

Truth, obligation and ethics in the propagation of democracy

Abstract

In this paper I present an analysis of the language used by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) on its website (NED, 2008). The specific focus of the analysis is on the NED's high usage of the word "should" revealed in computer assisted corpus analysis using Leximancer. Typically we use the word "should" as a term to propose specific courses of action for ourselves and others. It is a marker of obligation and "oughtness". In other words, its systematic institutional use can be read as a statement of ethics, of how the NED thinks the world ought to behave. As an ostensibly democracy-promoting institution, and one with a clear agenda of implementing American foreign policy, the ethics of NED are worth understanding. Analysis reveals a pattern of grammatical metaphor in which "should" is often deployed counter intuitively, and sometimes ambiguously, as a truth-making tool rather than one for proposing action. The effect is to present NED's imperatives for action as matters of fact rather than ethical or obligatory claims.

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Introduction

Public coverts are ubiquitous. I define "public covert" as an operation having public record, but whose activities and intentions are inaccurately stated. Rather, false claims whitewash actual purpose and vested interests. Their covert relationships and actions minimise democratic input. This allows a group to achieve its aims while avoiding diplomatic and political restrictions that might otherwise apply. They create, maintain, and build power through discourse. One such organisation is called the National Endowment for Democracy.

In 1983, during Ronald Regan's term as President, Congress passed legislation that brought the National Endowment for Democracy into existence (Sourcewatch, 2008). The congressional act established the group as "a private, nonprofit corporation known as the National Endowment for Democracy, which is not an agency or establishment of the United States" (Kosar, 2007, p. 33). On its website on its "About Us" page it states "[t]he National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a private, nonprofit organisation created in 1983 to strengthen democratic institutions around the world through nongovernmental efforts" (NED, 2008). But these are misleading statements because the NED is part of the US government and it is part of US foreign policy.

President Bush specifically mentions the NED in his 2004 State of the Union address, stating

"I will send you a proposal to double the budget of the National Endowment for Democracy, and to focus its new work on the development of free elections, and free markets, free press, and free labor unions in the Middle East. And above all, we will finish the historic work of democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq, so those nations can light the way for others, and help transform a troubled part of the world (Applause) (Bush, 2004)."

Here President Bush directs the NED where and how democracy ought to be implemented. This contradicts the legislation created by the US Congress and

the NED's claims of independence from the US government. This is only the surface level of inaccuracy that can be found throughout the NED's discourse. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) supplies reports to Congress through the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) (US Congress, 2007). In one FAS report, Kosar (2007) classifies the NED under the vague category "Instrumentalities of Indeterminate Character" (p. 32). Perhaps the source of this confusion lies in the contradictions between the rhetoric and the actions of the NED. In one instance, the NED was funded by Congress specifically to focus on democratic development in China. In a 1997 Congressional report Congress adopted amendments to "The China Bills", including a rule that,

"increases funding for the National Endowment for Democracy for projects which promote democracy in China; provides for additional reporting on human rights conditions, political prisoners, prisoners of conscience and prisoners of faith in China; and statements of Congressional Support for democracy in Hong Kong and for efforts to create a Commission Security and Cooperation in Asia (US Congress, 1997)."

In the same document Congress authorises US\$5 million per year in addition to NED's annual appropriation expressly to "be available to promote democracy, civil society, and the development of the rule of law in China" (US Congress, 2007). It is clear from these proceedings that the US government has a direct impact on the activities of the NED and fund the group for particular foreign interests. Therefore the NED is only as 'private' as a publicly tax funded organisation can be and as independent as one can be who takes orders from Congress. Furthermore, to compound the evidence of vested interests, the NED is associated with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Allen Weinstein is one of five men who "presided over the study that conceptualised the NED" and is also a former member (NED, 2008). He explained in an interview that "[a] lot of what we [the NED] do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA" (Ignatius, 1991). An American foreign policy briefing describes the NED as an organization that,

"[...] has a history of corruption and financial mismanagement, is superfluous at best and often destructive. Through the endowment, the American taxpayer has paid for special-interest groups to harass the duly elected governments of friendly countries, interfere in foreign elections, and foster the corruption of democratic movements (Conry, 1993)."

