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Lobbying in health policy issues as a linguistic topic

Abstract

Health policy is a precarious topic in public health communication, but the professional processes are rather incomprehensible to most citizens. The perceived opacity of the legislature sparks controversy and distrust that is a threat to any functioning democracy. Especially the practice of lobbying is perceived in a strongly negative light, despite it being a commonplace reality on all levels of politics. Lobbying can be defined as "direct or indirect influence exercised by a company on legislative and/or executive decision-makers through the communication of information with the aim of gaining competitive advantages or avoiding competitive disadvantages" (Joos 2011: 40). It comprises multiple actions aimed at persuading executive and legislative institutions to implement certain regulations that conform with one's interests. These actions are mainly linguistic in nature, turning the business of lobbying into a highly communicative profession. Not only international corporations but also NGOs and other stakeholders are involved in lobbying.

Most aspects of lobbying are confidential and therefore inaccessible, whereas some are open to the public. This particular mixture of the 'visible' and the 'invisible' is a major source of complexity and lack of transparency. Regarding health issues, the topos of the 'all-mighty pharmaceutical lobby' is ever-present in the public discourse. Its traces, however, are only visible to experts.

In this presentation, a general outline of lobbying as a linguistic practice is established, focusing on the level of the European Union: What is the social context of lobbying (political, legal and societal conditions) (Geiger 2006, Joos 2011) and how does this context affect linguistic choices (van Dijk 2010)? Which linguistic devices of persuasion (Zarefsky 2014) and for the establishment of power relations (Henriksen 2011) are in use? What are the text types, textual routines, and conversational patterns that need to be discerned (Koch 2014)? Which pragmatic peculiarities are viewed as necessary skills in order to gain lobbying success (Gray 2006)?

Besides this overview, a small empirical study on an overt aspect of lobbying is presented. The material for the analysis consists of self-representations by pharmaceutical companies in the "Transparency Register" of the European Union and their external corporate communication. The main question is: How do lobbyists legitimate their requests and how do they define their responsibility? What is the rhetoric of pharmaceutical policy making (Conrad / Jodlowski 2008)? The theoretical backdrop to the analysis are the linguistic ways to construct legitimation (van Leeuwen 2008) and responsibility.

Some preliminary results: Descriptions of lobbying activities by pharmaceutical companies remain on a very vague level of information transfer. The legitimation techniques stem exclusively from authorisation, moral evaluation and (very seldom) rationalisation with a slight prevalence on moral norms. This means, companies tend to display themselves as considerate, caring, responsible and transparent players in the political field. Corporations claim that they only provide neutral and correct information to political decision-makers. This marks a stark contrast to the public opinion. These negative perceptions are neither addressed nor refuted.

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Source of the material for the pilot study

EU Transparency Register
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