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**DISCURSIVE PROGRAMMING AS A MEANS OF SUSTAINING
THE ATTENTION OF THE AUDIENCE**

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Abstract

The present paper identifies the conceptual mechanism of discursive programming and considers its potential application for commanding and sustaining the attention of the audience in English language discourse. It is assumed that the conceptual mechanism of discursive programming consists in the ability of certain discursive elements to predetermine (or programme) the emergence of others, which means that the question 'programmes' the answer and the first elements of a set phrase 'programme' its other elements. The author believes that the conceptual mechanism of discursive programming has both psychological and cognitive foundations. The former are based on the anticipatory theory of Neisser, and the latter are grounded in Minsky's frame theory. The paper outlines three types of discursive programming (logical, emotive, and mixed) and relates them to the strategies of directing the attention of the audience. Thus, a connection is made between logical discursive programming and discourse structuring utterances and questions, emotive discursive programming and discursive means of appealing to the emotions of the audience, and mixed discursive programming and a combination of the above strategies. In the concluding part of the paper, it is suggested that the strategies of commanding and sustaining the attention of the audience based on the mechanism of discursive programming can be applicable to a variety of discursive forms.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Preliminary provisions

Nowadays, as readers and listeners are facing an increasing information flow, the importance of commanding and sustaining the attention of the audience is no longer put into doubt.

While the earliest attention maintaining strategies can be traced back to Aristotle and Cicero, a clear rise in the research into attention-directing strategies has been observed in the 20th and 21st centuries with the emergence of a greater discursive variety. Thus, Vityazeva (2016) and Syrovatskaya (2011) are addressing the strategies of attracting and maintaining the attention of the audience in mass media discourse, Pyatkov (2017) is exploring the capturing of the attention of students in pedagogical discourse, and Yegoshkina (2018) is providing valuable insight into the speech strategies of attracting and holding the attention of the audience in entertaining radio discourse. Nevertheless, despite the variety of discursive forms, such strategies of commanding and sustaining the attention of the listeners or readers as addressing the audience, appealing to the emotions of the audience, and asking rhetorical questions, appear to be valid for most of the known discourses. This observation enables us to assume that all the attention-maintaining strategies are grounded in the same conceptual mechanism or mechanisms. We believe that one of these mechanisms is that of discursive (or communicative) programming which was first identified and introduced in our previous research (Sokolova, 2019a; Sokolova, 2019b).

1.2. The conceptual mechanism of discursive programming

1.2.1. Definition of discursive programming

We assume that the conceptual mechanism of discursive programming manifests itself in the potential of certain discursive elements to predetermine (or programme) the emergence of other discursive elements. Thus, the answer is ‘programmed’ by the question and further elements of a collocation are ‘programmed’ by the previous ones.

It is noteworthy that, according to our observations (Sokolova, 2019a), the conceptual mechanism of discursive programming rests on psychological and cognitive foundations.

1.2.2. Psychological foundations of discursive programming

Given there is an essential characteristic of discursive programming which consists in the ability of certain elements of discourse to act as precursors to other elements, the process of discursive programming seems to be grounded in discursive anticipations. Meanwhile, American psychologist U. Neisser stresses the importance of the anticipatory schema in every act of perception (Neisser, 1975) and points out the anticipatory character of human attention in his research dedicated to information pickup (Neisser, 1979). The anticipatory character of human attention and perception is also underscored by such Russian researchers as Brushlinski, 1996; Lomov & Surkov, 1980; Mendelevich et al., 2011; Zimnya, 2001). Thus, the anticipatory nature of discursive programming along with the widely acknowledged

anticipatory character of human perception in general and attention in particular, suggest an intrinsic connection between discursive programming and attention maintaining processes.

1.2.3. Cognitive foundations of discursive programming

As stated previously, the key principle of discursive programming is based on the ability of certain discursive elements to ‘programme’ the emergence of their discursive ‘partners’. This regularity is apparently suggestive of the cognitive structures referred to as frames. For the purposes of our research, we accept the understanding of frame proposed by Marvin Minsky (1975) as a set of characteristics essential for identifying an object or a situation. We also share the understanding of frame as a multilevel cognitive structure including a network of nodes and relations filled with specific data called terminals or slots that can be shared by different frames (Kubryakova, 1996; Minsky, 1975).

