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Conceptual silencing as a rhetorical tool. A cognitive lexical semantics study of the lexical item *Europe*

Pojęciowe wyciszanie znaczenia jako narzędzie retoryczne. Analiza jednostki leksykalnej *Europa* z perspektywy kognitywnej semantyki leksykalnej

Abstract

Taking a cognitive lexical semantics perspective, the article introduces the concept of *conceptual silencing* as a rhetorical tool. Understood as a process of conceptual dissolution of meaning to offer a more coarse-grained sense of an expression, conceptual silencing is demonstrated to have a potential rhetorical value in that it allows for more opaque reproduction of ideology. From a cognitive linguistic standpoint, the process of conceptual silencing hinges upon a polysemous nature of a lexical item and boils down to triggering a given sense of a given lexical item in a given context. To illustrate the workings of conceptual silencing, the article reports on a case study of the lexical item *Europe* in the *Guardian* press discourse. It is demonstrated that the ultimate effect of conceptual silencing is silencing the 'European Union' senses under the guise of the lexical item *Europe*.

Artykuł wprowadza i omawia – z perspektywy kognitywnej semantyki leksykalnej – koncept *pojęciowego wyciszania znaczenia* jako narzędzia retorycznego. Pojęciowe wyciszanie znaczenia – rozumiane jako proces pojęciowego rozmywania znaczenia w celu uzyskania bardziej ogólnego sensu – ma potencjał retoryczny, ponieważ umożliwia upowszechnianie ideologii w mniej czytelny dla odbiorcy sposób. Z perspektywy językoznawstwa kognitywnego proces pojęciowego wyciszania znaczenia bazuje na polisemii jednostki leksykalnej i sprowadza się do aktywowania jej określonego sensu w danym kontekście. W celu zobrazowania niniejszego procesu przedstawione zostaje studium przypadku jednostki leksykalnej *Europa* w dyskursie prasowym dziennika „Guardian”, pokazujące, iż proces pojęciowego wyciszania znaczenia najwyraźniej przejawia się w wyciszeniu tych sensów jednostki leksykalnej *Europa*, które odnoszą się do Unii Europejskiej.

Key words

conceptual silencing, rhetorical potential, ideology reproduction
pojęciowe wyciszanie znaczenia, potencjał retoryczny, reprodukcja ideologii

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Conceptual silencing as a rhetorical tool. A cognitive lexical semantics study of the lexical item *Europe*

1. Introduction

Arguably, the concept of silence seems relatively easy to define as its primary site of operation is the domain of sound, and silence can be most straightforwardly defined as the lack of sound. This very rough and superficial definition, however, cannot do justice to the vast research into the phenomenon of silence, which has been done in many disciplines and from different perspectives. Silence has been studied most notably as a form of communication, from a wide spectrum of dimensions (e.g., Brummet 1980; Jaworski 1993; Nakane 2007; Saville-Troike 1985), but also from the perspective of rhetoric (e.g., Glenn 2004; Scott 1972), ethnography (e.g., Achina-Loeb 2006), political science (e.g., Brummet 1980), or discourse studies (Huckin 2002; Schröter 2013). Such richness of theoretical approaches and methodological perspectives only testifies to the fact that silence is a meaningful phenomenon and can indeed be theorized in many ways. As Nakane (2007) notices, “the multifaceted and ambiguous nature of silence [...] suggests that research into the phenomenon of silence requires multiple perspectives and approaches to reach a reliable interpretation and understanding” (11). In the present article, I take a cognitive linguistics perspective to put forward a construct of *conceptual silencing*. Analyzing a corpus of the Guardian’s news texts with the focus on the lexical item *Europe*, I attempt to demonstrate that conceptual silencing can be considered a rhetorical tool in that it allows for the reproduction of non-transparent and opaque ideologically-invested propositions, which may constitute an interpretative challenge for discourse consumers.

