



Distance crossing and alignment in online humanitarian discourse[☆]

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Abstract

This article analyzes multimodal genres of current online humanitarian discourse such as mission statements, annual reports and photo galleries to find how the construals of beneficiaries and humanitarian organizations *align* with the motives, values and emotional dispositions of prospective donors. The discursive reduction of *distance* between the donor and the beneficiary is likely to produce solicitation effects and enable self-legitimization. First, based on extant literature, the article develops a method to account for the pragmatic operations of textual 'proximization' and visually simulated 'co-presence' in humanitarian communication. Then it applies it to a sample of multimodal online messages issued by a prominent Polish humanitarian organization that distributes aid to communities in Africa or Asia. Analysis shows that Polish Humanitarian Action's mission statements and annual reports include strategic construals of space, quantity and transfer of aid that legitimize the organization's activities and their underlying axiological motivations. The texts also reproduce us/them differences to proximize the other that has been 'Westernized.' Meanwhile, the photo-galleries manufacture co-presence to enhance the axiological and affective investments in solidarity with the distant beneficiary. The case study offers a preliminary insight into alignment and distance-crossing maneuvers in online appeals that seek to project 'proper distance' between the donors and beneficiaries.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary online humanitarian appeals make use of many textual and visual devices that aim to enhance the persuasive potential of the messages to solicit donations to alleviate distant suffering. According to a classical rhetorical recommendation, such solicitations should involve the calibration of rational argumentation (*logos*), moral claims and credibility-building (*ethos*), and affective, even dramatic, appeals (*pathos*) (Smith, 1996). However, given the backlash that followed the marketization of charity (cf. Krause, 2014; Orgad and Seu, 2014), the current rhetoric of fundraising tends to be more contemplative and centered on the prospective donors' needs for sharing, while being less negative and less 'othering' (Chouliaraki, 2011, 2013). With more images of smiling faces and elegant descriptions of effective results of charity actions, this strategy seems to be attuned to the conventions of popular culture and is compatible with a more general trend towards the aesthetization of suffering in the media (Chouliaraki, 2006). Another trend in humanitarian

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communication, as traced by Vestergaard (2014), is related to the prominence of representations of prospective donors in charity appeals. Although humanitarian visual materials still abound in portrayals of beneficiaries, the verbal mode of appeals is now distinctly donor-oriented with textual foregrounding of both options for action and reasons for action, which Vestergaard (2014:519–521) describes as legitimation by material and moral compensation.

This study assumes that mediated public discourses construct identities and ingroup/outgroup relationships with strategically selected textual and visual resources (Fairclough, 1995; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). It explores how current online charity communication relies on *aligning* the construals of the beneficiaries and the aims of the humanitarian organization with the reasons, motives, values and emotional dispositions of prospective donors. It spotlights the pragmatic purposes behind the convergence between the representations of ‘us’ (givers) and ‘them’ (takers), as well as the reduction of social/axiological distance between the donor and the beneficiary. Empirically, it analyzes how language and visuals are deployed strategically to achieve the solicitation and legitimation effects by Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH). PAH is one of the most prominent Polish charities, whose activities target impoverished and disaster-stricken communities in Africa and Asia, in addition to a range of domestic programs. PAH’s annual reports, mission statements and action descriptions, as well as photo-galleries on its official website, are taken to be designed to bring those geographically distant causes and communities closer to the lifeworld of Polish/European donors, including corporate agents interested in broadening their corporate social responsibility portfolios. This pragmatic strategy is called distance crossing here and is treated as a device for alignment.

The categories for the present analysis are adapted from the *theory of proximization* (e.g., Cap, 2013; Kopytowska, 2015), as well as from *multimodal discourse analysis* (e.g., Hart, 2016; Machin and Mayr, 2012). As legitimation and persuasion are core pragmatic aims of distance crossing, one might also see parallels between humanitarian appeals and the *rhetorical* perspective of seeking alignment or identification (Burke, 1969). Hence, one objective of this article is to show how the ‘proximization toolkit’ can be expanded to be used as a framework for a systematic analysis of humanitarian rhetoric. Another objective is to grasp the latest trends in discursive strategies applied in charity materials at a time of erosion of trust in institutions (Thompson, 2012), skepticism with regard to the truth and moral claims in representations of suffering (Chouliaraki, 2011), and desensitization towards (some forms of) humanitarian appeals (Moeller, 1999; Seu, 2003). The article is thus divided into a theoretical-methodological part that makes a case for integrating proximization, multimodality and rhetoric (sections 2–4) and an analytic part (section 5) that studies textual and visual exemplars of distance crossing and alignment within this expanded framework.

2. Distance crossing: theoretical framework and its applications

This study can be located within a line of research that adapts the notion of ‘distance crossing’ from its original uses within Discourse Space Theory originated by Chilton (2004, 2005). Proximization, according to the early formulation by Cap (2006), is defined as a pragma-linguistic operation with a rhetorical purpose channeled towards legitimizing a stance in political discourse. Usually, the communicator is intent on “alerting the addressee to the proximity or imminence of phenomena which can be a ‘threat’ (...) and require immediate reaction” (2006:4). After a ‘threat’ has been identified and proximized, in the following rhetorical move, the speaker’s favoured solution to diffuse it or make it less immediate is suggested as the most acceptable one. The theory envisions discursive projections of proximity or distance of threat along *spatial*, *temporal* and *axiological* dimensions (cf. Cap, 2006, 2010, 2013). Thus, proximization can be seen as a dominant rhetorical device in interventionist discourse, as well as in other articulations of political (dis)alignment and policy (de)legitimation (Chilton, 2004; Cap, 2013). Here this operation is referred to as distance crossing, as it consists in the discursive adjusting of addressees’ perceptions of physical/social proximity and distance, which is important in the context of building support for humanitarian causes.

The realization of distance crossing in (multimodal) texts is based on the construal, or at least a presupposition, of territory or symbolic space, which is projected around the deictic center ‘inhabited’ by the discourse participants, and which can include various planes of the others’ activity and movement. Most often the construction of self (ingroup, ‘us’) in ‘here’ and ‘now’ (cf. Chilton, 2004; Cap, 2006; Kopytowska, 2015) has an ideological dimension: while the *self* is by default normalized and appreciated, the *distant other* tends to be positioned as an antagonist (especially when intent on encroaching on our territory). Meanwhile, the *closer other* may be seen as an ally, and evaluated positively. The spatial, temporal and axiological distance or proximity can be projected with strategically selected linguistic expressions, from deixis to metaphorical concepts, that work to balance. For example, one can forge symbolic unity with geographically distant entities or persons due to a projected commonality of values or interests while domestic opposition can be ‘marginalized’ or discredited as unpatriotic and thus alien (Fairclough, 1995; Dunmire, 2014). In most types of current humanitarian communication, the distant other is usually not construed as a threat to ‘us’ (unless there is an intimation of uncontrollable waves of refugees), but as a powerless human being falling victim to natural disaster or conflict, and thus axiologically deserving assistance and sympathy (Vestergaard, 2014).

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