

Language in political speeches



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Essay investigating the language used in speeches to motivate and persuade people including speeches of Tony Blair, George Bush, John Major and Winston Churchill, for example.

The language required to motivate and persuade in political speeches is a prepared mode of linguistic usage very different from others in that its imperative is inherently connected with its construction and delivery.

Although recognised and frequently employed linguistic devices, such as rhetoric, are necessarily an intrinsic part of this kind of syntax, the overall purpose governs the style far more directly and bears the weighty implication of both negative and positive influence: in other words, when do ‘motivation’ and ‘persuasion’ become ‘propaganda’? In order to demonstrate the power of speech to motivate and persuade, it is therefore necessary to look closely at some speeches which have attempted to accomplish this with varying degrees of success in relation to the circumstances in which they were made.

Though ‘it is often said that events, not speeches, determine the outcome of elections’ it is equally true that the language used to persuade the people addressed as to how they should view events is a determining factor in a positive or negative response. In terms of historical resonance, one might consider how Shakespeare presents the difference between Brutus’ appeal to reason and Mark Antony’s appeal to emotion when each addresses the easily manipulated mob in turn following the assassination of Julius Caesar in his play of that name written in a time of contemporary political tension, 1599. It has also been seen to be true in more recent times when, following the assassination of Ghandi in 1948, Nehru spoke to the people of India in <https://assignbuster.com/language-in-political-speeches/>

terms designed specifically to calm what was a potentially inflammatory situation by using words of address remarkably similar to Shakespeare's 'Friend's Romans, Countrymen', Nehru chose to speak to the multitude as 'Friends and comrades'. Both usages of familial terms encouraged feelings of empathy and solidarity, persuading those present that a feeling expressed by one man could at once unite, reflect and pacify those of a nation. Tony Blair's famous epithet 'the People's Princess' did much the same following the death of Princess Diana in 1995. In all of these cases, the right words at the right time persuaded people to believe in the speaker's ethos and motivated them to react as the orator wished.

The moving, motivational and persuasive rhetoric of Winston Churchill's wartime speeches remains profoundly powerful and is an extremely good way of demonstrating the effectiveness of language. During the darkest days of the war, in 1940, Churchill's 'we will never surrender' caused the British people to perceive hope where really there was none. His syntax, both personal and generic, like that of the emotive language earlier discussed, relies heavily upon the pronoun 'we' as a connective with those he is addressing:

We shall not flag nor fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France and on the seas and oceans; we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be; we shall fight on beaches, landing grounds, in fields, in streets and on the hills. We shall never surrender [...]

What is often forgotten is that this speech begins with a summation of the catastrophic progress of the war up to this point. Churchill's brilliance, here, is in saying nothing of factual substance but concentrating instead on the emphasis of the nation's unity. The personal pronoun 'we', which is repeated at the beginning of each sentence and echoed in 'our', produces the desired effect of proclaiming the collective consciousness of resistance, whilst simultaneously stressing, inferentially and by inversion, the possible negative results of disunity. That is, *only* by the behaviour Churchill declares to be prevalent can the Nation hope to survive. As well as repetition and rhetoric, the persuasive technique here employs alliteration, in 'flag nor fail', the language of the poetically picturesque in 'seas and oceans' and references to home in 'fields', 'streets' and 'hills': in other words, encompassing the whole country in the semantic field. The variation in structure, especially sentence length, indicates a momentum which rises and falls musically, beginning with short declarative statements, expanding with the introduction of both compound and complex sentences, until a crescendo is reached with 'never surrender'. The speech does not end here (it ends with a broad hint to the 'New World' to join the war and 'rescue [...] the old') but this is its rhetorical peak, emphasised, if such is necessary, by the fact that some fifty years later it is still remembered and quoted, even in that most necessarily persuasive of media, advertising. (However, it is necessary to remember that such persuasive language and technique was equally powerful in motivating Hitler's Nazi Party, and indeed the German people, to go to war in the first place, albeit with an offensive rather than defensive motive.)

The language of political speeches made in time of war must have, then, as a prime objective, the desire both to motivate and persuade. It has been said that, ' a [President is a] persuader by definition' and this can be seen in the speech of US President George W. Bush at the time of the decision to go to war with Iraq in 1991:

Just two hours ago, Allied air forces began an attack on military targets in Iraq and Kuwait. These attacks continue as I speak.

Ground forces are not engaged. This conflict started Aug. 2, when the dictator of Iraq invaded a small and helpless neighbour. Kuwait, a member of the Arab League and a member of the United Nations, was crushed, its people brutalized. Five months ago, Saddam Hussein started this cruel war against Kuwait; tonight, the battle has been joined.

Bush begins by emphasising the fact that the attack has already begun and that it is continuing; a fait accompli, in fact. The syntax is strikingly declarative and informative whilst the language, in the semantic field of attack and defence, relies heavily on the notion that there was no choice here and that America did not begin the conflict: it is not the aggressor. Indeed, Bush stresses the idea of the ' dictator of Iraq', Saddam Hussein, having ' invaded a small and helpless neighbor'. Emotive language is heaped upon this by the use of ' crushed' and ' brutalized' in order that the goal of the orator to persuade the American people and indeed the world, that the invasion was a humanitarian act. The ' cruel war', Bush invites us to judge, was begun by Iraq and ' battle has been joined' to ' protect and defend' as the American ' Oath of Allegiance' clearly demands. The language used

throughout is designed to persuade the listener of the validity and necessity of war. However, the notion that, ‘ Presidents [and politicians] are special beings. When they talk, we listen’, has to be qualified by the listeners’ growing political awareness.

This is evident when one turns to look at the language used in political speeches aimed at either the electorate or to instigate legislation where different criteria are applied which can be perceived in the structural linguistic mode. An increasingly sophisticated electorate has become more aware of ‘ political spin’, however, and is less easily swayed by political rhetoric:

Distrust of policy making and policy makers has become more common as politics has become positioned as more concerned with the spin of media presentation than with substance.

There is, then, with this innate ‘ distrust’ in mind, a discernable difference between what is presented in speeches to party members and what is intended to be persuasive and motivational to the general public. As has been observed, ‘ the babble of voices has increased massively and governments have to work very hard indeed to keep anything hidden from the public gaze’. Speeches do not, of course, seek obviously to ‘ hide’ being necessarily declarative and intended for public consumption. Nevertheless, political speeches are often made in the wake of political scandal where the motivation of the speaker is to persuade the listeners that despite appearances all is well. In cases such as these, the speaker has a more difficult role than usual, since the audience is likely to be hostile, especially

during a Commons Debate; in circumstances such as these, combative language will be employed by both sides, rather than either passivity or ‘attack and defence’. However, the later to be impeached President Nixon, when running for the office of Vice-Presidency in 1952, used the specific dynamics of ‘honesty and integrity’ to refute claims made against him and pledge, somewhat ironically in hindsight, ‘to drive the crooks and the Communists and those that defend them out of Washington’. By connecting the criminal fraternity with a contemporary political obsession of ‘the McCarthy Era’, Nixon diverts the issue from his own challenged integrity and instead attempts to persuade the listeners that those who speak against him are the dishonest ones and: the motivation is entirely personal in its attempt to achieve an individual goal.

Motivational speech can, however, be far more selfless and, indeed, more potentially powerful, if delivered in the desire to drive forward a socio-political cause. The finest example of this in the latter half of the twentieth century might well be said to be that of Dr. Martin Luther King Jnr. to the assembled masses in Washington D. C. on August 28 1963 which proved to be a seminal moment in the Civil Rights Movement:

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’ I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering

with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will be judged not by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.

