

Dysfunctionality of Master Signifiers in the Georgian (Political) Discourse

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to identify, compare and analyze the basic master signifiers within the Georgian political discourse. We will try to construct some kind of a typology of master signifiers in relation with the concept of ideology/discourse, fitting them in the main political parties' ideological grounds. We will also try to show that the concept of the Master Signifier can be employed while analyzing any type of political realm for practical purposes. Our main task will be the general typology of Master Signifiers, with a particular focus on the Georgian political-ideological realm. Together with the master signifier, the concept of empty signifier is also given in the literature. Accordingly, there are dysfunctional master signifiers, as well. Our goal is to focus on the dysfunctional signifiers and their importance in terms of meaning creation/cancelation. At the same time, the notion should be examined in the context of ideology/power relations. Moreover, it must be considered in relation with concepts like discursive strategy, narrative, metaphor.

Keywords: Discourse, ideology, Master signifier

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Introduction

We start with definition of the concept of Master signifier. In a very broad term, it can be defined as the main idea, the ideological basis for justifying a political behavior. The “master signifiers” define and limit the meanings of concepts and at the same time, they contain ideological views on how society should function. Master signifiers are unprovable, though guiding and justifying ideas of behavior. It is a collection of sublimated ideas. The function of the master signifier is to unify meanings and to derive a common, comprehensive and determinative final idea.

“The signifier does not provide a guide to reality, but presents myriad relations with other signifiers.” A signifier, moreover, is defined by other signifiers, indeed, “by its relation to the chain of *all* other signifiers.” It fails to fix a certain meaning and new connections are made by moving from one concept to another (Miller, 2016).

Ideological Components of Master Signifiers

As for the ideological components of master signifiers, “their main ideological function is that they can combine different views and find a common ground between them that are otherwise opposed to each other (Hook & Vanheule, 2016).

At the same time, master signifiers may change over time. Accordingly, we can talk about totalitarian/democratic/... master signifiers and the conflict between them. Hence, master signifiers are conflictual (just like discourses, which produce them (master signifiers)). For practical purposes, master signifiers can be identified based on core values, where value/ideal represents a master signifier (and vice versa). One important aspect of a master signifier is, that it over-reaches its signified; it exceeds what it literally signifies to perform a different discursive function, that of drawing a line, halting a sequence of inadequate explanations by the imposition of a master-signifier.

In this way such responses enable a temporary point of fixity; they ground a point of belief and/or authority. It is the last word, the bottom line, the term that anchors, explains or justifies the claims or demands contained within the message. Receivers of communication respond to master-signifiers similarly: whereas other terms and the values and assumptions they bear may be challenged, master-signifiers are simply accepted as having a value or validity that goes without saying (Bracher, 1994).

Such signifiers are given much more value than others. They provide the highest standard of values and beliefs. Therefore, master signifiers can generate/cancel meanings over time.

We can assume that politicians are fixing the master signifiers within the framework of formal discourse. In addition, they manipulate with master signifiers for specific (political) gains. Thus, dominant discourse uses master (hegemonic) signifiers, thus gaining an advantage over other types of discourses and by doing so, achieving discursive dominance. Therefore, it is important to identify master signifiers in each particular discursive field.

From the above mentioned, one can establish a direct link between master signifiers, as part of a discursive strategy and the power/hegemonic struggle for (discursive) dominance. Hence, it is important to keep in mind that those who hold a political power, skillfully operate with master signifiers over others. Therefore, the notion of the master signifier should be considered in the context of dominant discourse: “the discourse of the master promotes consciousness, synthesis and self-equivalence by instituting the dominance of master signifiers. This position has the subject speaking from a place of dominance and tyranny that represses all other signified meanings that do not correspond to the dominant signification of the master signifier (Bracher, 1997). The discourse of the Master is most utilized by political and cultural phenomenon that attempt to suppress resistance and revolution, influencing social life through the imposition of “master signifiers that guide the larger social and political agendas of our society” (Bracher, 1997, p. 119).

