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THE ONTOLOGICAL AND SOCIOPRAGMATIC NATURE OF THE CONCEPT OF MANIPULATION

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Annotation

This article provides a rigorous investigation into the ontological and sociopragmatic nature of manipulation within communicative theory and critical discourse studies, delineating the boundaries between rational persuasion and covert verbal influence. Grounded in speech act theory, epistemic vigilance, cognitive framing, and Critical Discourse Analysis, the paper examines how manipulative strategies exploit informational asymmetries and cognitive heuristics to steer recipient behavior while circumventing conscious critical evaluation. The study systematically categorizes lexical-semantic, syntactic, and presuppositional mechanisms of covert control, establishing formal criteria to distinguish legitimate argumentative persuasion from manipulative discursive domination.

Keywords: manipulation, persuasion, ontological nature, sociopragmatics, covert influence, epistemic vigilance, critical discourse analysis, cognitive framing, speech acts, discursive power.

MANIPULYATSIYA TUSHUNCHASINING ONTOLOGIK VA SOTSIOPRAGMATIK MOHIYATI

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada manipulyatsiya tushunchasining ontologik va sotsiopragmatik tabiati hamda ratsional ishontirish (persuaziya) va yashirin ta’sir o‘rtasidagi konseptual chegaralar tadqiq etiladi. Tadqiqotda nutqiy aktlar nazariyasi, epistemik hushyorlik, kognitiv freyming hamda Tanqidiy diskurs tahlili (CDA) metodologiyasiga tayangan holda, manipulyatsiyaning axborot asimmetriyasi va kognitiv evristikalardan foydalanish mexanizmlari ochib beriladi. Shuningdek, resipientning ongli tanlov erkinligini cheklovchi yashirin lisoniy vositalar tasniflanib, ochiq argumentativ persuaziya va yashirin manipulyatsiyani ajratib ko‘rsatuvchi lingvistik mezonlar ilmiy asoslanadi.

Kalit so‘zlar: manipulyatsiya, persuaziya, ontologik mohiyat, sotsiopragmatika, yashirin ta’sir, epistemik hushyorlik, tanqidiy diskurs tahlili, kognitiv freyming, nutqiy aktlar, diskursiv hokimiyat.

ОНТОЛОГИЧЕСКАЯ И СОЦИОПРАГМАТИЧЕСКАЯ СУЩНОСТЬ ПОНЯТИЯ МАНИПУЛЯЦИИ

Аннотация

В данной статье исследуется онтологическая и социопрагматическая сущность манипуляции, а также разграничительные критерии между рациональным убеждением (персуазией) и скрытым коммуникативным воздействием. На основе теории речевых актов, эпистемической бдительности, когнитивного фрейминга и критического дискурс-анализа раскрываются механизмы манипулятивного воздействия, основанные на информационной асимметрии и когнитивных эвристиках. Классифицируются лексико-семантические и синтаксические приемы скрытого контроля сознания адресата, устанавливаются параметры демаркации между открытой аргументацией и скрытым дискурсивным доминированием.

Ключевые слова: манипуляция, убеждение, онтологическая сущность, социопрагматика, скрытое воздействие, эпистемическая бдительность, критический дискурс-анализ, когнитивный фрейминг, речевые акты, дискурсивная власть.

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In contemporary linguistics and philosophy of language, verbal interaction is increasingly conceptualized not merely as a passive medium for transmitting objective propositions, but as an active arena where cognitive representations, power asymmetries, and social actions are negotiated and enacted. Within this communicative matrix, communicative influence constitutes an intrinsic property of verbal behavior, reflecting the universal human drive to alter the cognitive states, intentional stances, and behavioral commitments of interlocutors[1]. However, the scalar continuum of communicative influence encompasses divergent discursive modalities, ranging from transparent rational consensus-seeking to covert discursive manipulation. Unraveling the nature of this influence requires addressing the fundamental theoretical distinction between explicit persuasion and covert communicative interference. The ontological status of manipulation as a distinct communicative phenomenon remains a subject of intense scientific debate across pragmatics, cognitive science, and social theory. The term manipulation inherently evokes connotations of instrumental exploitation, cognitive subjugation, and the clandestine steering of social agents. Despite its pervasive manifestation across institutional, political, and digital spheres, the systematic boundaries separating manipulation from legitimate persuasive rhetoric often appear blurred. Consequently, establishing rigorous theoretical, epistemological, and linguistic criteria to demarcate manipulation from ethical persuasion represents a foundational imperative of modern sociopragmatics. This inquiry aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the ontological foundations, cognitive-semantic architectures, and sociopragmatic mechanisms that constitute manipulative discourse[2].

