

LINGUE
DI
OGGI



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PERSUASION IN POLITICS

A TEXTBOOK

The logo for Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto (LED), featuring the letters 'LED' in a stylized, cursive script.

— Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto —

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Foreword and acknowledgments

How language is used in politics is a common topic of public debate. Some politicians are accused of misusing language and are derided in consequence as shallow and inept. Others, in contrast, are accused of using it all too well, of being too clever by half, with the consequent insinuation that they are skilful and dangerous manipulators of the mind. But to what degree do those doing the accusing – principally the press – use the same techniques or are guilty of the same transgressions?

In this work we look at numerous examples of how politicians use the mechanisms that the language provides to practice the oldest of democratic arts, the art of persuasion. At the same time, by analysing these mechanisms, we can hopefully learn how, when necessary, to resist their power.

Many of the texts and examples to be found in this volume were taken from the Web. The following sites contain much interesting material:

- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/> (for TV and radio) and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/> (for news) - Probably the richest sites for political information on the Web. They contain news, political debates, interviews with politicians, mostly in webcast form, some in transcription.
- <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/> - Contains a number of important speeches and other documents regarding 20th Century US political history.
- <http://www.whitehouse.gov/> - Contains an ongoing record of current news as presented by the White House and press briefings.
- <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/> - Provides a similar service for the UK government.
- <http://www.satirewire.com/> - Contains a number of satirical works on current issues.

The Websites of political parties can also constitute interesting resources.

Two highly recommended works are *The Language of Politics* by Adrian

Beard and *Persuading People* by Cockcroft and Cockcroft, an excellent and accessible introduction to the art of rhetoric. Details of both can be found in the References.

Finally, very many thanks are due to my students of the Faculty of Political Science, Bologna, who were my long-suffering but patient guinea-pigs.

1.

EVALUATION: WHAT'S GOOD
AND WHAT'S BAD

Unit 1

EVALUATION: WHAT'S GOOD AND WHAT'S BAD

The limits of my language are the limits of my world.
(Wittgenstein)

1.1. POLITICS IS CONDUCTED THROUGH LANGUAGE

In this series of lessons we will look, first of all, at the many ways in which politicians use language, the tool of their trade, but also at what we can learn about politicians themselves from how they use language.

It is difficult to think of any political action which does not involve using language: political speeches, newspaper editorials, press conferences, cabinet meetings, Acts of Parliament, and so on.

○ Task 1: *Language in politics*

How many more political actions or events involving the use of language can you think of?

Can you think of any political actions or events which do *NOT* involve using language at some stage?

As Schäffner points out, language is vital to the process of transforming political will into social action, 'in fact, any political action is prepared, accompanied, controlled and influenced by language' (1997: 1). Fairclough

goes further still. Politics, he says, is not just conducted *through* language, but much of politics *is* language: 'politics partly consists in the disputes which occur in language and over language' (1989: 23).

□ 1.2. PERSUASION AND RHETORIC IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

In an absolutist or totalitarian regime (from the Roman Empire to Nazi Germany), those in power rule by using the twin weapons of coercion and the manipulation of information. In a democracy, the principal use of language in politics is for persuasion in debate. In fact, the art of political persuasion in this sense was born with the first democracy in Ancient Greece. The Greeks developed what they termed the art of ***rbetoric*** (terms which are in bold and italics are explained in the Glossary), which is none other than the skill of persuasion. Rhetoric was generally felt to have three main fields of application: for politics (*agora*, that is 'public space'), for law (*forensic*) and for speeches of public praise or blame (*epideictic*).

But rhetoric right from the beginning had a 'mixed reputation', and still today the word can have a number of meanings. It can be defined, following Aristotle, as the 'arts of persuasive discourse' (Cockcroft and Cockcroft 1992: 3), that is, the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents. Aristotle argues that we employ the art of persuasion every day in our normal and natural relations with other people. In this sense, it implies the activation of the *directive* function of language 'seeking to affect the behaviour of the addressee' (Cook 1989: 26). In terms of one important approach to language study, namely speech act theory, studying rhetoric means studying the *perlocutionary* force of utterances, that is, the effect speakers intend them to have on their audience.