As to the question of how one can identify/classify master signifiers: “one can identify a master signifier, and the agent who speaks from the discourse of the Master, by the way the agent and the other respond to the message (ibid.). An agent uses a master signifier to justify the claims that they make, as the master signifier represents “the last word, the bottom line, the term that anchors, explains, or justifies” (ibid.). The other in the discourse of the Master acts similarly to the authority of the master signifier, not offering a challenge to its authority but accepting it blindly as having value”.

The discourse of the Master linguistically imperializes meaning by shutting down progressive and revolutionary alternative rhetoric from surfacing in the system of knowledge. Meaning is imperialized in a discourse through the imposition of master signifiers on the subject, suppressing the subject’s evocation of their own master signifiers. The goal here is to move a subject from the ideologically interpellated position of the discourse of the Master to the discourse of the Analyst so as to generate new master signifiers that promote social change. Only by inducing the subject into the discourse of the Analyst can one overcome the tyranny that is exercised socially and psychologically in language, effectively achieving social change (Bracher, 1993).

According to Parker, speakers who adopt master signifiers (by employing the discourse of the Master) “claim authority that is maintained through repetition of the claim rather than reasoned argument”. To identify these signifiers, the analyst must locate the points in a text where “a facade of reason argument breaks down” (Parker, 2005). Asserting authority in a text, and consequently repressing alternative significations through the uttering of master signifiers, is a position of mastery taken by the discursive subject when one identifies with specific signifiers.

The goal pursued by us here can be bringing unconscious master signifiers into relation with other signifiers and to unblock an individual’s unconscious fixations, **so that fragments of a dysfunctional master signifier** can slip through into reflexive consciousness (Bracher, 1993). According to this strategy, the analyst’s discourse can be employed to represent the critical deconstruction of the illusionary positions of the actors.

The master generates ideals and their master signifiers such as God, country, nation, ideology and so on that subjects would even die for them. It (master signifier(s)) is the dominant factor that gives meaning and signification to the signifying process, for instance, masculinity, femininity, God, democracy and so on are all master signifiers that make the messages in language understandable. The master signifier is also the means for our identification as a journalist, a scientist, a woman, a hysteric or a political leader, and so on. Those who are exercising power on others are in those in the position of power who always find their enjoyment by identifying with the master signifier (Stanizai, 2018).

Empty (dysfunctional) Signifiers in Politics

As one can easily understand, master signifiers are heavily utilized within political discourse as a discursive strategy. Together with master signifier, other types of signifiers are also identified. For example, an “empty” or “floating signifier” is variously defined as a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified. Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even *any* signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean. It is a signifier that absorbs the meaning, rather than reinforcing it (Chandler, 2021).

A master signifier separates from its defined meaning. In return, it gives such an empty space that can be filled with universal meanings. For example, does the empty signifier of freedom include the freedom to own slaves or the freedom from being a slave?

A hegemonic struggle is one in which a particular signifier (freedom, equality, democracy, human rights, etc.) articulates a series of elements into a larger movement (Rebello, 2008).

Empty and master signifiers represent the unity of opposites. The first emphasizes emptiness and generalization, while the second emphasizes dominance and specificity. The process of turning of secondary signifiers into master signifiers is essentially a competition for supremacy, where the dominant signifier assimilates the connotations of other signifiers and transforms their individualities into universality.

It is of an importance to examine the use of master signifiers within the political discourse based on the above given explanations. One interesting point here is that master signifiers can be identified as (political) metaphors, at the same time. Correspondingly, they may change over time. In this regard, “in the process of change of meanings, some (political) metaphors lose their semantic load and turn into dead metaphors (signifiers depleted of meaning), for: “Words can be cut off from their original sources of meaning and turned into empty signifiers, dead metaphors and bad icons, which is especially detrimental to philosophical discourse, which operates with abstractions”.

Even the signifiers with the deepest meanings, lose their meaning after a few generations. This should not come as a surprise, as it awaits any language and any institution that operates with arbitrary signs, unless those signs are frequently compared with their subjects, through active usage and thus preserving their meaning (Noyes, 2018).

As to the generating and actualizing of empty signifiers, the educational system constitutes the primary agent which produces them.

