Understanding Political Persuasion

Linguistic and Rhetorical Analysis

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Foreword

There are many books on political discourse analysis already, so why add one more to the ever-growing pile of books on the topic? Some of the works frequently cited in this book, by authorities such as Halliday, Fairclough, Wodak, Chilton, Van Dijk, Martin, Van Leeuwen and so on, would appear to cover the whole territory, leaving nothing more to say on the subject. From a certain point of view, this is true, and yet a niche remains, however small. My book has two claims to occupy the niche. Firstly, as worthy as the authors just mentioned are, they each pursue their own research agendas and personal approaches. All plough their furrows, presenting ever deeper, more complex systems that place significant demands on the reader and would-be analyst; think, for instance, of the difference in complexity between the early and some of the later works of Norman Fairclough. It is a question of how far a reader and would-be analyst of political discourse can glean practical tools, from such works, that will enable them to begin actually working with texts.

Secondly, I hope there is merit in a work which synthesises some of the insights of these scholars, and shows how their approaches can be practically applied by the would-be political discourse analyst. The beginning analyst can, at times, experience a sense of bewilderment in front of the mass of theoretical and technical writing in linguistics, in the search for some practical, usable tools. In this book, I try to cover a variety of such tools, demonstrating their usefulness in application to the analysis of a number of political speeches, from different historical periods and diverse social contexts.

The question that has occupied much of my own research has been that of persuasion in political rhetoric, and I have tried, in the following pages, to set out a model of the processes involved that begins with a traditional, Aristotelian perspective, summed up in the familiar concepts of ethos, pathos and logos. Integrated with this simple picture is the area of evaluative language, which I explore using Martin and White's Appraisal Framework (Martin & White, 2005), and notions of argumentation deriving from Toulmin's work (Toulmin, 1958). Later chapters of the book explore the contribution to persuasion of multimodal features such as film, voice quality, colour and music, as well as cognitive devices such as metaphor and analogy. A final answer to the question of how politicians persuade us to do what they want us to (beginning with the obvious step of voting for them!) remains elusive, but I hope that the work will stimulate interest in the analysis of political rhetoric and empower the would-be analyst, as well as delineating some possible pathways towards an integrated model of political discourse analysis.

The book covers a wide range of possible techniques and approaches to political discourse analysis, which I shall now summarise. The first chapter looks at corpus linguistics in a study of deontic modality, comparing persuasive political rhetoric from different historical periods, the eighteenth century and the modern. The second explores the contribution to persuasive rhetoric of rhetorical figures such as alliteration, litotes and metaphor, in Edmund Burke's speech on the necessity for conciliation with the American colonies. Such features, for centuries, constituted the essence of what rhetoric was felt to be, and yet they are largely ignored in many contemporary accounts of political discourse. Chapter three looks at the interplay of parliamentary voices in evidence during Disraeli's speech on the ratification of the Suez canal purchase, showing how his argumentative strategy engages with opposing voices on the question. The fourth chapter features Winston Churchill and shows how political argumentation, in the modern period, can interest not simply listeners in the immediate context but can reach out through mass media to influence the hearts and minds of a much wider audience. Chapter five deals with two acknowledged masters of modern political rhetoric, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, rival leaders of the black community during the Civil Rights Movement. It shows how their argumentative patterns create in- and out-groups among their listeners, construing a notion of implicit enemy that can be identified not with their white oppressors, but rather with the other leader and his supporters. Chapter six sees Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams addressing the IRA, attempting to persuade them to abandon violent social resistance in favour of a political path. In chapter seven, the focus is on multimodal resources as two Republican videos are analysed, one by Ronald Reagan and one by G. W. Bush. Finally, verbal and visual metaphor feature in the analysis of UKIP's Nigel Farage and his representations of Europe.

In terms of linguistic features used in the analysis, then, the various studies include: Corpus linguistics (Deontic Modality, chapter one), Rhetorical features (Burke), Engagement (Disraeli), Representation of Social Actors (Churchill), Appraisal Framework and Argumentation (Malcolm X and Martin Luther King), Information Structure (Adams), Multimodality (Reagan and Bush) and Visual and Verbal Metaphor (Farage). The attempt is made to integrate these various features with a model of argumentation in political discourse that is presented in progressive stages throughout the work, gradually becoming more complex towards the later chapters. It is not necessary (nor, perhaps, would it be possible) for the analyst to use all of these approaches at the same time; rather, s/he will most probably be drawn to select an appropriate analytical approach according to specific features of the text or texts in question. I shall have more to say about this at the appropriate time.