In real life, of course, attempts to influence and convince others are often met with suspicion and resistance; the more blatant the attempts, the deeper the suspicion. Such resistance to rhetoric is anything but new:

The success of rhetoric rapidly drew upon itself a counter-attack, recorded in Plato's *Gorgias*, where Socrates deplores the skill taught by sophists (teachers of rhetoric) as a mere 'knack' to disguise falsehood or ignorance as plausible truth.

(Cockcroft and Cockcroft 1992: 5)

For Plato himself the rhetorician is a 'speech-rigger' (*logodaedalos*) (Cockcroft and Cockcroft 1992: 20). Rhetoric, in this view, is manipulative and there is somehow a deficit between complex-sounding rhetorical argument

and 'the truth'. Plato's view can be recognized today in the contempt frequently expressed for 'mere rhetoric'. The irony is of course that, according to the definitions given above, Socrates' own methods of persuasion were just as 'rhetorical'.

Rhetoric of course has yet another sense, equivalent to 'grandiloquence' or the use of high-sounding but 'empty' language. This meaning derives from the obscurantist associations that rhetoric acquired after the codification of its persuasive techniques and language *tropes* (or *figures*) that took place in the Middle Ages by Scholastic (or pseudo-Scholastic) orators. Geoffrey Chaucer satirizes this misuse of rhetoric in *The Canterbury Tales* (the Host is addressing the Oxford Clerk, a student of Rhetoric):

'Tell us a lively tale, in Heaven's name [...]
But don't you preach as friars do in Lent,
Dragging up all our sins to make us weep,
Nor tell a tale to send us all to sleep.
Let it be brisk adventure, stuff that nourishes,
And not too much of your rhetorical flourishes.
Keep the 'high style' until occasion brings
A use for it, like when they write to kings,
And for the present put things plainly, pray,
So we can follow all you have to say'.

(Chaucer: *The Clerk's Prologue*)

Rhetoric, in this sense, is an 'over-the-fence' word, that is to say, it is used to describe what *others* do, is only applied to an outsider group, and is often roughly equivalent to 'bluster':

COLONEL CROWLEY: [...] What we've heard today from Iraq is a great deal of rhetoric. We've heard this bluster before. We've seen this petulance before.

(White House press briefing)

○ Task 2: *Definitions of rhetoric*

We have seen that *rhetoric* is used with three distinct meanings. Briefly, these are:

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

Which of these did Aristotle subscribe to? _____
and Plato? _____

□ 1.3. SPIN AND THE SPIN-DOCTOR

In modern times, for many political commentators, then, the word rhetoric enjoys a very evil reputation. Knowledge of how to employ the techniques of persuasion is seen as one of the principal ways in which the 'powerful' both express and reinforce their power over the 'powerless', for example, in situations such as the courtroom, the workplace and also in the mass media.

Although this may *frequently* be the case, it is not *necessarily* the case. The relationship between rhetoric and power has not always been a cosy one. In many periods of history, rhetoric has been subversive of authority – Giordano Bruno, Thomas Paine and the pamphleteers of the 17th and 18th Centuries spring to mind – and Authority has always been most wary and intolerant of rhetoric and orators it could not control. Moreover, the very need for the organs of state to avail themselves of persuasion, of the arts of rhetoric, has tended to coincide historically with periods of relative freedom (for some sections of society at least). It is therefore, as we said, no coincidence that it first enters the arena of history with Greek democracy because absolute, despotic, coercive power has little need of rhetoric for persuasion.