One of the functions of schooling is the production of empty signifiers that are utilized in identity building industries, usually located outside the school. It is performed by means of cognitive practices in which certain terms are systematically detached from their experiential meaning in ritual repetitions, de-contextualized, abstracted and re-contextualized so that their meaning eventually becomes too complex and vague to be grasped. This process needs thorough empirical research, but we may venture a hypothesis that in the course of schooling, key categories in curricula (like “culture”, “nation”, “democracy”, “science”, etcetera) are circulated as important and at the same time impossible to define or understand, and that their incomprehensibility is systematically produced. Schools are factories of empty

signifiers and of subjects who are ready to use them in their quest for identity (Szkudlarek, 2011).

Dysfunctionality of (Georgian) Master Signifiers

For practical purposes, here we give a list of basic master signifiers (which otherwise can be labeled as core values, at the same time) and then try to examine specific issues from the current Georgian political discourse:

Homeland, Patriotism, Faith, God, History / Past, Monarch(y), Freedom, Independence, Democracy, (Private) Property, prosperity, Ecology (Environment), Human Rights, Peace, Equality, Prosperity, Justice, Obedience, Stalin, dignity, Georgianness ...

(note: majority of the mentioned signifiers are common to all discursive fields, while some constitute specific variations of the Georgian political realm)

Here we will try to adapt the concept of master signifier to the Georgian political discourse. For this purpose, we bring the opinions of the Georgian linguist - Levan Gvinjilia regarding the subject. For example, he is critical of certain recent phenomena in the Georgian public discourse. In particular, we bring an extract from L. Gvinjilia's interview, where he articulates the issue of identity problem in the Georgian students.

Master Signifier: Georgianness

..."Students do not know what a Nation is and why do we want to be Georgians".

"During my public lectures I often ask students provocative questions on why they are Georgians and they do not know what to answer," - said Gvinjilia.

According to him, the essence and importance of the (Georgian) language within the state is not clearly defined, which is an oddity.

"...Unfortunately for us, most of individuals in Georgia do not have a good understanding of the importance of the Georgian language for the Nation. In one of the interviews, Otia Ioseliani said that Language equals Nation and an equation sign should be put between them" (Gvinjilia, 2017)

We can assume that the above given case is the result of the confusion caused by the empty signifiers, generated by

the education system in terms of identity construction. It can be labeled as an identity crisis in younger generation of Georgians, experiencing difficulties in terms of identifying the basic pillar(s) of their national identity. The issue, on the other hand, can be linked to the incompetency of the Georgian educational system which fails to generate functional (master) signifiers and thus, creating confusion, that results in identity problem in individuals.

Master Signifier: (Private) Property

We take the abovementioned signifier within a context of Neo-liberal thought. One of the main Georgian political movement which promotes these types of values is the Right-Libertarian party called Girchi ("Cone"). The party members advocate for civic and political representation of democracy, the rule of law, and economic freedom.

As to their basic philosophical argument regarding the right to (private) property, they "assure us that there are no social rights since there are no pre-contractual obligations. If, against my will, I pay taxes to the state in order to secure social rights, it is a violation of my property rights. Helping others is a matter of voluntary charity and not an obligation secured by the state power. According to their logic, social rights are derivative and therefore, secondary rights, the neglect of which is allowed and even necessary.

If, in this libertarian paradise, the slavery contract also becomes legally permissible and should be logically permissible, for, if I am the owner of my body, then I can enslave myself to another, by contract. (<https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/rogor-vekamatot-libertarianelebs>)

This very idea echoes to the passage brought above, as an interesting interrelationship is being established: ...it gives such an empty space that can be filled with universal meanings. For example, does the empty signifier of freedom include the freedom to own slaves or the freedom from being a slave?

This type of reasoning is a good example of what Lacan identified as the Capitalist Discourse - the 5th type of discourse, which is a variation of discourse of the master, which takes a hysterical position in order to create an impression that it stands on the side of those who are subject to the discourse of the master, when in fact, it secretly serves and pursues the interests of the later. A good example of this is the position taken by the major oil companies (which are part of a discursive complex of the discourse of the master), which is almost indistinguishable from the position of a hysteric (activists protesting against the

environmental damage done by oil companies) when it comes to environmental issues, as if no one cares about ecosystems more than themselves (oil companies). That is why Lacan calls this fifth discourse a “smart discourse” - it is disguised as hysterical discourse, but in fact, it secretly promotes the interests of the capitalist master.

