

Stancetaking on risk: a socio-cognitive approach to situated discourse analysis

V. Ushchyna*

Lesya Ukrainka Eastern-European National University, Lutsk, Ukraine

Kyiv National Linguistic University, Kyiv, Ukraine

*Corresponding author. E-mail: uval@ukr.net

Paper received 20.05.15; Accepted for publication 02.06.15.

Abstract. This research has intended to focus on the ways stances on risks are construed in terms of linguistic features, including some structural and formal qualities, and how these features are related to social interaction. Among the objectives of this study is the description of the ways stances on one and the same problem (namely, the risks of important political choices) are taken by discourse participants under different communicative conditions.

Keywords: *stance, stancetaking, risk, risk discourse situation, socio-cognitive approach, risk frame*

The change in the nature of risk perception and risk communication in the early 21st century has been linked to the transformation from modernity to late modernity or even late post-modernity – concepts that are integral to debates about the contemporary nature of risk [1; 7; 11; 12]. Risk communication is now embedded in the wide social and political contexts. As risk judgments are shaped by social events and actions, these judgments may in their turn influence the shaping of the social events and actions. The hypothesis of this research is the assumption that “risks” may include not just real but hypothesized accidents and problems that depend upon the possible decisions of collective and individual subjects of risk.

We claim that risks and risky events are portrayed through various risk signs – both verbal (language) and non-verbal (images and symbols) – in order to manipulate the desired social, political and cultural movements in society. The experience of risk, therefore, is not only an experience of danger and physical harm but the result of processes by which groups and individuals learn to acquire or create interpretations of risk [9, p. 203].

Living in the world that we ourselves construct in discourse and by discourse, we invent new risks and create new dangers. Changing the semantics of many words, we change the world around us, and not always for the better. The communication of risk to the risk bearer becomes part of the political struggle [9, p. 21]. Politicians and newsmakers constantly warn people about risks and dangers of their wrong choices, predominantly associated with their political opponents. The notion of risk becomes a vehicle of manipulation by which politicians create resources with which to bargain with people in the process of achieving their political goals.

Countless risks confront us: from personal risks (such as diseases, life-styles or eating habits) to public risks (such as economic crisis or genetically-modified food); from voluntary risks (such as smoking, drug or Internet addiction) to involuntary risks (such as environmental pollution or climate change). In this study, we examine the process of manipulation by the notion of RISK as a discourse stance-taking on risk. Discourse **stance** is seen here as a missing link between the individual cognition, language formulation and the social surrounding in risk communication. Thus, according to the socio-cognitive approach, used in this study, stance is a “dynamic construct that is mutually constructed by interlocutors throughout the communicative process” [10, p. 331].

In the discourse situations that have been analyzed, the notion of ‘risk’ is an important part of stance-taking. Risk

receives a subjective interpretation in the present study, and therefore ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ connotations of taking risks directly depend upon the stances of the communication participants. The way that stances on risks are constructed linguistically is analyzed with regard to semantic categories of risk such as ‘danger’, ‘hazard’, ‘choice’, ‘chance’, ‘harm’, ‘gain’, ‘possibility’, ‘victim’, ‘risky situation’, ‘beneficiary’ etc. Fillmore & Atkins’ [5] analysis of “the risk frame” further helps us understand the different aspects of theoretical approaches to risk as the object of human interaction.

The term ‘stance’ has been used in a number of different ways in the literature related to discourse [2; 3; 8; 13]. There is no unanimity among scholars in terms of their approaches to the investigation of stance in the linguistic literature, but many of them are related to the study of the available resources for expressing thoughts and feelings in the course of interaction between individuals. Stance is often divided into epistemic and affective. Epistemic stance is usually taken to mean how a speaker signals about his / her knowledge, the source of this knowledge (*evidentiality*) and the relationship towards the proposition produced (*modality* = certainty / uncertainty, assertiveness / probability). Affective stance concerns the expression of emotions, evaluations and attitudes towards the objects of stancetaking or other stance-takers (subjects).