Yet the NED describes itself as an organisation that is "supporting freedom around the world" (NED, 2008). The NED has interfered in the elections of Nicaragua, Mongolia, Bulgaria, Albania, Slovakia, Venezuela and Haiti (Blum, 2008). The contradictions between the NED's discourse in comparison to its covert actions, such as those described by Conry and Blum, exemplifies the characteristics of a public covert and establishes the NED as such.

Truth and Obligation

It is in this context that I analyse the NED website. The approximately 300,000 word corpus was collected between June 20-25, 2008. The corpus includes the website content excluding content which is not hosted on the domain name "ned.org"; with the exception that I have included pages from the "Meet Our President" page under a section called "Select from Presentation and Remarks" (NED, 2008). This section contains articles which were written by the NED president Carl Gershman which are hosted on the *Washington Post* website. The NED website includes text written by NED staff as well as transcripts of speeches given at NED award events by recipients and keynote speakers. I use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) for the corpus because it is,

"[...] a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident

research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality (van Dijk, 2001 p. 352)."

CDA provides tools for the researcher to analyse text from multiple perspectives. I synthesised CDA methods and applied textual and intertextual analysis in order to uncover assumptions in the corpus. First, an analysis of the NED's website text using the program Leximancer showed the word "should" as a recurring theme and concept. A focus on "should" and "democracy" was chosen as it reveals the values of the NED's propagation of democracy enabling an examination of what it believes democracy "should be"; in other words, what it "ought" to be. Intertextual analysis focuses on the context of a text. It situates discourse in its real world with specific reference to power relations. Both general knowledge and situational knowledge are important aspects because a corpus exists in both contexts, and each requires a different perspective. In this paper, the general context includes knowledge about democracy and rhetoric. As already set out in this paper, the situational context includes background knowledge about the NED's undemocratic actions and other analyses of the organisation all of which provide information for an intertextual analysis.

The textual analysis focuses upon proposals and propositions as defined by Halliday (2004). According to Halliday (2004) there are two types of transitive clauses: proposals and propositions. A proposal prescribes action: it involves a "command", analysed by its "degree of obligation" or an "offer", known as "the degree of inclination" (Halliday, 2004, p. 147). A proposal cannot be successfully argued about for truth. For example, when a child says to her parent, 'I'm hungry', the parent can reply, 'but you just ate, you cannot be hungry'. The child can continue to say she is hungry, and so on. The parent cannot argue successfully about whether the child is actually hungry or not. At the base of it, the child is not explaining that she is hungry, she is actually demanding that her parent give her food. This is a proposal involving a degree of obligation: the parent can only argue whether he is "allowed to, supposed to, or required to" give food to the child (Halliday, 2004, p. 147). This distinction is important, as the proposal restricts the limits of the actual argument to the child's hunger. The parent can only then decide whether he is obligated to feed the child. The truth of the girl's hunger cannot

be discovered or engaged with in a manner that can establish the truth of the matter. The second type of clause is a proposition. A proposition can successfully be argued for truth as it has "two poles of asserting or denying", a "degree of probability", or a "degree of usuality" (Halliday, 2004, p. 147). For example, a child may say 'I always get dessert after dinner'. The parent could then respond, 'yes, you do always get dessert after dinner', which verifies the truth of the child's statement through the degree of usuality. Or he could respond, 'no, you do not always get dessert after dinner, you only get dessert when you finish your dinner'. This asserts the probability of her having dessert. The child will certainly have dessert if she finishes her dinner. These claims can be questioned and discussed, enabling engagement with the statements. Used systematically, proposals and propositions can be used to create statements that can either be argued for truth or statements that cannot. The examples between parent and child are easily classified as a proposal or proposition, but this is not always the case.

In examining the NED corpus, although both forms appear to be used, it is shown that propositions are construed as proposals through utilisation of the word "should." In these cases the word "should" is not conveying "oughtness"; instead it is used to replace more direct language. This replacement is called grammatical metaphor. An element of grammar, in this case the verb "should", is being transferred onto other verbs, which is the basis of grammatical metaphor. The "general effect of grammatical metaphor [is that] it construes additional layers of meaning and wording" (Halliday, 2004, p. 626). In this case, the transitory meaning structure (of shouldness onto other verbs) enables the propositions to be transformed into proposals. Therefore, these statements can only be questioned through obligation and inclination rather than through asserting or denying truth. Used in this way, the language can be used to convince people to action. In the case of the NED, the effect is to present NED's imperatives for action as matters of fact rather than ethical or obligatory claims. Overall, this has the effect of de-rationalising the discourse of democracy.

