Proximization Theory: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Fields

Piotr Cap
University of Łódź
http://ia.uni.lodz.pl/anglistyka/ZPJ?piotr_cap
Proximization as a concept: a non-technical description

- Legitimization strategy in political interventionist discourse involving THEM (‘bad’) vs. US (‘good’) opposition
- Strategy of presenting THEM’s actions as increasingly closer/consequential/threatening to US
- Strategy of evoking fear appeals to solicit legitimization of pre-emptive response
Proximization as a theory: (inter)disciplinary components

- Forced construals of DS organization (US center; THEM periphery) and changes in this organization (THEM encroaching upon US) – cognitive domains/levels of space, time, value

- Strategic deployment of set amounts of lexical choices (derived from the 3 domains) to force specific construals to fit the changing contextual requirements – pragmatic and lexical levels

- Pragmatics – ‘upward’ link to the cognitive; ‘downward’ link to the lexical
Two examples reflecting proximization
(corpus – American anti-terrorist rhetoric 2001-2010, c. 400 presidential speeches)

• Example 1 (G.W.Bush, 26 Feb 2003)

On a September morning, threats that had gathered for years, in secret and far away, led to murder in our country on a massive scale (...) Our country is a battlefield in the first war of the 21st century (...) The dangers of our time must be confronted forcefully, before we see them again in our skies and our cities. Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction are a direct threat to our people and to all free people.
Two examples reflecting proximization (corpus – American anti-terrorist rhetoric 2001-2010, c. 400 presidential speeches)

Example 2 (G.W. Bush, 19 Nov 2003)

This evil [dictatorship, radicalism] might not have reached us yet but it is in plain sight, as plain as the horror sight of the collapsing towers.

Different kinds of proximization following from different contextual premises/requirements in different phases of the legitimization period. Premises here: WMD /no WMD.
(S)patio-(T)emporal proximization vs (A)xiological proximization

- **Spatial proximization**: forced construal of THEM-instigated events/actions as physically endangering US (viz. Example 1)
- **Temporal proximization**: forced construal of the NOW frame as *the* moment for US to start action to preempt the near future THEM invasive action; symbolic centralization of the NOW (viz. Example 1)

vs

- **Axiological proximization**: forced construal of a gathering ideological conflict between US values and THEM values, eventually materializing in THEM physical impact upon US (viz. Example 2)
(S)patio-(T)emporal proximization vs (A)xiological proximization: why ‘vs’?

- Interventionist discourses show A’s compensatory potential (for the loss of (premises for) S-T)
- How to prove it? At lexico-grammatical level, through corpus counts of choices qualified as ‘spatial’, ‘temporal’, ‘axiological’. Compensatory regularities endorse the S-T-A model (legitimization constant, proximization types variable, context-driven, applied strategically - viz. title)
- We need 3 frameworks (S,T,A) that will (i) define lexico-grammatical choices as ‘spatial’, ‘temporal’, ‘axiological’, and (ii) make the choices quantifiable members of S, T, and A framework categories
S and A frameworks, problems with T framework

• S framework (skeleton version)

1. NPs construed as US, elements of the center of the DS (USA, American people, our people/nation/country/society, free people/nations/countries/societies/world, democratic people/nations/countries/societies/world)

2. NPs construed as THEM, elements outside the center of the DS (Iraq, Saddam Hussein, Iraqi regime/dictatorship, terrorists, terrorist organizations/networks, extremists/radicals, foreign regimes/dictatorships)

3. VPs of motion and directionality construed as markers of movement of THEM towards US [move along (with their plans to attack us), set their course (to attack us), head for confrontation (with us)]
S and A frameworks, problems with T framework

- A framework (skeleton version)

1. NPs construed as US values (freedom, democracy, justice, progress)
2. NPs construed as THEM values (dictatorship, radicalism, extremism)
3. Discourse structures involving the materialization of ideological conflict in the form of physical clash (recall Example 2)

This evil [dictatorship, radicalism] might not have reached us yet but it is in plain sight, as plain as the horror sight of the collapsing towers.
T framework: RT or CT markers?

- Real time markers (grammatically sanctioned) against the idea of proximization as a symbolic construal operation
- Primacy of CT (= Husserl: CT ‘offsets’ the RT ‘deficit’ of the imperceptibility of all events at one time, CT has RT dated events ‘come to us’ – ski lift metaphor, events = skiers latching on – reflecting the mechanism of proximization, ‘perception’ of the entire (compressed) time axis)

BUT

- How to abstract construed time markers?
T framework: A CT marker candidate?