Although epistemic and affective stances are separated, they are inherently connected: as Luhmann argues, risks have to do with expectations, which can be more or less (un-)certain [11, p. 307]. Expectations are linked with knowledge and experiences of the past, and they can be developed to the representations of everyday knowledge and personal experiences. On the other hand, what one considers as risky depends not just on knowledge but on a person’s sociocultural and individual values (evaluations) and emotions.

The following analysis is based on the public political rhetoric (including advertisements, TV programmes, newspapers and Internet publications) held in August–December 2013, devoted to the failed Ukraine-EU Association, which triggered mass protests in Ukraine. The data was gathered by searching for “Ukraine, EU Association”, and “Ukraine, risk” in the newspaper database search engine. The period of search includes August 2013 through December 2013. The analysis is mainly concentrated on two stages of the discursive activity: (1) preparation for signing the European Union’s Association with Ukraine; (2) political crisis in Ukraine caused by the re-

fusal from the Association. The corpus includes 28 texts, total amount of 71 484 words.

The supposition about the situated nature of stance implies the necessity of identifying certain discourse situations as the situations of risk – outlining the discourse context for the construction of stance. In order to achieve this end, it was essential to devise a prototypical conceptual model of the risk situation meant to serve as a basis for further analytical moves. FrameNet, based on a theory of meaning called Frame Semantics, deriving from the work of Fillmore *et al.* [6], offered its version of the RISK situation model. This model served as a conceptual founda-

tion for the analysis of stance, framed by the situational context of RISK.

The RISK frame consists of the system of interdependent components, uniting different abstract notions in a verb frame, which were called by Ch. Fillmore “semantic roles” that are treated as the basic constituents of a frame [4]. In the semantics of the word “risk” there is a reference to the possibility of some undesirable consequences as a result of the subject’s behavior. Thus, the basic constituents of the frame “risk” are AGENT, PATIENT, BENEFICIARY, INSTRUMENT, AIM, RISK OBJECT, and SOURCE OF THREAT.

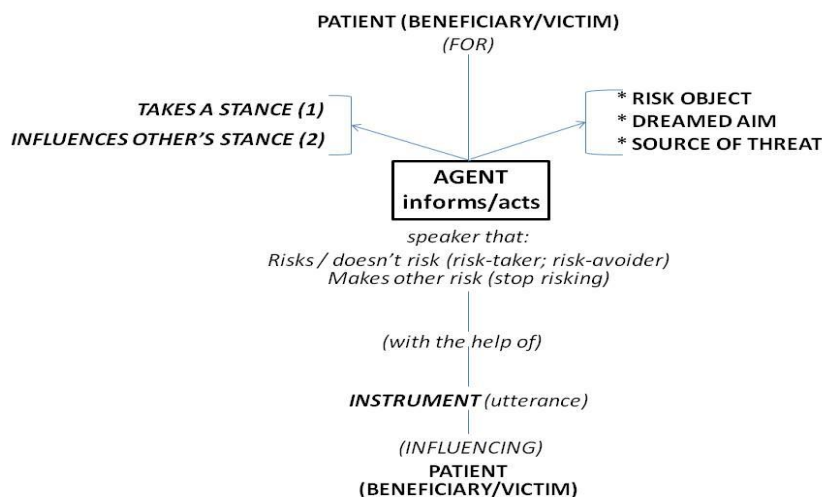


Fig. 1. Frame of meta-communicative RISK situation

The active role in the communicative risk event belongs to the AGENT who is the source of actions and the utterance producer. Very often AGENT acts for the sake of a PATIENT (sometimes himself) or the third party. He/she produces an utterance (INSTRUMENT), by which he/she outlines his/her stance or tries to influence the stance of the PATIENT in a risk discourse situation.

The RISK frame was used as a basis for socio-cognitive analysis of stance-taking as a decision-making in the situation of risk. The linguistic analysis of the RISK frame allowed assuming that risks have always something to do with **choices** and **decisions** made by a single subject (or a group of subjects as a social entity). The choices and decisions in its turn may cause either a GAIN or a LOSS. The conceptualization of the situation according to the RISK frame and scenario can be found already in the headlines of numerous publications where the authors mention the CHOICE which had to be made by Ukraine, for example: “Ukraine’s Choice”, “Ukrainian Choice of Russian Bear”, “A Fork in the Road?” “Ukraine between EU Association and the Eurasian Customs Union”, “Between two stools” etc.