Master Signifier: Stalin

This particular signifier would constitute an example of a totalitarian master signifier which still exists within the Georgian Psyche, as Georgia's totalitarian past of living 70 years within the Soviet rule has had a huge impact on the consciousness of the country's people. Many individuals still operate with old concepts that were indoctrinated upon them during the Communist Regime. An example of this would be the cult of Stalin which still exists in Georgia (predominantly within the older generation). Within this mindset, Stalin appears as a figure who controls and dominates every sphere of life, decides what's best for each and every individual, and requires every individual to conform to his will (an example of the Discourse of the Master). Disobedience necessarily results in punishment. As within this system of values a state is all powerful and dominating, its main function is to take care of every aspect of individuals' lives. That is why individuals of the Communist mentality are dependent on the state as they project the model of the Strict Father (Stalin's Cult of Personality) onto the functions of the state in general.

It would be easy to understand how conflictual would these types of old (**totalitarian**) signifiers be in relation with the new master signifiers (for example, the one given above: **private property**)

Another interesting feature of the totalitarian discourse of the Stalin's cult of Personality is its symbiosis with the religious categories that has emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Within this specific discourse, which appears as some kind of mix of totalitarian and religious thinking, a leader (Stalin) is portrayed as a deeply spiritual (religious) person who did not commit any acts of evil and he had no part in all the evil that was done during the Communist regime. It is a good example how totalitarian discourse incorporates religious categories within itself (or the contrary). In other words, totalitarian master signifier merges with the religious master signifier (spirituality), representing some kind of a hybrid between these two.

Another example of the Father's discourse (as a master signifier) is Iliia Chavchavadze as the founding “Father” of the Georgian Nation. An interesting point here is that

Iliia Chavchavadze and his deeds, as a secular person, whose main goal was to create a modern type democratic Georgian state was also incorporated by the religious discourse as he was proclaimed a Saint by the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Here, we are witnessing an interesting intercourse between the religious and secular discourses (and their corresponding master signifiers). One can claim, that there is a conflict between religious and secular master signifiers as the religious discourse is trying to achieve discursive dominance by monopolizing the production of master signifiers. A good example of this would be its (religious discourse's) conflict with the education system, as one of the major producers of master signifiers.

On the other hand, as we have already mentioned above, the system of education (in our case: the Georgian one) fails to produce and actualize the basic master signifiers for the members of the society, which eventually results in dysfunctionality of the master signifiers, with all corresponding consequences within the political realm.

Master Signifier: Faith

This particular (religious) master signifier (epitomized in Orthodoxy) fixates itself in opposition to the notions like democracy, freedom/independence, tolerance, prosperity and many others. As an absolute and the highest value, it represents the final point in all deliberations. As we have already pointed out above, there is a conflict between religious and secular master signifiers as the religious discourse is trying to achieve discursive dominance by monopolizing the production of master signifiers. That is why it tries to control the systems of education and healthcare (medicine), not to mention the spheres of politics and legislation.

As to the change/cancelation of meaning of **political metaphors** (equated with: **master signifiers**), we bring a specific Georgian (political) metaphor as an example of this type of transformation: “ქართული ოცნება” (“Georgian Dream”) As one can see, it is completely identical with an American (and other versions as well: “Chinese Dream”...) version in terms of its form (and presumably, in terms of content/meaning, as well). However, there is an obvious difference between the two: the American version represents a long-standing metaphor while the Georgian version is a name of a concrete political party/movement. While the American version of the metaphor does not lose its relevance, its Georgian version may presumably become

a dead metaphor (or has already become a dead metaphor) shortly after the party which has produced and introduced it into the Georgian political discourse loses its power, for “metaphors change and especially the frequency of its usage changes as well. As for politics, at a first glance, empirical correlation between metaphorical and political changes do not indicate which of these two are casual, however, according to some scientists (R. D. Anderson) metaphorical change precedes political changes (Berekashvili, 2007).

Conclusion

Master signifiers can be examined within the context of political discourse and linked with notions like power relations, discursive strategy, dominance, ideology, (political) metaphors. Master signifiers must be considered in the context of basic values/beliefs. For practical purposes, it is of an importance to categorize master signifiers based on their ideological component.

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