

# **Occasional Semes that Form the Semantic Field of the Polemic Component of the Print Media: Discourse on the Material of the English Language**

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## **Abstract**

This article deals with the study of the cognitive-semantic block of the polemic component of the discourse of print media. That is, the intensity index allows one or another genre of press to be attributed to the structural elements of the polemic discourse. The calculation of the intensity index of the polemic component (which is formed by means of such elements as actants and circonstants with usual and occasional semes), makes it possible to attribute the texts of press genres to the core, near and far periphery of the polemic discourse.

*Keywords:* polemic discourse of print media, cognitive-semantic block, intensity index, actants, circonstants, usual and occasional semes

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## **Introduction**

Despite the fact that the printed press in the literal sense of the word is gradually disappearing, it is more correct to say that it is only changing and moving into a new format – a digital one, which allows information to reach the most remote corners of the planet. Such a transformation makes it relevant to search for new forms of text space organization or change existing ones in such a way as to stimulate a response from readers and involve them in an active discussion. This fact determines the interest in polemics, which is a product of a complex speech and thought activity based on differences in views and opinions of communication participants;

participants whose goal is not only to express and substantiate their point of view, but also to refute the position of the interlocutor and arouse undying interest among representatives of various scientific fields.

Many researchers rightly attribute polemics to one of the varieties of dispute (Maidanov, 1997) and oppose it to such categories as “debate,” “discussion,” “dispute,” and “confrontation.” With regard to the above concepts, there are other positions which, as a rule, stem from the terminological confusion around them and consist in an attempt to define one category through another. This can be demonstrated by narrowing the category “dialogue” and opposing it to “dispute” and, within the framework of the dispute – “polemics” (Prokhorov, 1998). Such an approach, in our opinion, has insufficient grounds. Numerous studies show there are quite a lot of distinctive features that make it possible to speak of all three forms as fundamentally different forms of dialogue (Sazhyna, 2023).

We believe that this and similar examples of terminological diversity are associated with the insufficient degree of development of the problem of the manifestation of polemics in a particular area of communicative activity and the lack of a system of clear signs that would allow drawing boundaries between polemics, discussion, dispute, etc. In addition, there is a question concerning the definition of the polemic component of texts that form the space of various discourses as they penetrate all spheres of human activity, including the media. Consequently, the question of finding linguistic grounds for classifying the texts of certain genres of the print media discourse as a polemic type still remains unresolved.

### **The Nature of Polemics**

This article focuses on research examining the point of view according to which polemics has a special (discursive) dimension, within which a dispute, discussion, or debate as a form of polemics is not only formalized as a kind of given, but also constructed as an object of knowledge for participants and observers. For this article, out of multiple nominal definitions of polemics we use the following one: “Polemics can be defined as a struggle of fundamentally opposite opinions on a particular issue, a public dispute in order to defend one’s point of view and reject the opponent’s opinion” (Pavlova, 1991, p. 6). Polemics can take the form of a public discussion, with the purpose being “to clarify and compare different points of view, search, reveal the true opinion, find the right solution to the issue, problem” (Rodos, 1989, p.12).

This article also deals with the issue of the polemic nature of the discourse of the print media; that is, the markers of a polemic component in the texts of various genres of the press for further differentiation of communicative-pragmatic types of discourse in the print media. The relevance of the topic stems from the necessity to define and establish clear boundaries of the polemic component in the discourse under study. Additionally, there's a need to develop a system of indices enabling calculations to identify the core, near, and far periphery of polemic discourse in print media. It is also crucial to determine the belonging/non-belonging of certain genres of the printed press to the polemic type of discourse. The use of content analysis as research methodology was seen as instrumental in the quantitative analysis of printed material.