On the basis of the discourse analysis of various mass media sources (both Ukrainian, Russian and Western), it was discovered that A PATIENT (Ukraine as a risk-taker) has to make a RISKY CHOICE – to be integrated in one of the world Unions – either a European Union or a Customs Union: “Putin has presented the Ukrainian leaders with an impossible choice. Either they consent to the dismemberment of their country. Or they fight a war they cannot win” (Aslund 2013).

Linguistically the CHOICE in a RISK frame presupposes a certain lexico-grammatical structure of the utterance: “either/or”, “if/when”, “in case of”, e.g.: “We all are soon to face a bleak choice”. “We can choose to surrender any responsibility we have to protect Ukraine from further Russian incursion. Or we can mount a last-ditch attempt to deter Russia from furthering its imperial ambitions” (Lucas 2014).

The stance-takers fairly often built their stances in the conceptual frame of RISK, however filling the same frame slots with different contents. Two main ways of manifesting the stances on the above-mentioned problem in the RISK frame were established – supporting and criticizing.

(1) The speaker/author of the written publication supports the European integration. In this case a PATIENT (=Ukraine as a RISK-taker) is shown as a BENEFICIARY, if it chooses EU and VICTIM in case of choosing the Customs Union. The speaker’s stance can be formulated “in favor of the integration with EU” or SUPPORTING STANCE as he/she sees it as a GAIN for Ukraine, while a Customs Union as a LOSS. While verbalizing this stance, the speakers dwell upon BENEFITS (GAINS) of European choice as opposed to LOSSES of joining the Euroasian Union, e.g.: “In the long term, the EU would add 11, 8% to Ukraine’s GDP, while the Customs Union would reduce it by 3,7 percent”, “DCFTA would substantially increase trade whereas the Customs Union would reduce it”. “The Eurasian Union would bear the flaws of modern Russia: neglect of human rights, selective justice and omnivorous corruption”.

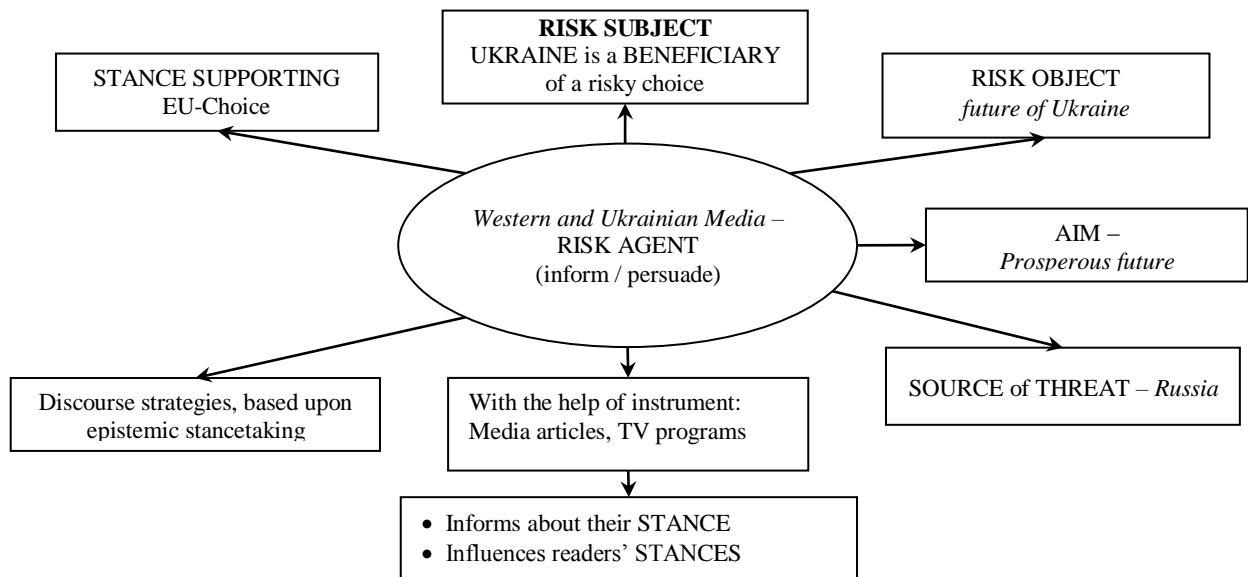


Fig. 3. Stance, supporting EU integration of Ukraine, represented in the RISK frame