2. Operationalizing conceptual silencing

In the present section, I operationalize conceptual silencing as a form of vagueness, pointing to its ideological (see section 3 for ideology operationalization)

and hence rhetorical potential. As the present study is based on the analysis of news texts, which are part of media discourse or press discourse in particular, a starting point of my discussion is Huckin's (2002) concept of textual silence. In his study on the phenomenon of silence in the context of the discourse of homelessness, he defines textual silence in a very broad sense as "the omission of some piece of information that is pertinent to the topic at hand" (348) and proposes a five-level typology of textual silences, namely, speech-act silences, presuppositional silences, discreet silences, genre-based silences and manipulative silences. What I find particularly relevant in Huckin's (2002) typology is the idea of manipulative silences defined as "those that intentionally conceal relevant information from the reader or listener, to the advantage of the writer or speaker" (351). The aspect of intentionality of manipulative silences clearly transpires in press discourse since no news texts exist in a vacuum, so they are invariably products of complex and multilayered institutional practices (Bell 1991). Hence, press message manufacturers do not reflect our social reality as it is, but construct its particular versions which accord with a particular media outlet's ideological stance.

Huckin's (2002) manipulative textual silence refers to text (understood here as a written record of language) as the primary site against which silence operates and since text entails the use of language, there clearly exists a link between silence and language. First, silence, though prototypically understood as a lack of sound, can by extension be understood as a lack of any form, therefore also linguistic (cf. Huckin 2002). Second, that which is said is quite often meaningful in the context of that which is not said (hence silent). The latter is perhaps most readily visible in the case of binary oppositions, such as good vs. bad, in that what we evaluate as good obtains its signification, among others, in opposition to the unexpressed conceptual negative. For example, a person we consider a good human being, which is undeniably context-dependent, is perhaps at least in part defined with respect to what our concept of a bad human being in that specific context is. The expression *She is a good mother*, for instance, will be meaningful not only in terms of a given situational context (we can be witnesses to a particular desirable behavior), but also partly with respect to the concept of 'bad mother' functioning in a particular culture and society (we seem to know what kind of practice motherhood should not be defined by). This example also demonstrates that what is silent, that is, lacks any linguistic form (here the linguistically unexpressed concept of 'bad mother'), can have a conceptual basis, as it can be evoked and hence made conceptually available to the speaker by another expression (here the linguistically overtly expressed concept of 'good mother'). Moreover, such contextually evoked conceptual presence of a given expression may have a meaning-making potential.

As already mentioned, language use in media discourse is never neutral, but ideologically invested, as it invariably reflects a particular ideological stance of a news outlet. Therefore, language use is a site of meaning and ideology reproduction. In light of the relation between the silent and the conceptual presented in the previous paragraph, it does not seem ungrounded to posit a relationship between silence (in terms of its meaning-making potential) and ideology. As Kalamaras (1994) observes, silence can be defined as a rhetoric because of its meaning-making potential. In a similar vein, Glenn (2004) argues that silence be perceived as “a rhetoric, as a constellation of symbolic strategies that (like spoken language) serves many functions. [...] Employed as a tactical strategy [...], silence resonates loudly along the corridors of purposeful language use” (xi). I find Glenn’s (2004) concept of silence as a rhetoric particularly useful in light of my way of operationalizing conceptual silencing, which I situate within media discourse, where language use is purposeful and serves a particular, often ideological, communicative function, and hence can be perceived as rhetorical in terms of its influence-based opinion-shaping potential.

It is my contention that what I call conceptual silencing and understand as a process of conceptual dissolution of meaning to offer a more coarse-grained sense of an expression can be operationalized as a form of vagueness (see e.g., Geeraerts 2010, 2016 for the discussion of vagueness). As Geeraerts 2010 notices, “[i]f vagueness and context-dependence of meaning were not part of the meanings of words, language would be a less efficient means of communication” (258). But it is precisely these two aspects of meaning that afford an ideological and hence rhetorical potential of language use. The rhetorical value of conceptual silencing lies in the fact that choosing a more vague expression (here *Europe*) over a more specific one (here *the EU member states*, for example) makes a given (ideologically-invested) proposition less transparent and hence potentially more challenging for the audience to contest. In light of the above example, conceptual silencing obtains in “erasing” the ‘EU member states’ sense, for example, under the guise of the lexical item *Europe*.