Findings

An analysis of the corpus exposes the NED's treatment of truth, obligation and ethics in relation to democracy. The word "should" is a major theme and concept in the corpus. The following instances are representative of the corpus. First, they are semantically probed to check for the occurrence of grammatical metaphor. In order to establish the occurrence of grammatical metaphor, semantic probes are used to replace the word "should" and the verbs used with it, known as its verbal group. Second, they are intertextually analysed to further flesh out other assumptions. The word 'should' is used in what is called its 'congruent form' as it conveys 'oughtness' (Taverniers, 2003, p.6). For example here is an excerpt [1] of a speech made by U.S. Senator Jon Kyl at the 2003 NED Democracy Awards. Semantically probed verbal groups are underlined.

"We should seek to facilitate that movement toward democracy in North Korea. We should work toward a day when the people of that country are able to choose their own fate. And we should make clear to the current regime in Pyongyang that we will not settle for anything less - that we will not be blackmailed into aiding its survival (NED, 2008)."

These clauses are proposals because we can only argue if we ought to seek to facilitate and if we ought to work and if we ought to make clear. Here, the word "ought" can be inserted where "should" is used, but we cannot semantically probe "should" with another verb successfully. For example, using the semantic probe "need" to replace "should" in this case results in the verbal group "need seek to facilitate" which is not sensible. Rather, to probe this statement it requires tactical questions to reveal assumptions made in this paragraph using intertextual analysis. For example, since these statements are proposals we can only question the obligation of the NED's oughtness in promoting democracy in North Korea. Yet, what needs to be questioned is if democracy should be promoted at all. But this is not available for debate here. In addition to the grammatical structure another element is the heteroglossic nature of the discourse, which conceals assumptions. Graham (2002) explains,

"[h]eteroglossia and so on presuppose *the existence* of shared value systems without explaining *the means* by which they are produced, reproduced, distributed, and transformed *en mass* across *space and time* (p. 254)."

An awareness of heteroglossic themes in the corpus then requires a reader to become informed of surrounding circumstances also known as the full extent of the intertextuality of the discourse. Are the people of 'that country' already able to choose their own fate? What evidence is there to assume otherwise? Why should the NED make it clear to 'the regime' that the NED 'will not settle' for less than democracy? What gives the NED power to require a settlement? What sort of judgement is being placed on a group when it is referred to as 'a regime'? Example [1] is congruent so it does not include grammatical metaphor. Yet, there are plenty of assumptions in these clauses in the form of proposals, which still require prodding in order to flesh out meaning.

In the following examples, "should" is used in a non-congruent form, meaning it conveys something other than "oughtness" (Taverniers, 2003, p.6). This is a form of grammatical metaphor. In example [2] the NED president Gershman utilizes "should" in "A Forward Strategy for Democracy Promotion in 2008 and Beyond: Regaining the Momentum" to convey necessity rather than "oughtness":

"The assassination of Benazir Bhutto was a severe blow to these hopes [of military withdrawal from politics and defeating terrorists] as well as a reminder of how far the enemies of democracy will go to subdue their political and philosophical rivals. But of course, such a reminder should not have been needed - not after the murder last year of Anna Politkovskaya and of the Uzbek journalist Alisher Saipov (a NED grantee) in October, the brutal suppression of the nonviolent protest movement in Burma, the killing of journalists in Somalia and so many other countries, the assassination of political

leaders in Lebanon, and the upsurge of suicide bombings in Afghanistan and now Pakistan, to give just some examples of the growing use of political violence today (NED, 2008).”