(2) If the speaker/author supports a further integration of Ukraine in the Customs Union, a PATIENT (Ukraine) is shown as a BENEFICIARY, if it joins the Customs

Union and a VICTIM if it integrates into the EU. This stance can be nominated as “in favor of the integration with the Customs Union”.

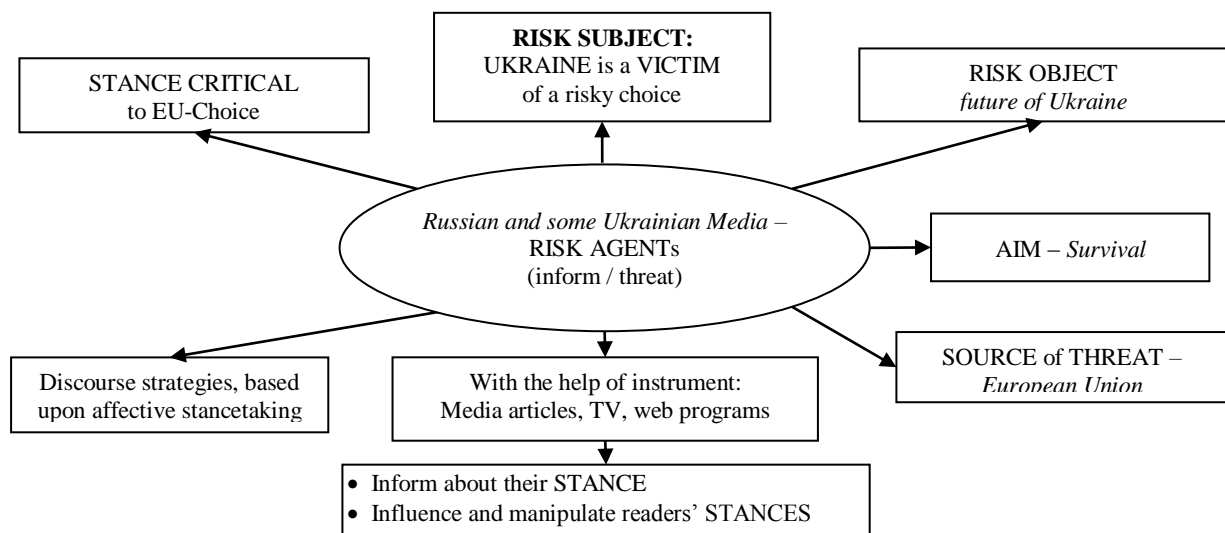


Fig. 4. Stance, criticizing EU integration of Ukraine, represented in the RISK frame

Proponents of the Customs Union Choice of Ukraine verbalize their stances using rather rhetoric of threats than “decision-making” argumentation. They do not offer any choice to Ukraine in this risky situation. The only possible way out for Ukrainians according to the subjects of this stance is returning to the “russkiy mir” orbit. It’s a “death or dare” choice, “European choice is *euthanasia for Ukraine*”, “In reality – just ahead, lies the economic collapse of the whole country. Ukraine is flying towards this on a calculated path. Passengers will be hurt. Not all will survive (Kiselyov, September 2013). “We are preparing to tighten customs procedures if Ukraine makes the *suicidal step* to sign the association agreement with the EU” (Glazyev, 2013).

In the above-mentioned examples European choice of Ukraine is metaphorically called “ *euthanasia*”, “ *collapse*”

and “ *suicidal step*”, while the decision-makers (Ukrainian people) are compared to the “passengers” of a falling plane.