The previous analysis on the material of the Russian-Language and English-Language press (Sazhyna, 2023) has indicated that the markers of polemics at the structural-compositional level are represented by the following structural-compositional elements in the texts:

- *Problem Setting* – a block of text of one or another genre of print media, which reports on a complex theoretical or practical issue that requires study, resolution, formation of an idea, concept for finding an answer (problem solving) with verification and confirmation in experience;
- *Assessment* – a block of text of a particular genre of print media, which shows the significance of the problem/question for the acting and cognizing subject;
- *Comment* – a block of text of a particular genre of print media, which provides reasoning, explanatory and critical remarks about an existing problem / issue; and
- *Opinion* – a block of text of a particular genre of print media, which contains beliefs, judgments, conclusions, points of view on the topic, based on the interpretation of facts or the emotional attitude towards them on the part of the addressee (p. 101).

It should be noted that each element of the structural-compositional block has its own density index. The density index is an indicator that links the number of sentences and the number of propositions in these sentences. Sentence and Proposition numbers are included in the set of structural and compositional blocks that form the polemic component of a text of a particular genre. Due to the density index in various genres of the study, we can single out the core, the near periphery, and the far periphery of the polemic discourse of the print media. This is calculated by the formula  $Dns = nprop : nsent \times nbl$ , where:

- $Dns$  = the density of the polemic component of the polemic discourse of the print media;
- $nprop$  = the total number of propositions included in the structural-compositional block;
- $nsent$  = the total number of sentences included in the structural-compositional block; and
- $nbl$  = the total number of structural-compositional blocks in the polemic text.

For example, the structural-compositional block of the polemic component of the “survey” genre has the density index of 37.28, while the density index of the structural-compositional blocks of the problem article is 51.63, and of the review – 41.26. Thus, we see that among the presented genres, the problem is at the core of the polemic discourse of the print media, while the other two genres form its near periphery.

Cognitive-semantic markers of the polemic nature of a text of a particular genre can be a structural element of the polemic discourse. The cognitive-semantic markers of the print media are identified in the following way: Lexical units are distinguished in the composition of the propositions included in the structural and compositional blocks of the polemic component. The lexical units are subjected to the component analysis, in which dictionary definitions are studied and semes are identified. Thus, ‘dispute,’ ‘discussion,’ ‘question,’ ‘problem,’ ‘quarrel,’ ‘consideration,’ ‘confrontation,’ and ‘opinion’ form the semantic field of polemics.

Texts from the core, near and far periphery of the polemic discourse of the print media can be distinguished. This discernment is dependent on the index of intensity of cognitive-semantic features of the polemic component of a text of a particular genre. The index of intensity of cognitive-semantic features of the polemic component is calculated by the formula  $Ints = nactn(+ncirc) : t nactn(+circ) \times nprop$ , where:

- Ints = the intensity index of cognitive-semantic features;
- $nactn(+ncirc)$  = the number of actants/circonstants with the meaning ‘dispute,’ ‘discussion,’ ‘question,’ ‘problem,’ ‘quarrel,’ ‘consideration,’ ‘opposition,’ and ‘opinion;’
- $tnactn(+circ)$  = the total number of actants/circonstants in propositions that form the blocks of the polemic component; and
- $nprop$  = the number of propositions included in the structural and compositional blocks of the polemic component of the polemical discourse of the print media.

Before drawing final conclusions, we have found out that in addition to the usual semes that form the semantic field of the polemic component, there may be occasional semes, which should also be taken into account when calculating the intensity index of the polemic component of the discourse under study.

### Methodology

To identify occasional (contextual) semes, a psycholinguistic experiment was employed with 70 native English speakers. The participants were attending college in the United Kingdom and the United States and identified themselves as native English speakers. This study aimed at developing an algorithm for identifying a set of occasional (contextual) semes that form the semantic field of the polemic component of print media discourse. The contextual semes, along with the denotation semes, can be taken into account when calculating the intensity index of the polemic component of the discourse under study. Researcher-developed surveys were sent to each participant (see Appendix).

The surveys were designed on the Google forms website (“Google forms: Online form creator-Google workspace”, n.d.) and involved a remote form of participation as it was possible to use from a computer or a mobile phone. The duration of survey was no more than 30 minutes. The surveys contained two stages. The first stage included two parts. The first part consisted of questions concerning association of a lexeme with a polemic situation. Participants were presented with stimulus lexemes that are part of the polemic component of the print media discourse. They were asked to write in front of each lexeme the first word that comes to their mind. They were instructed to use only one word for their answer and to take no longer than 10 seconds. For example, participants were to write the first word that came to mind when prompted with the word “dispute.”