Very recently, in those societies where speech is relatively free, much attention is being paid to the phenomenon of *spin*, that is, the tailoring of news and information on its release to the public to cast a favourable light on the institutions of authority. The term itself is a *metaphor* (see Unit 4) deriving from the sport of baseball, 'spin' being the twist effect put on the ball by the pitcher (thrower) in order to make the ball curve through the air in order to evade the batter. Thus the politician or his/her agent hopes to spin their political message so that it will reach the public without the intervention of a critical press. From the politicians' point of view, the process is necessary because the modern press, in the UK and often in the US at least, is obsessed with conflict and scandal and is forever 'distorting' their (the politicians') messages. As Richard (Dick) Cheney, who became Vice-President of the Bush administration, once put it: 'You don't let the press set the agenda. They like to decide what's important and what isn't important. But if you let them do that, they're going to trash your presidency'.

In the UK and the US, then, all the major political parties have press officers, responsible for maintaining relations with and communicating the party's message to the media. These officers frequently become very unpop-

ular with the journalists they are dealing with, who accuse them of manipulating or hiding 'the truth' (whatever that might be). They are informally labelled ***spin-doctors***. The verb to *doctor* has the slang meaning of to 'tamper' or to 'interfere' with something. Perhaps a more disturbing development is the employment by major companies of public relations personnel whose job it is to present the best possible image of their employer to the world, to perhaps 'sell' an unscrupulous oil company as a Friend of the Earth.

But are these terms – *spin* and *spin-doctor* – simply new names for an old game? Persuading people to accept your version of events, of 'the truth' – in competition with other versions – is at the very dialogic heart of rhetoric. And just as Socrates was alert to the efforts of the doctors of sophistry, we need to build and maintain our modern defences against the doctors of spin.

○ Task 3: Metaphors of spin

Briefings is the name given to press conferences which are held on a regular basis. The White House has its own press secretary who meets the press and responds to their questions more-or-less every day. This book contains numerous extracts from White House briefings because they can give us useful insights into the relationship between the political world and the press.

Read the text below entitled 'The spin-doctor and the wolf-pack' (from Partington 2003). What do you notice in general about the metaphors used to describe the White House press briefings and their participants, that is, the spokesperson (the press secretary) and the journalists? The metaphors can be grouped into certain categories, for example, 'sporting', 'military'. Try to sort as many of the metaphors as you can into such categories.

The spin-doctor and the wolf-pack

Metaphors of the press briefing

1) A quite remarkable variety of metaphors have been employed by commentators, many of whom are unsympathetic towards the participants, in describing the briefings held daily at the Office of the White House Press Secretary. They are 'a political chess game' (Reaves White), in which 'both sides view everything the other side does as a mere tactic' (Kamiya). Alternatively, they are 'rhetorical combat' (Kurtz), a 'war zone' in which 'combatants with a multitude of agendas [...] prepared for battle' (Reaves White). They are 'a wrestling match' and a duel or 'face-off' (Reaves White) but also 'a weird formulaic dance' (Kamiya).



1.5. DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION

There are, of course, many ways of saying the 'same' thing and speakers and writers can, indeed *must* in practice, choose one among these many potential ways. The choice of vocabulary that a speaker/writer makes can tell us a great deal about how they evaluate the topic in question, and so a great deal about their opinions and/or intentions.

Compare, for instance, the following set of descriptions, applied perhaps to a young person:

thin, slim, skinny, svelte;

or these applied to a politician:

obstinate, stubborn, firm, decisive, resolute, pig-headed.

In both cases, the basic meaning of the words, that is, their **denotational** meaning, is roughly the same, but they differ radically in the evaluation or the **connotational** meaning they express. A speaker is unlikely to employ the words *skinny* or *obstinate* to pay someone a compliment, whereas *slim* or *resolute* are definitely more favourable or complimentary. The denotation of an item is the definition we might find in a dictionary; the connotations of an item are the associations it has for us, especially the evaluative ones.

Many words have different associations, different connotations for different people or for a particular culture or sub-group. What do you think are the associations of the following words in English?

black,
red,
green,
right and left.