In order to see the frame mechanism in action in the course of discursive programming one can consider the characteristic of a certain phenomenon as ‘remarkable’. Being the terminal of the frame REMARKABLE EVENT, ‘remarkable’ is likely to evoke the whole frame with its other terminals, such as ‘Why is the event remarkable?’, thus setting the respective anticipations of the audience and establishing a certain ‘programme’ of discourse which may or may not be implemented further.

It is hard to overlook that the above example alone may show the potential of discursive programming for capturing and sustaining the attention of the audience, because when a certain object or event are characterized as remarkable, the readers, or the listeners are likely to follow the speaker or read into the context until they know what makes a certain object or event deserve this characteristic.

1.2.4. Typology of discursive programming

For the purposes of the present research into attention direction we identify three major types of discursive programming: logical, emotive, and mixed. All these types are based on frame mechanisms of conceptualizing reality, but these mechanisms differ from type to type. Thus, logical programming is triggered by the frames of reasoning and judgement, such as the STRUCTURING INFORMATION frame or the QUESTION-ANSWER interaction frame. Emotive discursive programming is based on the frames suggesting an appeal to the audience’s emotions such as SURPRISE, HAPPINESS, EMOTIONAL INVOLVEMENT, etc.; mixed programming, in our opinion, contains the elements of all or several of the above types combined together and actualized simultaneously.

1.3. Definitions

In the present study the processes of commanding and sustaining attention, attracting and maintaining attention, capturing and holding attention, capturing and maintaining attention as well as directing, maintaining, capturing, holding attention are viewed as similar in nature, and therefore respective terms are used interchangeably.

2. Problem Statement

While the authors of previous research papers have identified sets of strategies of capturing and sustaining the attention of the audience, no uniform conceptual mechanism underlying this process has so far been found. The present paper aims at considering the conceptual mechanism of discursive programming as a potential conceptual foundation of attention-commanding and attention-sustaining language strategies. This assumption is grounded in the common psychological and cognitive anticipation-setting mechanisms that are intrinsic to both discursive programming and attention directing processes.

3. Research Questions

The main question that the present study addresses is whether attention directing strategies can be based on one single conceptual principle – that of discursive programming, when certain discursive elements predetermine the emergence of others.

The research further answers the questions whether it is possible to relate the three most common types of discursive programming (logical, emotive, and mixed) outlined in 1.2.4. to the respective discursive means and strategies and whether the mechanism of discursive programming can potentially be applicable to a variety of discursive forms.

4. Purpose of the Study

The present study aims at exploring the possibility of identifying attention capturing and attention maintaining strategies based on the principle of discursive programming as well as revealing the discursive implementation of these strategies and the possibility of applying them to different English language discursive varieties.

5. Research Methods

The methods used for this study included conceptual analysis and discourse analysis. The former relates elements of the word's semantic structure (components of its meaning) to the elements of its conceptual structure (Nikonova, 2007; Nikonova 2008), and the latter enables a broader understanding of the communicative context and its non-verbal manifestations (Tannen et al., 2015).

6. Findings

The research into the application of discursive programming mechanisms in commanding and sustaining the attention of the audience in English language discourse was mainly based on relating the types of discursive programming (logical, emotive, and mixed) to the respective discursive manifestations.

6.1. Attention direction through logical discursive programming

As stated above, in 1.2.4., logical discursive programming is based on the frames of reasoning and judgement. Our research shows that they can manifest themselves through discourse structuring utterances and questions.

For example, the statement that *There are three points on the agenda* activates the respective frame of reasoning and sets the programme of further discourse to the enumeration of all the three points. Thus, the anticipation of having these points mentioned sustains the attention of the audience until they are told the ‘promised’ information. Likewise, the use of *firstly* sets the anticipations for *secondly*, and *secondly* – for (potentially) *thirdly*, thus holding the attention of the readers or listeners.

Questions appealing to the audience activate the frame of the question-answer interaction and ‘programme’ the discourse for an answer. This anticipation of the answer maintains the attention of the audience until it is received. For example, the question *We know Amazon is killing the high street, so why do we keep clicking on ‘buy now’?* (The Guardian, *We know Amazon is killing the high street, so why do we keep clicking on ‘buy now’?* 26 Apr 2021) maintains the attention of the reader throughout the whole article until they can make their assumptions about the answer.