3. A construal approach to ideology reproduction

Arguably, the most comprehensive account of ideology reproduction in discourse has been laid out by van Dijk (1998; 2006). According to van Dijk (1998), there are two fundamental principles of ideology reproduction in discourse, namely, (1) either presence or absence of discourse-relevant information, and (2) the function of either expression or suppression of information in the interest of the speaker or writer. The latter principle constitutes the foundation of van Dijk’s (1998) concept

of ideological square. The basis of the *ideological square* lies principally in positive self-presentation (boasting) and negative other-presentation (derogation), and consists in the four following moves: (a) express/emphasize information that is positive about ‘Us’, (b) express/emphasize information that is negative about ‘Them’, (c) suppress/de-emphasize information that is positive about ‘Them’, and (d) suppress/de-emphasize information that is negative about ‘Us’ (van Dijk 1998, 267).

In the present study, I take van Dijk’s (1998) concept of ideological square as a fundamental operation aimed at reproducing ideology in discourse. Yet, it is my contention that ideology is laid down in language and hence reproduced in discourse by means of, among others, imposing a particular “construal” (Langacker 1987, 2008) on discourse participants or events. This observation is consistent with one of the main tenets of cognitive linguistics which holds that human beings (the conceptualizers) are capable of perceiving and hence construing the same situation in alternate ways. To put it differently, we are able to creatively use our linguistic resources to construe the same objectively given phenomenon in different fashions.

Given the general layout of how ideology reproduction in discourse can be operationalized in terms of construal, namely, how a particular construal may evoke either positive evaluation of the self or negative evaluation of the other, the remainder of this section lays down the present-study-specific instantiation of this general operation. The construals of Europe under microscope in this article relate to the historically motivated east-west divide of the Old Continent, which dates back to the times of the Iron Curtain. Hence, I focus on three adjectives, namely, *eastern*, *central* and *western*, which comprise an east-central-west continuum that serves to conceptually demarcate the European continent. As a result of attributing one of the three adjectives to the noun *Europe*, three noun phrases, that is, *eastern Europe*, *central Europe* and *western Europe*, emerge. Importantly, each respective noun phrase gives rise to a different construal of Europe, namely, the eastern Europe construal, the central Europe construal and the western Europe construal. As far as construal’s ideological work is concerned, what allows for ideology reproduction in the press discourse under analysis is the rhetorical potential of the adjectives eastern, central and western founded on different historically motivated allocation of values to the west (positive) and the east (negative). What follows from the above is that construing Europe as *eastern*, *central* or *western* can bring about negative, neutral or positive valuation respectively.

To reiterate, van Dijk’s (1998) concept of the ideological square is founded on positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, which in the case of the present study boils down to (implicit) positive self-evaluation and negative

other-evaluation. Importantly, since the corpus of the news items analyzed in this article has been compiled from the British daily the *Guardian*, the journalists' (and target readers') western European vantage-point has to be acknowledged. Hence, the west is associated with the self ('Us') while the east is associated with the other ('Them'), which translates into the fact that the west is associated with positive values and the east with negative ones. It should be remembered, however, that the polarity of allocating positive and negative values depends crucially on whose perspective the values are considered from. Taking the above observations into account, it is my contention that a fictive (discursive) movement along the east-central-west axis, which is tantamount to activating one of the three construals of Europe referred to in this section, constitutes the basis of ideology reproduction as defined in this study. Crucially, moving away from the west, the locus of the ego and hence the vantage-point, contributes to maximization of the axiological and discursive distance, while moving towards the west minimizes it, making the other ('Them) closer to the self ('Us').¹

As I have already pointed out, ideology reproduction in discourse in this study is not only the function of construing Europe relative to the east-central-west continuum but also, and perhaps even more importantly, the function of activating a different context-induced sense of the lexical item *Europe*, which I have operationalized as conceptual silencing. As I will demonstrate in the analytical section of the article, conceptual silencing allows for more opaque, and hence less audience-consumable, ideology reproduction, which is exactly what constitutes its rhetorical potential.

4. Data selection and processing

The source of the language data under analysis in this study is a manually compiled corpus of news articles (approximately 926,000 words) retrieved from the liberal British daily quality newspaper the *Guardian* from May 2004 through December 2009.² The key to the selection and retrieval of the language data was the occurrence of the lexical item *EU* in the headline of an article. The corpus has been designed to have a thematic focus, i.e. Europe and the European Union in their political and economic contexts. The language data subject to analysis in this paper comprise the total of 4234 corpus occurrences of the lexical item *Europe*.

1. This operation of moving forth and back the east-central-west axiologically charged and ideology-laden axis can be compared to Cap's (2008) concept of proximization.

2. It can be claimed that the corpus is dated, yet what I aim to demonstrate in the article is a general concept and the workings of conceptual silencing, which is not data-sensitive and can be verified and proven operative against any other corpus comprising more up-to-date data.

To facilitate the process of data analysis, I used the computer software WordSmith Tools 4.0 (Scott 1996). The concordance facility was particularly useful as it allowed me to see all the instances of the lexical item *Europe* in their contexts of occurrence. Moreover, utilizing a patterns option, I was able to establish patterns of repeated phraseology in the concordances. A detailed analysis of the distribution of the lexical item *Europe* in the context of the news articles made it possible to establish a variety of senses of the lexical item in question. In order to obtain concordance results pertaining to particular senses of the lexical item *Europe*, the corpus has been refined by having been manually annotated with semantic tags. The tagging procedure consisted in ascribing a particular semantic tag contained in square brackets to a given occurrence of the lexical item *Europe* in the corpus, for example, Europe[EU_member_states].

5. Analysis and discussion

The first part of the analytical section focuses on presenting the conceptual foundations of the four (out of fourteen) senses of the lexical item *Europe*, namely, “EU member states,” “EU member states representatives,” “geographical region,”³ and “geopolitical region,” which allow for and give rise to ideology reproduction as defined in the present article. These four senses are subject to the east-central-west continuum-based construal operation (see section 3 for details) and accord with van Dijk’s (1997) claim that since a greater role in persuasion is played by the subtler and more indirect arguments which seem to be impartial or objective, it seems crucial to bring to attention especially the less transparent mechanisms of ideology reproduction in discourse, since they pose a greater cognitive and critical challenge for an average news message consumer.

The “EU member states” sense of *Europe* draws on the conventional knowledge that the EU is a heterogeneous institution in that it consists of individual member states, and hence is conceptualized as an amalgam of different national states. The understanding of *Europe* as the “EU member states” sense is illustrated by examples (1) and (2).

(1) Tony Blair yesterday defended plans to offer a £1bn a year cut in Britain’s EU rebate, saying compromise was necessary to secure prosperity in **eastern Europe**[EU_member_states] and an overall budget deal at the EU summit in a fortnight.

(2) More than 175,000 workers came to Britain from **eastern and central Europe**[EU_member_states] in the 11 months following last year’s EU expansion, new government figures showed today.

3. The geographical region sense does not give rise to ideological polarization as defined in the present article, yet it is brought up here as a background against which the nuts and bolts of ideology reproduction are illustrated.

From the context of excerpt (1) it is clear that the funds from the EU budget apply only to the members of the EU and not non-EU members. Moreover, the adjective *eastern* suggests that it is not in the whole EU, but in its part that prosperity needs to be secured. By the same token, in (2) the “EU member states” conception is evoked by means of the adjectives *eastern* and *central*. Additionally, the headline of the article states that the number in the estimate in excerpt (2) refers to workers from the new EU member states.

The “EU member states representatives” sense of *Europe* is a metonymic extension of the “EU member states” sense and is founded upon our general knowledge that behind any social institution there are people who operate it. It is important to notice that this sense is characterized by a certain amount of vagueness in that it is never specified who exactly the representatives are as the sense only generally denotes political decision-makers. Example (3) serves as an illustration:

(3)On the continent, the Blair government lost the sympathy of much of **western Europe**[EU_member_states_representatives] over Iraq; now it risks losing the sympathy of **central** and **eastern Europe**[EU_member_states_representatives] over the budget.

Since gaining or losing sympathy is unequivocally connected with humans and the context clearly concerns a European Union political debate on the Iraq war and the EU budget, it can be concluded that the lexical item *Europe* in (3) prompts for the EU member states political decision-makers reading.