My hope, then, is that would-be students of political rhetoric, of whatever level and from a variety of fields within the Humanities, will be able to pick up this book and find tools and techniques that will assist them in actual work on texts. Naturally, it is also that they will be inspired to follow up the suggestions for further reading which they will find in the bibliography.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The question of how political speakers attempt to persuade their listeners has informed much of modern political discourse analysis.[1] However, it is worth beginning this book, which attempts to follow in the footsteps of some of these works, with older accounts of these processes which have, effectively, stood the test of time. In particular, the notions of Aristotle and the context of the ancient Greek polis are worth evoking, however briefly, as a reminder of the essential power of the spoken word.

As Nöth puts it: "To persuade and to convince the public were the pragmatic goals which orators wanted to achieve by means of rhetorical techniques" (Nöth, 1995, p. 339). The many diverse schools of rhetoric and sophistry which flourished in the ancient world are witness to the important place of oratory in public life. It was recognised that the ability to use words to sway an assembly was the politician's chief weapon, and the characteristic form of political debate, in much Greco-Roman oratory, was the *genus deliberativum*, which required a pro/con debate, on the basis of which decisions were taken. It was imperative, then, for any politician to master what Aristotle called the forms of persuasion, and Thucydides makes it plain that Pericles, alongside his military abilities, was also a master of oratory.

With modern parliamentary democracy, oratory has gradually become less important, since political decision-making tends to occur on party lines, and even brilliant rhetorical displays are unlikely to alter the MPs' voting choices. In some of the older parliamentary contexts studied in this book, however, for example in Burke's time, the coercive mechanism of the party whip was in an embryonic state, and his speech takes place in a context that is closer to Athenian realities than to those of our own time. Burke would certainly have hoped to convert some listeners to his cause.

It is also worth pointing out that, though one feature of pro-con debate is undoubtedly the discussion of various possible responses to a real-world situation, the pragmatic purpose of much persuasive rhetoric is not to obtain

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[1] See the works of some of the authors that will be referred to frequently in this book, for example, such as Fairclough (2000; 2003), Chilton and Schäffner (1997; 2002), Chilton (2004), (Halmari & Virtanen, 2005), Charteris-Black (2005).

a specific result but to influence 'the hearts and minds' of hearers, creating a diffuse consensus for the speaker's preferred ideology or belief system. Bermejo-Luque provides the following useful discussion of these issues:

> One of the most salient features of argumentation, in contrast with other kinds of communication, is that when we argue we not only try to make others aware of what our beliefs are, but we also try to induce these beliefs in others. The way we try to induce beliefs by arguing is by showing them to be correct, that is, by appealing to reasons that would allegedly justify them. Thus we can say that argumentation aims at persuasion by means of justification, and as a result an adequate comprehension of the activity of arguing requires not only an explanation of the way argumentative discourses are able to justify beliefs and claims, but also of their power to produce beliefs in others by offering justifications for them. (Bermejo-Luque, 2011, p. 73)

This perspective will be worth remembering when we ponder the status of political rhetoric in the modern world. Although there may be less emphasis on using rhetoric to gain support for the specific measure under discussion, it clearly has a role to play in spreading beliefs that, though they may not affect the immediate vote, may make their contribution to an ongoing, mediated, nationwide or even global debate at semi-conscious levels of political ideology. These processes may, clearly, produce concrete results for the political party at the next electoral consultation.

Some considerations of the difference between spoken and written discourse are necessary preliminaries: it should be remembered that political speeches, of the kind under consideration in this book, share features of both oral and written communication. They are not spontaneous utterances, but are mostly written to be spoken, and this will involve a certain inevitable analytical difficulty. Halliday and Matthiessen's account of information structure (2004, pp. 87-94), for example, presents the theory with reference to *spoken* language only. What is to be considered as newsworthy (Fries1994, p. 230) is marked by prominence, with the relevant syllable carrying 'information focus' (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004, p. 89). There would be no problem, were it not for the obvious fact that recordings are not available of speeches before a certain historical date, and even in the modern era, it may be impossible to obtain a recording of a particular speech. In the small collection of speeches studied in this book, recordings are, to my knowledge,

only available for those by Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, while doubts remain as to the authenticity of recordings of Churchill's wartime addresses.[2]

The speeches have therefore been studied as *written* artefacts, a necessary compromise, and one that has at least the merit of underscoring effects that persist beyond the immediate historical context, but that will inevitably fail to capture the subtle peaks and troughs of the spoken word, which signal such features in spoken discourse.