From an ontological perspective, manipulation refers to a deliberate communicative practice wherein an addresser seeks to reconfigure the mental representations, desires, and actions of an addressee without the addressee's conscious awareness of the underlying strategic intent. Unlike communicative acts characterized by reciprocal dialogism, manipulative discourse is inherently asymmetrical and structurally teleological[3]. In communicative ontology, language serves as both an epistemic filter and an ontological scaffold through which individuals construct their understanding of social reality. Manipulative intervention targets precisely this constructivist capacity of language, systematically distorting the truth conditions and inferential pathways available to the interlocutor. As Jürgen Habermas demonstrated in his theory of communicative action, authentic communication operates on implicit validity claims: truth, normative rightness, and subjective sincerity. When an utterance is produced within an ideal speech situation, participants presuppose that the speaker commits to these universal communicative presuppositions. Manipulation represents a parasitic deviation from this normative substrate, functioning under what Habermas terms covert strategic action. In such interactions, the speaker simulates communicative orientation toward mutual understanding while simultaneously executing a strategic program designed to unilaterally govern the recipient[4]. The ontological essence of manipulation therefore resides in this functional duality: the speaker feigns adherence to communicative norms while covertly violating the epistemic integrity of the interlocutor.

Sociopragmatically, manipulation cannot be conceptualized in isolation from institutional structures, social power distributions, and contextual variables. As Pierre Bourdieu emphasized, linguistic exchanges are never neutral semiotic transactions; rather, they are embedded within social fields structured by unequal distributions of symbolic capital. Discursive manipulation frequently operationalizes institutional authority and social prestige to lower the recipient's critical resistance. Within Critical Discourse Analysis, notably formulated by Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk, manipulation is defined as a specific discursive practice of reproducing social inequality and power abuse. Van Dijk convincingly argues that manipulative discourse involves the systematic control of public mental models by dominant social elites who possess privileged access to communicative

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channels[5]. Through strategic verbal formulations, discourse architects regulate what knowledge is foregrounded, which perspectives are marginalized, and how causal agency is attributed. Power asymmetry in manipulative settings does not necessarily manifest as coercive pressure; instead, it functions through manufactured consensus, wherein dominated subjects willingly adopt propositions that undermine their own interests. The sociopragmatic efficacy of manipulation is thus determined by the interlocutors' relative institutional status, role expectations, and the socio-structural constraints governing the interaction.

The theoretical delineation between persuasion and manipulation constitutes the paramount analytical challenge in discourse studies. Persuasion, in its classical Aristotelian and modern pragma-dialectical formulation, is grounded in transparent argumentation, communicative rationality, and respect for the interlocutor's epistemic autonomy. A persuader openly articulates a claim, provides verifiable warrants, and invites critical deliberation, granting the audience full cognitive freedom to accept, qualify, or refute the thesis. In a persuasive interaction, the communicators participate as epistemic equals, and the argumentative burden of proof remains fully transparent. Manipulation, by contrast, operates through clandestine cognitive steering, covert informational deprivation, and the subversion of rational argumentation[6]. The manipulator systematically circumvents the recipient's critical faculty, ensuring that the target internalizes a belief or adopts a decision while falsely presuming it to be autonomous. While persuasion aims to transform belief through the unforced force of the better argument, manipulation manufactures psychological compliance through cognitive vulnerabilities and semantic deceptions. Crucially, persuasion preserves the recipient's agency, whereas manipulation commodifies the recipient into an instrumental tool for the speaker's unilateral benefit. The boundary dividing these two phenomena is therefore epistemological, intentional, and ethical.

At the cognitive-pragmatic level, manipulation succeeds by exploiting the cognitive architecture of human information processing and bypassing epistemic vigilance[7]. Dan Sperber and his colleagues introduced the concept of epistemic vigilance to describe the cognitive mechanisms that enable humans to evaluate communicative reliability and guard against misinformation. Under optimal processing conditions, individuals critically evaluate the speaker's trustworthiness and the logical coherence of incoming assertions before integrating them into their belief systems. Manipulative discourse strategically deploys cognitive overload, rapid temporal pacing, and emotional salience to exhaust the recipient's cognitive bandwidth, thereby inducing intuitive, low-effort heuristic processing. Daniel Kahneman's dual-process cognitive framework demonstrates that human cognition routinely toggles between fast, effortless System 1 heuristics and slow, deliberative System 2 reflection. Manipulative strategies intentionally target System 1, activating affective biases, availability heuristics, and confirmation tendencies that bypass analytical scrutiny. When cognitive resources are constrained, recipients fail to calibrate their epistemic vigilance, accepting unverified assertions as self-evident truths. Through this covert exploitation of cognitive constraints, the manipulator successfully embeds contested mental representations into the target's episodic memory[8].

The linguistic architecture of manipulation operates through an intricate repertoire of lexical-semantic, grammatical, and cognitive devices designed to mask communicative intention. Primary among these cognitive instruments is conceptual framing, which Robert Entman characterizes as the selective highlighting of particular aspects of reality to promote a specific problem definition, causal attribution, and moral evaluation. By activating a strategically chosen semantic frame, the manipulator covertly restricts the interpretative horizon of the interlocutor, predetermining which inferences appear natural and inevitable. Conceptual metaphors, as formulated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, serve as powerful vehicles for manipulative framing because they map complex,

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abstract social phenomena onto simplified sensorimotor experiences without eliciting critical reflection. Metaphorizing economic austerity as “surgical intervention” or migration as a “flooding torrent” surreptitiously alters public perception, naturalizing ideological policies as physiological necessities[9]. Furthermore, lexical selection represents an omnipresent mechanism of covert evaluation; the deliberate substitution of ideologically loaded lexemes for neutral designations introduces implicit axiological judgments into seemingly factual statements. Euphemisms sanitize controversial or destructive practices, dulling moral sensitivity, while dysphemisms delegitimize opponents by attaching pejorative connotations to their identities. Semantic vagueness and ambivalence are likewise weaponized to generate plausible deniability, allowing the speaker to convey covert messages while evading accountability for controversial entailments.