Upon first reading “should not have been needed” may seem as if it is a proposition because the statement includes a question regarding the probability of a murder being needed as a reminder. This is rather distressing in itself. In this form it appears we can only argue if the reminder should or should not have been needed, and likely our first reaction due to human nature is to answer ‘no’. But is this what requires questioning here? Perhaps what should be more salient is that in the NED’s line of work people have a history of dying. In this case the verbal group “should not have been needed” can be successfully semantically probed as it can be sensibly replaced with “was not needed”, “could not have been needed”, “was not necessary” or “is not necessary”. Therefore, this is a case of grammatical metaphor because a semantic probe is successfully used as a substitute and additional meanings are found within the verbal group. This clause then is a proposition hidden as a proposal, and without the semantic probe, it cannot be argued for truth. Yet, when a form of “need” is substituted for the “oughtness”, it reveals whether the statement reads that an assassination is or was sometimes necessary or if it is believed it was needed this time. Not only can “should” be replaced with a form of “need”, in addition, the tense can also be changed from “should” which is conditional, to past (was) to present (is). Clearly, this statement can be construed in multiple ways. Intertextual clues to assumptions made here include nominalisations. These are tangible pieces of language that highlight the perspective from which the NED views their own involvement and the perspective from which they believe others should view their involvement as well. This is done without clearly stating this perspective. They use nominalisations such as “enemies of democracy”, “the brutal suppression of the nonviolent protest movement”, and “growing use of political violence today”. Each of these groups of words includes judgement in the name that is used to refer to it. Rather than state what the groups have done to become enemies, or how they have suppressed a movement or what violence has occurred, these labels more subtly pass judgements. The way the grammar is structured, we cannot argue if they deserve these labels. Yet this language

this colours the entity that is being discussed thereby encouraging the disablement of a reader’s objectivity.

A second example of grammatical metaphor is revealed in a press release style story published on NED’s website for the 1993 Democracy Awards. “Should” is again used in its non-congruent form [3]:

“In few countries have people suffered as much as they have in Rwanda, or are conditions less ripe for peace and reconciliation. Yet from the ashes of this inhumanity there has emerged an individual whose immense courage and idealism should serve as a lesson and an inspiration to us all. However distant democracy may seem as a goal, it is not unreachable as long as there is someone like Monique Mujawamariya whose belief in freedom and the dignity of all human beings can be neither repressed nor denied (NED, 2008).”

Here “should serve” can be replaced with “should be viewed”, “should be looked upon”, “needs to serve”, “needs to be looked upon”, “will serve”, or “serves”. When the grammatical metaphor is revealed we see this is a proposal rather than a proposition. As a proposal, this is an offer of inclination and it is about needing and serving. The real question however is about the authority of the speaker to know, judge, and advise how people should think and feel. Most of the instances of the word “should” in this corpus are in propositional form in which case the claims made can be tested for truth, but they are still prescribing oughtness. van Dijk (2001) explains that,

“[...] at the local level, in order to understand discourse meaning and coherence, people may need models featuring beliefs that remain implicit (presupposed) in discourse. Thus, a typical feature of manipulation is to communicate beliefs implicitly, that is, without

actually asserting them, and with less chance that they will be challenged" (p.358)."

In examples [2] and [3] "should" is used to replace more direct language that implicitly conveys views contradictory to democratic action. Although at first glance the text may appear to support democratic action when broken down into manageable pieces for analysis it is seen that the "shouldness" of the NED's brand of democracy is not democracy at all. This theme is continuous throughout the corpus. Its repetition is powerful in that,

"[...] if particular lexical and grammatical choices are regularly made, and if people and things are repeatedly talked about in certain ways, then it is plausible that this will affect how they are thought about (Stubbs, 1996, p. 92 in Orpin, p. 58, 2005)."

Beyond the repetition of these choices manipulating thought processes, van Dijk (2001) states that discourse and power studies go a step further because,

"[...] we first find that access to specific forms of discourse, e.g. those of politics, the media, or science, is itself a power resource. Secondly, [...] action is controlled by our minds. So, if we are able to influence people's minds, e.g. their knowledge or opinions, we indirectly may control (some of) their actions, as we know from persuasion and manipulation (p. 355)."

The NED has access to a variety of media and therefore the access to be able to control people's actions. This is especially the case because,

"[...] members of more powerful social groups and institutions, and especially their leaders (the elites), have more or less exclusive access to, and control over, one or more types of public discourse (van Dijk, pp. 356, 2001)."

For example, the National Endowment for Democracy has published extensively in the *Washington Post*. A Google search of the *Washington Post* website, the NED president "Carl Gershman" and "National Endowment for Democracy" retrieved 37 results. Reducing the search terms only to the *Washington Post* website and "National Endowment for Democracy" resulted in 311 instances. Not only does the NED appear to have created a particular discourse in this newspaper; in addition, the NED publishes a variety of its own media. It publishes a blog called *Democracy Digest*, a forum called the *International Forum for Democratic Studies*, a monthly journal called the *Journal of Democracy*, a *Journal of Democracy* Book Series, an e-newsletter called *Democracy*, special theme reports such as *The Backlash against Democracy Assistance*, conference reports, testimonies, presentations, and articles, all available through its website (NED, 2008). The NED uses a variety of online media for its discourse creating a specific brand of discourse focused on supporting its goals.