6.2. Attention direction through emotive discursive programming

By definition, emotive discursive programming contains an appeal to the emotional sphere of the audience. It has been observed that the attention-maintaining strategies based on this type of discursive programming can be implemented through (1) the strategy of ‘promising’ new emotions; (2) the strategy of pointing to the personal significance of the information provided to the audience; (3) the strategy of intriguing the audience through emotionally charged metaphoric images, allusions, and other discursive expressive means; (4) the strategy of using graphic imagery or video footage.

The strategy of ‘promising’ new emotions to the audience activates the frames of these emotions through their terminals. For example, the frame of SURPRISE is evoked through its terminal ‘surprising’ (causing SURPRISE) in *The Surprising Power of Remote Work* (TED talks, *The Surprising Power of Remote Work*, 23 May 2020) thus maintaining the audience’s attention in anticipation of the powerful emotion of surprise.

The strategy of pointing to the personal significance of the information provided to the audience involves the activation of the respective frame which programmes the communicative context into providing further life-changing information to the reader or listener and thus maintains the attention of the audience, as in the TED-Talk by Elizabeth Gilbert called *Your Elusive Creative Genius* (TED talks, *Your Elusive Creative Genius*, 9 February, 2009).

The strategy of intriguing the audience through emotionally charged metaphoric images, allusions and other discursive expressive means may suggest the activation of familiar frames in unfamiliar communicative contexts which programmes communication into providing an explanatory context. For example, an allusion to a fairytale character – Leprechaun – in an article headlined *Biden, Yellen and the War on Leprechauns* (Berkshireeagle.com, *Biden, Yellen and the War on Leprechauns*, 9 April 2021) written by well-known American economist Paul Krugman evokes the frame LEPRECHAUN and

programmes further discourse into revealing a terminal or terminals. They are shared by the frames ECONOMY and LEPRECHAUN, which sustains the attention of the readers.

It is noteworthy that by creating an emotionally charged image in the minds of the reader or the listener emotive discursive programming is not unlike its graphic counterpart which offers visual images or video footage to the listeners or viewers.

The strategy of using graphic imagery or video footage establishes the further ‘programme’ of discourse and consequently the anticipations of the readers or listeners through a graphic image or video footage. For instance, Figure 01 actualizes two parallel frames MEGHAN MARKLE and PRINCESS DIANA and sets the readers’ anticipations on encountering the terminals shared by these two frames, thereby maintaining their attention and interest.



Figure 1. *Meghan Markle and Princess Diana* (<https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-49905596>)

6.3. Attention direction through mixed discursive programming

It has been observed that several types of discursive programming often occur together, sustaining the attention of the audience through several discursive strategies at the same time. For example, we can observe a combination of graphic discursive programming through a graphic image in Figure 02 which evokes the frame of transporting a pet on a plane, emotive discursive programming through the stylistic device of the pun in the commentary that the *cat is out of the bag* (two simultaneous statements that the secret has been revealed and the cat is literally no longer in a bag) and logical discursive programming based on the REVEALING THE SECRET frame.



Figure 2. *The cat is out of the bag* (https://i.dailymail.co.uk/1s/2019/11/08/11/20759934-0-image-a-1_1573213126570.jpg)

7. Conclusion

The present research was aimed at studying the potential of the conceptual mechanism of discursive programming in the process of capturing and sustaining the attention of the audience. We have considered a number of discursive implementations of this mechanism based on the types of discursive programming (logical, emotive, and mixed). These discursive manifestations included discourse structuring utterances and questions, 'promising' new emotions, pointing to the personal significance of the information provided to the audience, intriguing the audience through emotionally charged metaphoric images, allusions, and other discursive expressive means, using a graphic image or video footage, as well as combinations of all the above discursive means.

The examples used in this study were borrowed mainly from educational (TED-Talks) and mass media discourse, however our previous research shows that the strategies of commanding and sustaining the attention of the audience based on the mechanism of discursive programming can be applicable to a variety of discursive forms, such as fictional discourse (Sokolova, 2019a) and the discourse of analytical articles (Sokolova, 2019b).

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