The “geographical region” sense rests upon the knowledge that Europe, a specific geographical region with its unique climate, terrain, flora and fauna etc., is one of the 7 continents which our globe’s landmass is conventionally divided into.⁴ Examples (4) and (5) show how this sense is contextually activated.

(4)Huge swaths of **central** and southern **Europe**[geographical_region] were this week engulfed in record temperatures, as other areas recorded their heaviest summer rainfalls.

(5)The experts agreed to step up the surveillance of migratory birds amid fears that they could carry the highly pathogenic H5N1 as they head to the warmer climes of **western Europe**[geographical_region] from Siberia.

Excerpt (4) unequivocally concerns meteorological conditions on the European continent and, hence, it can be concluded that the lexical item *Europe* obtains the “geographical region” reading here. Similarly, example (5) is concerned with precautionary measures taken in order to prevent the spread of the H5N1 virus, which could be carried by birds migrating from Asia to the more hospitable climates of the western part of the European continent.

4. The number of continents varies according to different classifications; the division into 7 seems, however, the most common and widely-acknowledged one.

Finally, the “geopolitical region” sense of *Europe* is founded upon the knowledge that Europe is one of the continents populated by different nations who inhabit clearly delimited areas of land, referred to as nation states, with their particular political, economic, social, cultural etc. systems. This sense does not denote the European Union because its scope is broader and concerns Europe as a geopolitical region of the world, of which the EU is only a part. Examples (6) and (7) illustrate the contextual activation of this sense.

(6) The Dutch economy is in the doldrums, and, as home to a large Turkish minority, the country is also mainly against entry to the EU by Turkey. Last year's EU expansion into **eastern** and **central Europe[geopolitical_region]** was also unpopular.

(7) Recently the society expressed concerns that the expansion of the EU has made it easier to smuggle exotic birds from **Eastern** to **Western Europe[geopolitical_region]**. There have already been several cases of cross-border parrot smuggling between Bulgaria and Turkey.

Excerpt (6) refers to the 2004 EU enlargement and shows it in terms of expanding the territory and, of course, the influence of the EU into the eastern and central European geopolitical regions. By the same token, (7) voices some fears concerning the fact that the exotic bird contraband may enter western Europe, as it is already happening in the case of Bulgaria, a non-EU state at that time, located in the eastern Europe geopolitical region. It is important to notice here that the distinction between Europe as a geopolitical region and Europe as a geographical region is drawn on the basis of the available contextual information, which either does or does not afford access to the portion of knowledge (cf. Evans 2009; 2013), in this case pertaining to international politics and relations as a defining contextual factor in the conceptual process of sense identification. Hence, in the context of (5), for example, the fact that birds move to the European continent, where they can find a milder climate, affords access to the portion of knowledge pertaining to Europe as landmass, while excerpt (6), for instance, construes Europe as a geopolitical region because the context makes salient the social, political as well as geographical aspects of the EU expanding borders.

The remainder of the analytical section explains and illustrates how the interplay of the ideologically charged east-central-west continuum-based construal of Europe and the process of conceptual silencing, understood as a process of conceptual dissolution of meaning to offer a more coarse-grained sense of an expression, allows for a subtler and more indirect ideology reproduction. In linguistic terms, conceptual silencing is instantiated by choosing a conceptually more vague or schematic expression (here the lexical item *Europe*) instead of a more specific one (the lexical item *European Union*, for example). It is demonstrated that the main senses of the lexical item *Europe*, namely “geographical region,” “geopolitical

region” and the two “European Union” senses, that is, “EU member states” and “EU member states representatives,” correspond to a gradual decrease in transparency of ideology reproduction. This is obtained in the process of conceptual silencing, whose aim is to neutralize the ideological work and hence make it less discernible to media text consumers. It is claimed that ideology reproduction is a gradable phenomenon whose scope ranges from more objectively grounded instances (the case of the “geographical region” sense) to completely subjective and entirely evaluation- and ideology-laden cases (the case of the two “European Union” senses), which also constitutes the rhetorical potential of conceptual silencing.