The NED is not what it claims to be. This in itself is not shocking regardless of how much discourse is created about the "oughtness" of its brand of democracy. There are a variety of organisations that do not fulfil their mandate. Society is not up in arms over this regular defaulting. Still the imperative message in the discord is not the lack of fulfilment of its goals.

Ethics of Propagation: Discourse and Power

I suggest that the imperative message is that the NED's actual purpose is simply to *spread the belief* that the US intends to aid democracy. The truth of the matter is that the democratic agenda has rarely been top priority for the US; rather the American focus has been on "oil and Israel" (Kabalan, 2008). Ultimately, the NED supports US foreign policy goals not democracy. Its discourse involves "whitewashing", and is intrinsically unethical. Ethics in general are a culmination of socialised "oughtness" and it is a choice whether to act ethically or not. An organisation that purports to support democracy, but uses it as a cover for covert activities is purposefully designing manipulative discourse. This form of discourse can also be referred to as propaganda because its false message aids the NED to subsist. The NED and others like it claim to be non-governmental organisations (NGO's) and this

misnomer has a profound effect on political communication among countries. Russia amended its laws to include new requirements on foreign non-commercial initiatives, enabling them to supervise groups' activities, restrict and or deny access to the country, and to abolish groups already formed which do not meet the standards of the new law (ICNL, 2006, p.2). This new law was enacted in order to stop foreign political organisations from putting pressure on the Russian government to act in particular ways beneficial to foreign interests. Yet, it was reported in the mass media that Russia was acting undemocratically by making such restrictions. Arguably, Russia was attempting to keep out foreign interest organisations that would intrude on democratic freedoms of its own government. According to a report by the NED, this "new law requiring NGOs to report extensively on their activities and finances was used to shut down NED grantee the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society" (NED, 2008). This form of foreign intervention is not a new phenomenon. The NED works all over the world promoting democracy as if it has a legitimate role as a world police agency. This type of activity has been coined "Wilsonian" after President Woodrow Wilson's brand of foreign policy (Lafeber, 1994, 269). "'Wilsonian' became a term to describe later policies that emphasised internationalism and moralism and that were dedicated to extending democracy'" (Lafeber, 1994, 269). The NED attempts to dominate with this Wilsonian agenda. Lukes' theory of the third-dimension of power outlines how dominant power can be held through the act of shaping beliefs. He defines the third dimension of power as"

"The power 'to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things (2005, p. 11)."

This is the space in which the NED discourse performs. Even while it acts entirely against democracy promotion, the US government can claim organisations such as the NED prove otherwise. This justification tactic is used beyond just the NED. Fairclough (2001) notes that,

"[a]n order of discourse is not a closed or rigid system, but, rather an open system, which is put

at risk by what happens in actual interactions (p. 235)."

US foreign policy has long used peace and democracy promotion as excuses for retaliation or intervention in foreign countries to secure American interests. Perhaps the most salient example is that of the September 11th plane crashes and the subsequent retaliation wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and most recently in Pakistan. The NED's agenda relies upon the whims of the current administration and democracy promotion is a shield to protect the US government from criticism.

Conclusion

The NED is a public covert. Its stated intentions are other than what they set out to accomplish. It states that its intentions are to spread democracy but its actions directly contradict this claim. By analysing the NED website text corpus, its false claims of democracy promotion are revealed. In my analysis, the world "should" has a large representation. In attending to this clue and examining it, it is seen that the words "democracy" and "should" are used to present rhetoric, which whitewashes the intentions of the public covert. The usage of grammatical metaphor hides claims to truth by constructing language that changes the claims from proposal to proposition rendering them inarguable.

The NED portrays a seemingly harmless democracy promoting agenda. However, when broken down into manageable pieces for analysis, it can be seen the NED's agenda is one of deceit towards the global population. The NED is a direct arm of the United States government and a main piece of American foreign policy. Its discourse is unethical in that it hides assumptions and at the same time urges action without provoking thought or discussion about the facts that ought to be the basis of decision-making.

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