The Aristotelian perspective: ethos, pathos and logos

Aristotle describes three main dimensions to persuasion; *ethos*, or the respect engendered by the speaker's character; *pathos*, the appeal to the emotions, and *logos*, the rational argument advanced (Charteris-Black 2005, p. 9). The importance of these three factors is, arguably, as great today as in ancient Greece. On ethos, Aristotle writes:

> There are three things which inspire confidence in the orator's own character - the three, namely, that induce us to believe a thing apart from any proof of it: good sense, good moral character, and goodwill [..] anyone who is thought to have all three of these good qualities will inspire trust in his audience (Aristotle, 1954, p. 91)

This explains the necessity for politicians to preserve an untarnished image, though such factors are highly culture-specific. Bill Clinton's extra-marital adventures may not have provoked many scandals in countries less affected by Puritanism, for example; while, in a British context, the financial misdemeanours of leading Italian figures would be sufficient to end a political career. The persuasive force of any particular message will clearly be augmented if the speaker has a positive ethos, as was the case for Gerry Adams among a Republican audience, or Malcolm X with the black community in Harlem.

Aristotle (1954, p. 25) wrote that "persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions", and this factor has consistently played an important part in the history of rhetoric through the ages. Humour, for example, was used by Ronald Reagan in the 1984 presidential head-to-head with Walter Mondale. Asked if he was not getting too old to deal with the pressures of the Cold War, he responded:

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[2] It has been suggested that some at least were read by an actor imitating Churchill.

> I want you to know that I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience[3]

Politicians also frequently try to touch a pathetic chord, moving their audience to experience sorrow or grief. In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, for example, G.W. Bush said:

> For those who lost loved ones it has been a year of sorrow, of empty places, of newborn children who will never know their fathers here on earth[4]

Notice here, in passing, the use of the rhetorical figure known as the three-part list (in classical rhetorical studies, *tricolon* or *hendiatris*). This device is common in persuasive discourse and can be used to create a sense of climax or a satisfying sense of completion; here, it does both.

As important as the first two factors were felt to be, Aristotle regarded *logos*, or reason, as the orator's chief persuasive resource. The argumentative force of a speech mostly consists of the reasons that support the orator's favoured solutions, making it persuasive to listeners. For this reason, in the centuries that followed, schools of rhetoric flourished, developing and refining Aristotle's own analysis of the micro-processes involved. The influence of Greek and later Roman, rhetoric on the discursive practices of politicians is still amply felt today.

Aristotle's categories, then, offer approaches to text analysis that have not been supplanted altogether by more modern methodologies, and the notions of ethos, pathos and logos are central to the concept of persuasive political discourse advanced throughout this book.

Some more basic concepts: evaluation, engagement and alignment

This section introduces some key terms that the reader will be reminded of at various points in this book; *evaluation, engagement* and *alignment*. Each represents a component of most, if not all, persuasive political discourse. Evaluation refers to the positive or negative statements advanced by speakers, thereby revealing a system of 'values', which may be aesthetic or axiological, according to the topic: politicians praise some policies, people or aspects of a

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[3] "Top 10 Memorable Debate Moments". See web references.

[4] Bush: Speech to the United Nations: see Modern Corpus, Appendix, Chapter 1.

situation whilst they denigrate others. Engagement describes the way the speaker represents other views than his own, while Alignment refers to the attempt to persuade the audience to adopt the speaker's own views.

Evaluative language has a central role to play in much more persuasive political rhetoric (see Fairclough 2003: 173). As an example of this, consider the following extract from a speech by Tony Blair, in which the proposal is reinforced by the negative connotations of the word 'fanatics':

> The fanatics have to be confronted and defeated

In terms of recent western culture, a 'fanatic' may be someone driven by an ideology to commit anti-social atrocities. Representing a person or group of people with this term is a way of stimulating a range of responses that are in line with the speaker's overall purposes - here, Blair wished to stimulate support for the belligerent policies he advocated. In this book, I use the Appraisal Framework of Martin and White (2005) to classify such references, and in the case of 'fanatics', their classification would be -J: propriety, standing for 'negative Judgement: propriety'.

Hunston and Thompson (2003, p. 142) offer the following description of the Appraisal Framework:

> The enormously varied lexical choices are seen as construing a small range of general categories of reaction. The main category or sub-system is AFFECT, which deals with the expression of emotion (happiness, fear, etc.) Related to this are two more specialised sub-systems: JUDGEMENT, dealing with moral assessments of behaviour (honesty, kindness, etc.), and APPRECIATION, dealing with aesthetic assessments (subtlety, beauty, etc.)

Emotion/Affect is viewed as the basis of all our evaluations, and Martin and White (2005, pp. 46-49) outline six variables according to which AF classifies resources from the Affect system:

- Are the feelings popularly construed by the culture as positive or negative?
- Are the feelings a surge of emotion or a kind of predisposition or ongoing mental state?
- Are the feelings directed at some specific external agency, or a general ongoing mood?
- How are the feelings graded: low, median, high?;

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