To start with, it might be of interest to see the statistics concerning the corpus distribution of the adjectives *eastern*, *central* and *western* relative to the four senses of the lexical item *Europe*. The numerical data in Table 1 indicate the total corpus occurrence of a particular adjective with a particular sense.

<i>Europe as</i>	<i>eastern</i>	<i>central</i>	<i>Western</i>
geographical region	2	1	2
geopolitical region	54	25	6
EU member states	90	22	33
EU member states representatives	7	2	2

Table 1. The distribution of the adjectives *eastern*, *central*, *western* relative to the four senses of the lexical *Europe*.

Table 1 indicates that ideology reproduction operates primarily on the “EU member states” and “geopolitical region” senses of the lexical item *Europe*, while the “geographical region” and “EU member states representatives” are marginal in this respect. Moreover, it is also noticeable that as far as the “EU member states” sense is concerned, eastern Europe is the most frequent construal yet central Europe and western Europe are also quite conspicuous. Meanwhile, in the case of the “geopolitical region” sense, western Europe is practically marginal. What this suggests is that the sharpest contrast between eastern and western parts of Europe is evoked in the context of the European Union affairs.

As far as ideology reproduction is concerned, I discuss the “geographical region” sense first because it arguably does not give rise to ideological polarization and hence serves only as background for the remaining senses. In excerpts (4) and (5) above, the adjectives *eastern* and *western* respectively concern the cardinal directions and denote geographical regions of the European continent. The adjective *central* in (4) is slightly different in this respect as it is not one of the cardinal or even ordinal directions but stems from our conventional knowledge that between two extremes, that is, the east and west in this case, there is a middle ground. Hence the three categories constitute a continuum stretching from the east

through the centre to the west that serves as a measure scale that can be applied to delineate the European continent (see section 3 for more detailed discussion). It is my contention that in the case of the “geographical region” sense the application of the above scale does not seem to produce any ideological effect as it serves to more objectively (understood as ideology-free) divide the landmass of the European continent into geographical regions. As will be demonstrated in the remainder of the article, the same is not the case in terms of the three remaining senses of the lexical item *Europe*.

The next sense discussed here is the “geopolitical region” sense of the lexical item *Europe*. As already explained, the difference between the previous and the present sense lies in that the former activates the landmass reading while the latter makes salient the domain of international politics and relations. In excerpt (6) above, we can observe that the EU expansion into eastern and central parts of the European continent did not trigger an enthusiastic response of Dutch citizens. Similarly, in (7), British citizens, in fear of the spread of avian flu, express their unease concerning exotic bird trafficking from the eastern to the western regions of the continent. To reiterate, the source of the language data in this paper encodes a western Europe-based vantage point, which has a direct bearing on the ideological ‘Us – Them’ polarization in that ‘We’ is the west while ‘They’ is the east, with a middle ground in between. What it means in practice is that the eastern region of Europe is assigned negative axiological charge, which is evoked in the contexts of (6) and (7). Although such a conceptualization may bring about some ideological implications and axiological evaluation, as it does in the case of (6) and (7), the geopolitical delineation of the European continent into the east and the west appears to be, at least to some extent, motivated and anchored in what the east and west have conventionally been agreed to be and hence it is not necessarily ideological. Moreover, this divide seems to be motivated to some degree by the cardinal directions. After all, it seems quite reasonable and objective to refer to countries located in eastern parts of the European continent as “eastern European.” Arguably, however, the turbulent European history has marked its stamp on European society (including the British readers of the *Guardian*) so that the deeply ingrained negative connotations of the east may oftentimes be automatically activated upon mention of the phrase *eastern Europe*.

Finally, I focus on the two senses related to the European Union, namely “EU member states” and “EU member states representatives,” which is the case of the least transparent ideology reproduction: the less discernible and more neutral, and hence less audience-consumable, ideology reproduction is the sole function of the process of conceptual silencing. A caveat is in order here: although the two senses are clearly distinct in that they activate different portions of the conceptual

content of the lexical item *Europe*, they are discussed here jointly as the latter is a metonymic extension of the former and hence has a similar share in terms of ideology reproduction. The case of these two senses is the least transparent case of ideology reproduction as the ideological polarization, that is, imposing the east-central-west continuum based construal, concerns the domain of the European Union in the guise of the lexical item *Europe*, which is an instance of conceptual silencing as defined in this article.