At the structural and pragmatic levels, manipulative discourse relies heavily on syntactic agency masking and presupposition engineering. Syntactic transformations, specifically nominalization and passive voice constructions, enable communicators to systematically efface social actors from propositions describing adverse actions or systemic failures. By transforming verbal processes into abstract nouns such as rendering “the company dismissed workers” as “workforce reductions occurred” the discourse obliterates causal agency and presents contingent human actions as inevitable historical laws. This grammatical masking shields powerful decision-makers from moral culpability and public accountability. Even more insidious is the pragmatic deployment of presuppositions, which introduce controversial, unverified assertions into discourse as if they were already common ground and beyond dispute. Because presuppositions remain syntactically backgrounded beneath the main propositional assertion, the interlocutor's cognitive processing focuses automatically on the foregrounded claim, leaving the latent premise unchallenged. Denying a presupposition requires disproportionate conversational effort and explicit metalinguistic confrontation, a barrier that recipients rarely surmount in real-time communication. Similarly, manipulative speakers exploit implicatures and strategic ambiguity, relying on Gricean conversational maxims to prompt listeners to draw misleading conclusions for which the speaker accepts no overt responsibility[10].

Argumentative fallacies represent another critical operational dimension where manipulation masquerades as valid argumentation. In classical rhetorical and pragma-dialectical traditions, fallacies are defined as argumentative moves that appear logically sound on the surface but violate the rules of critical discussion. Manipulative discourse frequently relies on argumentum ad hominem to divert attention from legitimate substantive issues by launching covert attacks against the interlocutor's character or credibility. Argumentum ad verecundiam inappropriately leverages irrelevant or distorted institutional authority to suppress legitimate inquiry, presenting contingent opinions as indisputable dogmas. The false dilemma fallacy artificially compresses multidimensional social realities into rigid binary oppositions, compelling the audience to accept an unpalatable policy under the fabricated threat of total catastrophe. Slippery slope arguments fabricate catastrophic chains of consequences without empirical justification to induce paralysis or fear. Emotional appeals, particularly fear appeals (argumentum ad baculum) and flattery, systematically displace evidentiary reasoning (logos) with visceral affective reactions (pathos). When anxiety or fear is induced, the recipient’s cognitive vigilance diminishes sharply, facilitating the uncritical acceptance of radical measures presented as the sole guarantee of survival.

In the contemporary digital landscape, manipulative practices have undergone qualitative and structural transformations, expanding into automated, algorithmic, and multimodal environments. Digital communication platforms prioritize algorithmic engagement metrics, creating structural conditions that amplify emotionally polarized and rhetorically sensationalist discourse. Microtargeting techniques harness psychometric user data to deliver tailor-made manipulative narratives that exploit individual psychological vulnerabilities with surgical precision. Algorithmic

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architectures curate echo chambers and epistemic filter bubbles that insulate individuals from counter-attitudinal evidence, thereby drastically degrading collective epistemic vigilance. Furthermore, digital manipulation is profoundly multimodal, seamlessly integrating linguistic utterances with manipulated imagery, synthetic deepfakes, and algorithmic amplification networks. Generative artificial intelligence models now enable the mass automated generation of syntactically flawless and contextually persuasive texts, fundamentally blurring the threshold between genuine interpersonal interaction and synthetic discursive steering. In this hyper-mediated information ecology, covert manipulation operates not merely through single utterances, but through pervasive, decentralized discursive cascades that systematically distort public consensus.

In conclusion, the ontological and sociopragmatic essence of manipulation lies in its clandestine subversion of communicative reciprocity, cognitive agency, and rational discourse. Manipulation is characterized not merely by linguistic form, but by the strategic divergence between explicit locutionary performance and covert perlocutionary intent. While authentic persuasion relies on transparent argumentation, verifiable claims, and the preservation of interlocutor autonomy, manipulation systematically exploits informational asymmetries, cognitive heuristics, and institutional power to govern consciousness. Lingual mechanisms such as presuppositions, agency-effacing syntax, metaphorical framing, and deceptive argumentation form a sophisticated linguistic architecture of covert domination. Unmasking these covert mechanisms requires developing integrated cross-disciplinary paradigms that synthesize linguistic pragmatics, cognitive science, and critical social theory. Advancing empirical methodologies for detecting linguistic manipulation is vital for preserving epistemic autonomy, fostering critical media literacy, and sustaining the integrity of democratic deliberation in an increasingly automated communication age.

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