Bush 2002-2003: A September morning

• CT marker A ‘making sense of’, profiling RT instant September morning to make the CT+RT phrase meaning a forensic/epideictic/deliberative blend

• T framework members: CT+RT phrases construing imminence (and thus, construing NOW as pre-emption frame) through forced indefiniteness of RT instants (e.g. phrases including nominalizations as CT markers ('threat'); phrases including modal auxiliaries as CT markers ('could'))
Core of STA: capturing compensatory potential (to ensure constancy of legitimization) of the 3 kinds of proximization

Departure from S/T proximization around December 2003, sample 2003:2004 lexical drops:

- *Iraq* 330 (hits): 165
- *terrorists* 255:112
- *head* (or syn. VP) *toward* (or syn. PP) *tragedy* (or syn. NP) 126:41
- *destroy* (of THEM) 105:30
- *use* (or syn.) *WMD* (by THEM) 88:6
Core of STA: capturing compensatory potential (to ensure constancy of legitimization) of the 3 kinds of proximization

Sample compensation: ‘Axiological proximization formula’:

This evil THEM-ideology NP
might not have reached us yet remote possibility VP

but remote possibility – actual occurrence transition point

it is in plain sight, actual occurrence VP
as plain as the horror sight of the collapsing towers.
NP expressing (effect of) THEM-US physical clash

2003: 7 hits .... 2004: 63 hits!!
What has STA demonstrated wrt interventionist discourses like American anti-terrorist discourse 2001-2010?

- Interventionist solicitation of legitimization first relies on material premises since they are initially easier to obtain and possess a more direct appeal to the audience which grants an immediate approval of the speaker’s actions → BUT → ...
What has STA demonstrated wrt interventionist discourses like American anti-terrorism discourse 2001-2010?

- contextual (geopolitical) changes may have the initial premise disappear \( \rightarrow \) SO

- compensation from axiological premises:
  
  A groundworks are, i) less vulnerable to geopolitical changes, ii) they set up discourses which are essentially abstract and involve less specific interpretations (viz. „threat”, „danger”) – despite moving to a new premise, it is possible to save the logic of the initial premise!
Further applications of (STA?) proximization

- Theory of political (interventionist) discourse?
- Theory of political / public space (public policy) discourse?
- (Eventually?) Theory of communication? (viz. deictic grounding of the STA model)
Further applications of (STA?) proximization

- Health (legitimization in „war-on-cancer“)

Some say we can contain melanoma with standard chemotherapy measures. The evidence we have says we must strike it with a full force in its earliest stages. We will continue to conduct screening programmes to spot the deadly disease before it has spread throughout the body. We must be able to wipe out all the infected cells in one strike, otherwise it takes a moment before they continue to replicate and migrate around the body. We now aim to develop a new treatment that targets the infected cells with precision, effectively destroying the engine at the heart of the disease, and doing minimal harm to healthy cells. (British Association of Cancer Research 2010)
Further applications of (STA?) proximization

Environment: climate change discourse
(A.F. Rasmussen 2009)

• We now know enough to start moving from analysis to action. Because the trend lines from climate change are clear enough, and grim enough, that we need to begin taking active steps to deal with this developing global threat.
Further applications of (STA?) proximization

• When it comes to climate change, the threat knows no borders. We may not yet know the precise effects, the exact costs or the definite dates of how climate change will affect security. But we already know enough to start taking action. This is my first point: either we start to pay now, or we will pay much more later.
Further applications of (STA?) proximiziation

- Climate change is different than any other threat we face today. The science is not yet perfect. The effects are just starting to be visible, and it’s difficult to pin down what will actually change because of climate change. The timelines are not clear either. But that only makes the threat bigger. [...] The challenges being discussed today are big, and they are growing. Anything’s possible.

(T-proximiziation: indefinite Future mobilizing resources in the Now)
Further applications of (STA?) proximization – prospects, empirical fields – CDS domains

- CDS explores ways in which ideologies and identities are reflected, enacted, negotiated, reproduced, etc., in dichotomous discourse space (DS) (racism, xenophobia, intra-national vs. national vs. inter-national identity, gender (in-)equalities...)

- Thus: any “doing” of CDS must involve, studying original positioning of different ideologies and identities and studying the “target positioning”, the change taking place through the speaker’s use of discourse;

- Thus: doing CDS means, eventually, handling issues of the DS re-arrangement. Proximization adds to CDS tools, while CDS informs proximization as a theory.
Further applications of (STA?) proximization – problems with the current model

- Proposing a DS conception universal enough to handle **different ranges of the deictic center and the deictic periphery, in particular discourses.**
- The DS problem will continue to grow as more discourses are investigated.
Selected bibliography:

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