As can be observed in (1) and (2) above, the phrases *eastern Europe*, *central Europe* and *western Europe* do not really denote Europe as a continent, but refer crucially to the European Union and hence evoke a clear-cut distinction into eastern, central and western member states of the EU. Similarly, in (3), the eastern-central-western continuum refers to political decision-makers of particular EU member states. A common denominator of excerpts (1) and (2) is that the west, which is the vantage point, is ascribed positive values as this part of the European continent which is prosperous, rich and more privileged. In (1) we can see that it is the richer west that is to guarantee prosperity in the poorer east; excerpt (2) is constructed on a presupposition that the citizens of eastern and central EU member states head for Great Britain, an affluent western European country, where they can better their lot.

The significance of ideology reproduction in the case of the two above senses of the lexical item *Europe*, namely “EU member states” and “EU member states representatives,” lies chiefly in that the European Union, which is a heterogeneous collection of member states, is discursively polarized into eastern and western European Union. What it means in practice is that moving towards the eastern end of the east-central-west continuum increases the discursive distance between the west-based vantage-point ego and the subjects in the regions of central and eastern Europe. More importantly, this fictive movement also translates into highlighting the ideological distance between the positively axiologically charged west and the negatively evaluated east.

To reiterate the main point of this article, the ideology-laden discursive division of the European Union relative to the east-centre-west continuum is an exclusive function of conceptual silencing: choosing a more vague expression over a more specific one, the lexical item *Europe* rather than the lexical item *European Union*, is a rhetorical move to make a given ideologically-invested proposition less transparent and hence more challenging for the audience to contest. Specifically, what allows for this to happen is context-sensitive activation of a specific portion of knowledge in the vast content of the conceptually vague lexical item *Europe*, namely, the EU-related cluster of senses. What might serve as additional support for my argument is the fact that in the corpus of news items under analysis in the present article not a single occurrence of the phrases *eastern EU*, *central EU*

or *western EU* has been testified. It seems that in linguistic terms premodification of the noun phrase *EU* with the adjectives *eastern*, *central* or *western* would be a straightforward misuse as it would constitute a conceptual clash. Hence, it is only due to the process of conceptual silencing that such ideology-laden rhetorical operations are viable.

6. Conclusions

The main goal of the article has been to argue that conceptual silencing, defined as a process of conceptual dissolution of meaning to offer a more coarse-grained sense of an expression, can be perceived as a rhetorical tool which allows for less transparent ideology reproduction, which is more challenging for a discourse consumer to demystify. To illustrate the mechanism of conceptual silencing in action, a case study of the lexical item *Europe* in the *Guardian's* press discourse was presented. Ideology reproduction was operationalized as a fictive discursive movement along the east-central-west axiologically charged and ideology-laden axis, where the discursive 'We' is associated with the west while the discursive 'Them' is construed as lying outside the scope of the ego vantage-point, hence closer to the east end of the axis.

Conceptual silencing, in linguistic terms, has been demonstrated to consist in using a more vague or schematic expression over a more specific and precise one. The findings of the case study suggest that ideology reproduction is a gradable process whose scope ranges from more objectively grounded instances (the case of the "geopolitical region" sense) to subjective and evaluation- and ideology-laden instances (the case of the two "European Union" senses) and that such gradability is the function of the process of conceptual silencing. As the analysis has shown, the highest rhetorical potential of conceptual silencing can be seen in terms of the European Union portion of conceptual content of the lexical item *Europe*. Specifically, it has been demonstrated that, by using the conceptually more schematic lexical item *Europe* rather than the conceptually more specific lexical item *European Union*, the text producer is able to promote a discursive delineation of the European Union into eastern European Union, central European Union and western European Union, which does not seem to have any reasonable or objective grounds, and hence can be attributed a solely evaluative and ideological function. Such masked and neutralized propositions possibly constitute a greater conceptual challenge for discourse consumers, which means that it is much more difficult to critically contest them.

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