Dr. King's intention both to present a persuasive argument and motivate a damaged and blighted country to heal itself is evident in both the structure and the lexis, as he interweaves past, present and future to create a vivid picture of American racial prejudice: 'expression and persuasion were the goals, confirmation of shared values the method'. The speech uses repetition almost as melodic punctuation to enable the essence of the speaker's directive to appear both personal and communal. Focusing on a future built from a mutual healing of the past and presenting the image of children as the distillation of this, Martin Luther King involves the listener in a persuasive generic rhetoric. Elsewhere, the speech uses biblical imagery and references to love of country to demonstrate the inherent right of mankind to freedom and equality enshrined in the *Declaration of Independence* (July 4th 1776). By enforcing this in relation to the Civil Rights Movement, King underpins his 'dream' with a historical resonance to which the 'American Dream' is inextricably linked. Thus the structure and content combine to persuade and motivate those who are not actually present to engage with the movement to which he is truly dedicated. The speech was a 'media event' and remains one of the most powerful and emotionally charged speeches in history. It had tremendous success, both contemporaneously

and over future decades, in persuading the American people to act positively to abolish racism, though prejudice is, unhappily, still prevalent.

John Major, also speaking on the right to ‘freedom’, this time in relation to fox hunting, acknowledged by the speaker as ‘ludicrous’ in its introduction as a Government Bill before the House, attempts to persuade almost by inversion:

I have never hunted a fox or a deer, nor have I attended a hunt or seen one, except at a distance, yet I oppose the Bill every bit as strongly as any one of the country dwellers who are likely to lose their livelihood should a ban be imposed by Parliament.

By declaring his disinterest, Major begins to persuade by suggesting that his is the action of any right-thinking man, not just ‘the minority’ of ‘countrymen who hunt’. Major’s entire speech attempts to persuade by derision and negation, implying that the Labour Government is sacrificing the rights of the few, ‘a breath-taking illustration of political self-interest overriding natural justice’. Major’s persuasive tactic, faced with an overriding popular opposition to fox-hunting, is to cast doubt on this as a fact and also to stress the importance of hunting as part of the rural economy. He refers to ‘farmers’ and ‘country dwellers’ as well as loss of ‘livelihood’ whilst avoiding reference to ‘the image of huntsmen as red-faced toffs’, a disparaging reference to the view of the Left, until after he has delivered an argument based on opinion rather than fact and concluding with the fox-hunting term of ‘gone to earth’ and even reference to the Christmas season, when the speech was delivered, to aid its persuasiveness. Moreover, Major

states that one needs an ‘open mind’ to see the truth of his argument implying that those who do not agree with him have a restricted view based on the desire to appeal to the populace rather than common sense or justice.

Speaking to the ‘Fabian Society’ in 2003, Tony Blair employed a similar methodology when speaking of Public Services where he alluded to such ideologically emotive ideas as ‘the creation of the National Health Service’ to further his argument that his government was ‘deliver[ing] the progressive rights that other countries took for granted’. The speech is argued coherently, acknowledging the historical knowledge of the Socialist Party his audience possesses. In this sense, he tailors the structure very differently from a speech to a more general audience.

Language is the principal tool of the politician and as such offers much in the way of linguistic analysis for the study of the power of lexis and syntax to persuade and motivate. From the specific words required for wartime, to the promotion of a political agenda or the need to expose injustice, speeches employ the many and various linguistic devices within their textual structure to argue and persuade effectively. Language is a powerful and emotive stimulant, dangerous in the hands of a skilled orator with an ambivalent or perilous personal agenda. Certainly, the way a speech is constructed and delivered has been shown over the centuries to have tremendous influence, both negative and positive, and knowledge of method and intent are important in the ability of an audience to differentiate astutely between the two and avoid being either persuaded or motivated against their better interests or those of the public at large. Thus, understanding the nature of persuasive and motivational argument is essential in order for the listener to

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make informed, rather than merely linguistically manipulated, choices based upon skilful speech.

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