The way such words are used by a speaker/writer will tell us a great deal about that person.

Q Look at the Appendix *Concordancing Colours* to see the rich associations of *red*, *green* and *black* in British newspaper articles (look especially at the word immediately to the right of the colour keyword). Which ones are political?

Some words acquire a good or bad sense over time, for example, as Beard (2000) points out, *politics*, *politician*, especially in the UK, have acquired a negative sense. The denotation would be something like:

Politician: One versed in the theory or science of government and the art of governing; one skilled in politics; one practically engaged in conducting the business of the state; a statesman;

whilst the connotation, for most people at least, is likely to be:

Politician: a shrewd schemer; a crafty plotter or intriguer.

And perhaps this bad connotation is not as recent as is sometimes imagined:

You can't use tact with a Congressman! A Congressman is a hog! You must take a stick and hit him on the snout!

(Cabinet member, 1906)

○ Task 5: *Forms of government*

Using a dictionary and a Web search engine, try to find the general evaluative connotations of the following items used to describe forms of government.

In 'Notes', note down any other observations you might have, e.g. the associations of the item, where in the world it is applied, and so on.

regime, junta, democracy, dictatorship, one-man rule

Word	Good / Bad / Neutral	Notes



6.

HUMOUR, IRONY AND SATIRE
IN POLITICS

Unit 6

HUMOUR, IRONY AND SATIRE IN POLITICS

Castigat ridendo mores.

(Anon., 16th Century)

The one thing the Devil cannot stand is laughter.

(Martin Luther)

*I have never made but one prayer to God, a very short one:
'O Lord, make my enemies ridiculous.'*

(Voltaire)

□ 6.1. POLITICS AND HUMOUR

Politics and humour enjoy a close relationship on a number of levels. In particular, many commentators have discussed the *subversive* power of humour, how it allows 'the little person', the powerless, to gain some small revenge at the expense of the powerful. In totalitarian states, of course, humour at the expense of the regime is generally forbidden. Raskin however presents a collection of jokes which circulated in the pre-1989 Soviet bloc nations. These very often implied discontent or criticisms of the system rather than of individual politicians, for example:

A group of students from East Germany are all killed in a car crash. They discover that hell, too, is divided into an eastern and western sector. Given the choice, those who see themselves as ideologically sound opt for the eastern hell. A fact-finding delegation arrives from the western hell; they complain: 'Conditions on our western side are terrible; we've been boiled in oil three times already and roasted half a dozen times. How are things with you, in the eastern hell?' 'Fine,' is the answer. 'They've run out of fuel.'

The humour arises from a reversal of *evaluation*: the renowned inefficiency of the East German communist state suddenly and ironically becomes a good thing.

However, even in environments where free speech within limits is tolerated, political humour thrives – there is still a human need to dress

down those with power. In fact many stand-up comics in Western countries earn their living almost entirely from political jokes. Generally, however, these tend to have as their target individual politicians rather than the system itself. There are various categories. The politician may be depicted as very unpopular:

Donald Rumsfeld and his driver were going to the White House and were passing a farm. A pig suddenly jumped out into the road. The driver tried to get out of the way, but he hit the animal. He went in the farm to explain what had happened. He came out with a beer, a cigar, and a lot of money. Rumsfeld saw this and said, 'My God, what did you tell them?' The driver replied, 'I told them that I'm Donald Rumsfeld's driver and I just killed the pig.'

or vastly over-ambitious:

George W. Bush, Tony Blair and Silvio Berlusconi were having a meeting on the Air Force One aeroplane when it crashes. They ascend to heaven, and God's sitting on the great white throne. God addresses George first.

'So, Mr Bush, what do you believe in?'

'Well, I believe that might is right, in the power of the dollar and, of course, I believe in you, Lord'.

God thinks for a second and says: 'Okay, I can live with that. Come and sit at my left.'

God then addresses Tony. 'Now Mr Blair, what do you believe in?'

'I believe in everything my friend George believes in, only more so.'