Unlike the objective parameters of the situation, speaker’s stance belongs to its subjective as well as intersubjective part, including epistemic, affective and interactional components. One of the political realities of the modern world is that political actors tend to use stance-taking in discourse as a means for framing, assigning and controlling risks, and thus, manipulating large audiences. The reality we live in and the reality constructed by the political discourse are often mismatched. The concept of risk presupposes stance-taking, by which subjects try to make the unpredictable consequences of civilian decisions predictable and controllable. Risk society becomes “a stage” where “risk thinking” (the intentions to calculate and control future events) produces more risks.

The sad reality of the latest events in Ukraine demonstrates that it is possible to control the wide audiences, influence the state developments and even start the wars mutilating the information about risks. Ukrainian conflict 2014 is totally based upon massive semantic manipulations. The notion of risk became central for the political discourse in the conditions of vital and responsible choices Ukrainians have been facing lately.

This study shows that the discourse of those who were “against” the Ukraine’s alteration of its geopolitical course

and integrating with Europe was more resourceful and manipulative, but less factual and informative. They grounded their argumentation on the imagery of risk, fear and danger. The subjects of European choice though exploited more expert strategies in their stancetaking; thus, basically constructing epistemic rather than affective stances. It was also revealed that the proponents of the European Union tended to formulate their stances on the basis of professional analysis and calculations, whereas the counter stances were based on biased assumptions and RISK scenarios.

REFERENCES

- [1] Beck, U. Living in the World Risk Society // Economy and Society, London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. – 2006. – Vol. 35, No 3. – P. 329-345.
- [2] Biber, D., Finegan E. Styles of stance in English: Lexical and grammatical marking of evidentiality and affect // Text. – 9. – 1989. – P. 93-124.
- [3] Du Bois, J. The Stance Triangle // Stancetaking in Discourse / Ed. by R. Englebretson. – Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007. – P. 139-182.
- [4] Fillmore, Ch. Frame Semantics. // Linguistic Society of Korea (Ed.). Linguistics in the Morning Calm. - Seoul: Hanshin, 1982. – P. 111-138.
- [5] Fillmore, Ch.J. Toward a frame-based lexicon: the semantics of RISK and its neighbors / Ch.J. Fillmore, B.T. Atkins // Frames, Fields and Contrasts [ed. by A. Lehrer, E.F. Kittay]. – Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992. – P. 75-102.
- [6] Fillmore, Ch., Johnson C., Petruck M. Background to Framenet // International Journal of Lexicography. 16 (3). – 2003. – P. 235-250.
- [7] Giddens, A. Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.
- [8] Jaffe, A. Introduction: The Sociolinguistics of Stance / Alexandra Jaffe // Stance: Sociolinguistic Perspectives / Ed. by A. Jaffe. – Oxford : OUP, 2009. – P. 3-28.
- [9] Kasperson, J., Kasperson R. The Social Contours of Risk: Publics, Risk Communication and the Social Amplification of Risk. – London: Earthscan, 2005.
- [10] Kecskes, I., Fenghui Z. Activating, seeking, and creating common ground. A socio-cognitive approach // Pragmatics and Cognition. – No 17. – V. 2. – 2009. – P. 331-335.
- [11] Luhmann, N. 1993. Risk : a Sociological Theory. – New York: Walter de Gruyter. – 236 p.
- [12] Social Theories of Risk and Uncertainty / Ed. by Jens O. Zinn. – New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. – 262 p.
- [13] Stancetaking in Discourse: Subjectivity, Evaluation, Interaction / Ed. by R. Englebretson. – Amsterdam : John Benjamins, 2007. – 323 p.

References for Illustrative Material

- Aslund, A. (2013) Ukraine’s Choice: European Association Agreement or Eurasian Union. Policy Brief. – Peterson Institute for International Economics. – September. No PB 13-22.
- Kiselov, E. (2013) Eutanasia po-ukrainski [“Ukrainian Euthanasia”] (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rT28rsApqF4>)
- Lucas, E. (2014) I hope I’m wrong, but historians may look back and say this was the start of World War III. // *Daily Mail*. – April 15, 2014 (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article2605578/Edward-Lucas-I-hope-Im-wrong-historians-look-say-start-World-War-III.html>)