In the second part of the first stage, participants were asked to complete the given stimulus phrase with a synonym and could use only one word for their answer. This part was more free association and they could spend no more than 20 seconds. For example, the prompt “Polemic means ...” was given, and participants had to suggest a word with a similar meaning.

The second stage consisted of questions concerning association of lexemes with action nominations or verbs. Participants were asked to identify as many verbs that could be associated with the specific lexemes *dispute*, *discussion*, *question*, *problem*, *quarrel*, *consideration*, and *confrontation*. They were to spend no more than two minutes on each lexeme.

## Findings

During the analysis, the following findings emerged. The word “dispute” has the most frequent matching associations as argue (16) and argument (10); discussion – talk (20), conversation (10); question – answer (33); problem – solution (22), issue (6); quarrel – fight (27); consideration – think (5), thinking (3); confrontation – fight (12). These findings can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Association of a Lexeme With a Polemic Situation: One-Word Free Association Response (n=70)*

Given Lexeme	Most Frequent Associations
Dispute	Argue (16); Argument (10)
Discussion	Talk (20); Conversation (10)
Question	Answer (33)
Problem	Solution (22); Issue (6)
Quarrel	Fight (27)
Consideration	Think (5); Thinking (3)
Confrontation	Fight (12)

Further, it was found out that when associating the characteristics expressed by adjectives, associated with the polemic context, the following associations were obtained: polemic – controversial (16); disputable – arguable (9); discussive – talking (10); questionable – doubtful (4); problematic – difficult (8); quarrelling – fighting (19), arguing (18); under consideration – thinking (13); confrontational – aggressive (4). The findings can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2***Association of a Lexeme With a Polemic Situation: Selected Response (n=70)*

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Given Lexeme as Adjective	Most Frequent Associations
Polemic	Controversial (16)
Disputable	Arguable (9)
Discussive	Talking (10)
Questionable	Doubtful (4)
Problematic	Difficult (8)
Quarrelling	Fighting (19); Arguing (18)
Under Consideration	Thinking (13)
Confrontational	Aggressive (4)

When associating certain actions related to the polemic context, the following results were obtained: dispute – to argue (46); discussion – to talk (54); question – to ask (25); problem – to solve (30); quarrel – to fight (43); consideration – to think (36), confrontation – to fight (23). We also took into account the semes that were least represented in the respondents' answers, for example, *dispute* was represented by such associations as *confrontation*, *union*, *border*, *international*, *cancel*, which allows us to speak about the contextual polemic nature of these lexemes (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Association of a Lexeme With a Polemic Situation: Constructed Response With as Many Verbs as can be Associated With Given Lexeme (n=70)*

Given Lexeme	Most Frequent Associated Verbs
Dispute	To argue (46)
Discussion	To talk (54)
Question	To ask (25)
Problem	To solve (30)
Quarrel	To fight (43)
Consideration	To think (36)
Confrontation	To fight (23)

### **Application of Findings**

Using the results from the survey, a set of associations emerged, which, in the context of the polemic discourse of the print media, may be taken into account when calculating the intensity index. In addition, the analysis was made of other associations repeated at least twice, which we also take into account when analyzing the polemical component of the print media discourse. These associations were then applied to a segment of print media using content analysis. Occasional semes were taken into account when considering the calculation of the intensity index in the article, “The Main Lesson From Afghanistan is That the ‘War on Terror’ Does Not Work” from the British newspaper, *The Guardian* (Kaldor, 2021). Content analysis has been defined by Stone (1966) as “... any research technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within text” (p.5). It should be noted that content analysis is not intended to ascertain reasons, motives, or intent, but simply to describe the content of communication. As Weber (1990) noted, “There is no single right way to do content analysis. Instead, investigators must judge what methods are most appropriate for their substantive problems” (p.13).