God thinks for a second and says: 'Okay, that sounds good. Come and sit at my right.'

God then addresses Silvio. 'Well, Mr Berlusconi, what do you believe in?'

'I believe you're sitting in my chair.'

or perhaps downright stupidity:

Donald Rumsfeld is giving the President his daily briefing on Iraq. He concludes by saying, 'And yesterday, three Brazilian soldiers were killed.'

'OH NO!' Bush exclaims. 'That's terrible!'

His staff is stunned at this sudden outward display of emotion, nervously watching as the President sits, head in hands, practically sobbing.

Finally, Bush looks up and asks, 'Just how many is a brazillion, anyway?'

Vice president Dick Cheney gets a call from his 'boss', George W. Bush.

'I've got a problem,' says George.

'What's the matter?' asks Cheney.

'Well, you told me to keep busy in the Oval Office, so, I got a jigsaw puzzle, but it's too hard. None of the pieces fit together and I can't find any edges.'

'What's the picture on the box?' asks Cheney.

'A big rooster,' replies George.

'All right,' sighs Cheney, 'I'll come over and have a look.'

So he leaves his office and heads over to the Oval Office. Bush points at the jigsaw on his desk.

Cheney looks at the desk and then turns to Bush and says, 'For crying out loud, George – put the cornflakes back in the box.'

□ 6.2. IRONY AND SARCASM

Irony occurs when there is a mismatch, a radical difference, between the evaluation expressed in what is actually written or said (the '*dictum*') and the evaluation which is really intended (the '*implicatum*'). Very often, the *implicatum* is the exact opposite of the *dictum*:

[Politician X] is a genius! He's managed to upset both the trade unions *and* big businesses.

The politician in question is clearly not being evaluated as a genius but as completely inept. In general, the *dictum* is almost always positive and the *implicatum* negative. This is because the principal function of irony is to criticize.

Irony then is reversal of evaluation. It often employs quite elegant and surprising turns of phrase, as in the much quoted:

America's allies – always there when they need you!

which clearly reverses the more usually sentiment that friends (and allies) should be there when *you* need *them*. For our purposes, **sarcasm** can be defined as a particularly straightforward kind of verbal irony, with a clear 'victim'. Others define the difference between irony and sarcasm by pointing out that the *speaker* generally sees what he or she says as ironic (and therefore 'elegant') whilst the *victim* sees the same utterance as sarcasm (and therefore crude and hurtful). Rhetorical questions can often be vehicles of sarcasm:

Does the honourable gentleman know anything at all about farming?

If you were Osama bin Laden, would you go on satellite transmission just now?



Conclusion



Conclusion

In a modern democratic society, politics is persuasion, and persuasion is conducted predominantly through language.

Throughout these lessons we have studied evaluative language as employed by politicians and those around them – journalists, press agents, and so on. Evaluative language is defined as the linguistic methods of persuading us of what is *good* or *bad* – in a democracy, one presumes, good or bad for us, the people. But we have seen too that a careful study of the use of evaluative language can also tell us a great deal about the beliefs, character and strategies of the would-be persuader.

In addition, we examined a number of models and techniques of persuasion, as well as analysing various discourse types in which we can find persuasive language, principally question-response discourses and satire. We observed some of the subtleties in these models, but also some of the dangers – for both author and audience – especially in persuasion by comparison or analogy and the use of metaphor and metonymy.

Along the way, we noted that persuaders, in some cultures at least, do not have it all their own way. So-called ‘modern techniques’ of persuasion – ‘spin’ or ‘image politics’ – have their many critics. Moreover, in societies where the press is relatively free, the attempts of politicians and their hired persuaders to present to the world their picture of events and their evaluations are thoroughly scrutinized through rigorous, even hostile questioning. In a healthy society, rhetoric and spin produce their own antibodies. But only very careful attention to language and the ways it is used can help us appreciate, exploit and protect ourselves from the art of persuasion.

