Res Rhetorica

ISSN: 2392-3113

Mediated Rhetoric of Recent Conflicts

12 (2) 2025

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Introduction to the thematic issue “Mediated Rhetoric of Recent Conflicts”

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Introduction to the thematic issue "Mediated Rhetoric of Recent Conflicts"

This issue was conceived to explore the rhetorical dimensions of conflict discourses as reflected in contemporary media landscapes. It was to show how established rhetorical categories and analytic protocols can be adapted to making sense of and explaining the mechanisms of today's conflicts, both real and imagined. In an era marked by hybrid warfare, disinformation, and polarized media ecosystems, understanding how conflicts are rhetorically constructed and mediated has become crucial for both scholars and practitioners. It was developed in collaboration with the CORECON project (https://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/corecon/) that explores the coverage and reception of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in a multi-disciplinary perspective of language and rhetoric, journalism and mediation and politics and security studies.

The call for this thematic issue was proposed with a set of underlying assumptions in mind. One of them is that while rhetorical communication may be a means of eliminating difference and clear up misunderstanding among individuals and communities, it may also give rise to new conflicts and can be purposefully used to intensify clashes. These conflicts may be represented as simple differences, contrasts, discords and dissents, but they may escalate to arguments and attacks, opposition and abuse, hate, hostility and even violence. The linguistic and semiotic constructions of recent conflicts often depend on the situational and cultural contexts and the affordances of multimodal communication technologies (including online and social media platforms) used to mediate them, which is especially pertinent given their proliferation in the 21st century. The contributions in this issue employ a wide array of methodologies, from discourse-historical approaches and cognitive discourse analysis to semiotics and computational rhetoric, reflecting the multifaceted nature of conflict mediation in contemporary media.

As editors, we were surprised with the number of inquiries and submissions from scholars representing various disciplines and research orientations, and we regret not being able to accommodate many illuminating studies in this issue: we needed to prioritize variety of media contexts and the intelligibility and coherence of conflict studies, on top of the rhetorical orientation of the journal. For the same reason we had to decline some submissions exploring not-so-recent conflicts and comparative studies with a historical focus, or those exploring conflict-ridden international relations rather than mediated rhetoric.

The issue opens with a study by **Piotr Cap**, who combines critical cognitive discourse analysis and rhetorical theory to explore legitimization strategies that Polish politicians employ during election campaigns in his article "Constructing alternative futures of Poland: (de)legitimizing conflict, populist stance and liberal politics in leadership and campaign discourse." The dynamic of an essentially conflict-charged speech rhetoric of the populists and the liberals is explored in view of the effectiveness of rhetorical maneuvers that respective leaders use to project and justify alternative future visions of Poland.

In "The myth of the Israel Defense Forces through the lens of critical rhetoric" **Michał Mokrzan** and **Marta Songin-Mokrzan** look closely at the posts published on the Israeli Defence Force's official Facebook profile between October 2023 and January 2025, tracing selected rhetorical devices that construct the myth of the IDF as a moral organization. This includes persuasion through ethos, character and euphemisms. They draw on Foucault's discourse theory, Barthesian semiology and Burke's critical rhetoric to argue for the need of constant demystification and demythologization of official discourses, especially if they glorify or normalize violence.

Within the scope of the CORECON project, **Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska** and **Jan Paszczyński** analyze salient argumentative schemes that are characteristic of, but also problematic for, the Polish public deliberations on the acceptable degrees and forms of assistance provided to Ukraine and Ukrainians during the war. "Rhetorical and linguistic devices in the argumentation against supporting Ukraine in the radicalized Polish media sphere" reports on an analysis of a purposive sample of online materials posted by radical opponents to Poland's aid to Ukraine. The study identifies dominant *topoi*, fallacies and rhetorical maneuvers that tend to be employed to make these claims appealing, especially to disenfranchised publics.

In a related manner, **Marcin Deutschmann** and **Jędrzej Olejniczak**, in "Unwanted encounters: Anti-Ukrainian rhetoric in the social media reception of migrants by the Polish far-right" use the CORECON corpus to measure the intensity and scope of rhetorical resources that were recruited to express negative sentiment about Ukrainian immigrants in Poland by selected far-right organizations and

politicians. The study combines quantitative approaches to rhetoric – including the tools that are used to automate the measures of hateful speech – with a detailed analyses of anti-immigrant *topoi* applied strategically for breeding division and resentment against Ukrainians while capitalizing on fear and sense of injustice among Poles.

By first operationalizing the concept of "the rhetoric of anger" **Magdalena Mateja** provides us with "A case study of Polish farmers' protests against the import of grain from Ukraine." The study employs several methodological approaches from the intersection of social sciences and humanities, including discourse analysis, semiotic analysis, and action analysis to describe in detail the various dimensions of persuasive communication during farmer protest actions, as they were being reported by the popular general news portal rmf24.pl throughout 2023 and 2024.

Two articles relate to the rhetorical devices and argumentation used by Russian propaganda in the ongoing war against Ukraine. "More than words: Argumentative structures as a tool of disinformation in Sputnik Mundo" by **Anna Nowakowska-Głuszak** analyzes operators and connectives in articles published on the Spanish-language pro-Kremlin news portal Sputnik Mundo. The study demonstrates that manipulation is not only a matter of content but also of discourse structure. Categories derived from Anscombre and Ducrot's theory of argumentation in language are used to look at selected articles covering NATO's Steadfast Defender exercises in Europe in order to show how Russian propagandas challenge official Western narratives, delegitimize NATO's actions, and promote a Kremlin-aligned interpretation of geopolitical events.

Meanwhile **Nadia Gergało-Dąbek** follows the discourse-historical approach and applies the concept of mental models to show how certain recurring *topoi* of "artificiality," "primitiveness" and "hostility" are used by Russians to diminish the status of the Ukrainian language. "Language as a front of conflict: Russian discourse on the Ukrainian language in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war" exemplifies numerous instances of depreciations and delegitimizations of Ukrainian linguistic sovereignty and national identity, which can be perceived as a coordinated campaign fitting in Russia's neo-imperialist strategy of subjugation.

There are two articles that attend to how selected Polish media outlets engage in conflict propagation in the context of Polish political coverage. **Joanna Szylko-Kwas** contrasts news bulletins *Wiadomości* and *Fakty* to spotlight polarization and politicization of television newscasting. In "Traitor, cheater, coward: The leaders of the two largest political parties in television newscasts during the 2023 general election campaign," she looks at the respective portrayals of party leaders and identifies the biased schemas, frames and narratives that Polish televised news outlets employ when they engage in campaigning rather than in reporting.

In a different context, **Karolina Brylska** applies Burkean rhetoric to interrogate the news content aired by four major Polish TV stations to account for "Strategic narratives in Polish TV news coverage of the 2018 Polish-Israeli diplomatic crisis." The study demonstrates conflicted storylines – or a political gameplay – where some reporters assert Poland's duty to defend truth and its reputation on the global stage and others maneuver around the issue of challenging Polish-Jewish relations.

In the two articles in the "Varia" section of this issue, one can read about unique strands of rhetorical research, such as the backstage of preparing American presidential addresses and other official statements. **Iwona Świątczak-Wasilewska**'s "Speechwriting in and beyond the White House: Selected international perspectives on aspects of speechwriting in government and business" explores interview data that prove that contemporary speechwriters' communication expertise and media awareness remain vital to shaping and conveying policy.

In the only Polish-language contribution to his issue, **Natalia Kowalska-Elkader** analyzes three radio broadcasts devoted to different armed conflicts from various historical periods, using the concepts of "thick" and "thin" representation in the context of sonic rhetoric. "The war's echoes thunder in my ears: Towards the rhetoric of sound" shows how repetition, cacophony, and the use of low frequencies, which enhance the emotional and material impact, shape both aesthetics and semantics of radio accounts of war.

The issue closes with a student "reaction" essay in which **Oskar Tomala** revisits the latest Munich Security Conference and explains the rhetorical devices resorted to by U.S. Vice-President J.D. Vance in his speech on the challenges facing global security. The analysis focuses on the rhetoric of fear, the use of anecdotes, implied information and strategic vagueness, and in-group/out-group framing and explains how Vance positions himself as a moral authority, criticizing European politics in a purported defence of democratic values.

We hope that this collection not only advances scholarly debates on mediated rhetoric and conflict but also encourages critical reflection on the ethical and societal implications of conflict communication in a globally connected media sphere.