The practical analysis has showed that the Kaldor article, published in 2021, included 11 blocks of text which were placed in the structural-compositional elements mentioned earlier:

- There was one block of text in the “Problem Setting” element.
  - *The main lesson from Afghanistan is that the ‘war on terror’ does not work. US allies in the fight, the warlords and corrupt officials, would go on to undermine the legitimacy of the Afghan government.*
- Three blocks of text were assigned to the “Assessment” element.
  - For example: *I opposed the initial invasion of Afghanistan on the grounds that terrorism is a heinous crime but not a war, and that we needed to use the*

*techniques of policing and intelligence, while tackling the underlying causes of terrorism, rather than military methods to deal with the problem.*

- The “Comment” element contained three blocks of text.
  - For example: *After the invasion, I favoured a strategy of human security, stabilising Afghanistan, and protecting individual Afghans and their families. President Biden called this “nation building” and said it should never have been undertaken. This was the approach of the UN in Afghanistan and, while it is possible to argue that nation-building efforts are often too top down and technical, and need to include civil society and local initiatives, these are not the reasons that nation building was so inadequate in Afghanistan.*
- Five blocks of text were assigned to the “Opinion” element.
  - For example: *If we want to help ordinary Afghans, we should neither do a deal with the Taliban nor start a war against them – continued counter-terror air operations, as suggested by Biden, will merely shore up support for the Taliban. Rather, we should undertake a humanitarian intervention in order to establish safe havens and humanitarian corridors to help those who need to flee and to deliver aid. This is not the same as war even though military personnel could be used – the aim would be to protect people rather than kill enemies (Kaldor, 2021).*

The listed blocks of text consisted of passages including 121 propositions, which include 169 actants and circonstants. At the same time, the number of actants/circonstants with the meaning of ‘dispute,’ ‘discussion,’ ‘question,’ ‘problem,’ ‘quarrel,’ ‘discussion,’ ‘opposition,’ ‘opinion,’ together with the occasional semes found as a result of the psycholinguistic experiment, is equal to 67. By calculating the intensity index of the cognitive-semantic feature of the polemic component of the print media discourse; we get the figure 47.97. This means the intensity index may vary from genre to genre and the higher the number, the more polemic the genre.

### **Conclusion**

The practical analysis of the textual material from the English-Language press, together with the results of the psycholinguistic experiment, made it possible to calculate the intensity index of a single problem article. This is significant because this index marks the polemic character of this or that genre of the discourse of print media and shows its borders as not all genres have the polemic component. The results obtained will form the basis of the comparative analysis not only of the texts of this genre, but also of other genres. The results obtained will make it possible to identify what genres of the press form the core, near and far periphery of the polemic discourse of the print media on the material of the English language and conduct the contrastive analysis with texts of similar genres on the material of other languages, which will make a certain contribution to the development of not only discourse analysis, but also genres studies.



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### Appendix

This study aims at developing the algorithm for identifying a set of occasional semes that form the semantic field of the polemic component of the print media discourse. The occasional semes, along with the ordinary semes, can be taken into account when calculating the intensity index of the polemic component of the discourse under study.

The current stage of the study is experimental. We are conducting a series of associative experiments on the material of Russian and English languages. The surveys were designed on the Google forms website ("Google forms: Online form creator-Google workspace", n.d.) and involve a remote form of participation (it is possible from a computer or mobile phone).

The duration of one experimental survey is no more than 30 minutes.

#### Part I

Write behind each lexeme the first word that comes to your mind. Use only one word for your answer and spend no more than 10 seconds on each word.

1. Dispute -
2. Discussion -
3. Question -
4. Problem -
5. Quarrel -
6. Consideration -
7. Confrontation -

Complete the stimulus phrase with some characteristic. Use only one word for your answer and spend no more than 20 seconds on each phrase.

1. Polemic means ...
2. Disputable means ...
3. Discussive means ...
4. Questionable means ...
5. Problematic means ...

6. Quarrelling means...

7. Under consideration means...

8. Confrontational means...

## Part II

Write as many verbs as possible denoting typical actions that accompany the given words. Spend no more than 2 minutes on each word.

Dispute -

Discussion -

Question -

Question -

Quarrel -

Consideration -

Confrontation -

Please, provide your age:

Please, provide your sex: