral discourse emphasizes the enduring role of morality: its rules and regulations can be applied to the past, the present, and the future.

- The temporal system of moral discourse clearly demonstrates the fact that the present tense prevails. It is also used to describe events that took place in the past. The latter comprises the so-called “historical present”. The main use of the present tense in the type of discourse under study speaks for the relevance and continuing value of moral norms.

Obviously, this research is potentially open-ended. Studying discourse as one of the basic categories of modern linguistics is appealing, first of all, through its involvement of cultural, socio-psychological and cognitive aspects of human activity.

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