

The role of linguistic devices in political discourse

Dr. Morena Braçaj

Mediterranean University of Albania

Abstract

As we all know people use language to convey meanings for a certain purpose in a certain social context but at the same time they place themselves in the social organization according to their ideologies and power. Thus, linguists have conducted many studies focused on the way people use their language and especially politicians, who have strong influence on the audience by selecting the proper words and linguistic tools to convey the message and their intention they want to. Therefore, this study aims to provide a brief theoretical overview of the language used in political discourse; with particular regard to the following rhetorical strategies as metaphor use in political discourse, the role of equivocation, the use of personal pronoun, and rhetorical devices which impose applause. Discourse analysts have concluded that all these rhetorical strategies are frequently used in many political speeches in order to convey the message they want and at the same time convince a specific audience. Thus, it is important to be aware of how politicians make use of all these rhetorical strategies in their favor in order to convince, inform or transmit the message to an audience.

Keywords: political discourse, linguistic manipulation, metaphor, rhetorical elements, personal pronouns.

Introduction

Linguists have long been interested in the structure of words and sentences and even their function, considering that people construct structures out of words that are not only aimed to make sense but also to serve more specific purposes: people speak in order to exchange information, to ask for help, to persuade, to promise, to apologize, etc. according to their purpose in a certain social context (Austin 1962, Searle 2000). Discourse analysts have drawn attention to yet another very important aspect of language: linguistic choices for the purpose of conveying alternative meanings, a different view of how the world is organized, of social ideologies or cultural beliefs. Fairclough (1995) believes that discourse constitutes the social. People use language to convey meanings for a certain purpose in a certain social context but at the same time they place themselves in the social organization according to their ideologies and power. Thus, language is invested with social, political and cultural beliefs (Fairclough, 1989).

By studying language in circumstances where all its functions and variations are taken into consideration, it is possible to learn more about how perceptions, convictions and identities are influenced by language. In political speeches during election campaigns, ideas and ideologies need to be conveyed through language so that they are agreed upon by the receivers as well as by others who may read or hear parts of the speech afterwards in the media. Words and expressions are used or

omitted to affect meaning in different ways.

According to Charteris-Black (2005), the effect of rhetorical strategies in political speeches is often a result of them being combined. Therefore, it is as interesting to look at the interaction of various strategies as it is to look at each one separately (Charteris-Black 2005: 11).

Other researchers, such as Adam Jaworsky and Nikolas Coupland (1999) share the idea of language reflecting and shaping social order also acknowledging that language is closely connected to politics and culture. How is that possible? When people talk or write, they bring their inner world into being; they express their knowledge and experience of the world and even shape the world around them. Discourse is, therefore, invested with social, political and cultural beliefs; it is the expression of both language and culture and all the ideology associated with culture. Thus, the study of discourse may focus on a conversation or a text (the micro level), but at the same time it provides a broader perspective (the macro level) on the social, political and cultural functions of discourse within groups, society and culture (Van Dijk, 2000). Discourse analysts have drawn attention to a very important aspect of language that allows it to be manipulative: linguistic choices.

Within a language, there are possible choices at various levels (graphic, syntactic, semantic) that may seem arbitrary, but they are not. We can express the same idea using different structures (passive or active voice) or use synonyms for a certain word changing its basic meaning, but we do this for different purposes as we use language in different contexts, otherwise the alternative structures would disappear from the language as they would be considered redundant or obsolete. Therefore, there cannot be truly synonymous words or truly synonymous surface structures and if these alternative structures exist, if the grammatical set of conventions allows their existence, it obviously means that they serve different functions (Johnstone, 2002). Moreover, according to Johnstone the ways of talking and writing can indicate a way of thinking, which can, in its turn, be manipulated by the choices about grammar, style or wording. It follows that any linguistic choice will determine a linguistic interpretation which will reveal a way of thinking, a view of the world. Therefore, she groups the choices a discourse producer needs to make as follows:

- choices related to the representation of actions, actors and events;
- choices about the representation of knowledge status;
- choices about naming and wording;
- choices about incorporating and representing other voices;

2. The Use of Language in Political Rhetoric: Linguistic Manipulation

2. A. What is political language?

In this part, it will be discussed how powerful and manipulative language can be if the appropriate linguistic choices are made and how much it reflects the social context in which it is produced.

Firstly, it is important to start with the meaning of political language. In order to understand the political language better, it is crucial to focus what different scholars have studied and analyzed about this issue. Thus, Bourdi states that political language

is the "life blood or mother's milk of politics because communication is the essential activity that links the various parts of society together and allows them to function as an integrated whole".

The political language contains some features that must be constant in them to be recognized and understood by the audience as such but, at the same time, must fulfill the purpose of transmitting the message aimed in that venue with a personal and original style.

Fairclough (2000:93) says that "*we are all political beings in our everyday life*" he adds that if politics is communication, we must study who talks to whom and what they say.

Another scholar Chilton (2004:3) argues that successful speakers, especially in political context, need to appeal to attitudes and emotions that are already within the listeners. When the listeners perceive that their beliefs are understood and supported, the speaker has created connection to policy that they wish to communicate. When putting forward arguments a speaker has to communicate at an emotional level and take standpoints that seem morally correct. Furthermore, the listener must perceive that the arguments are relevant for issue. All this cannot be done only by lexical means, but also linguistic performance plays an important role on that. Thus, Chilton recommends the following rules for politicians:

- Never use a long word instead of a short one.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday equivalent.
- Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.
- According to Chilton, in general, political language consists of the following features:
 - It is a privileged language: only certain groups of people are allowed to use it.
 - Access to and the performance of language is restricted and profoundly reflects social rank and privilege.
 - It is comprised predominantly of slogans and propaganda, rather than statement of truth or facts. It contains many acceptable and unacceptable lies and empty promises.
 - It utilized and develops classical rhetoric techniques with modern information technology such as sound, graphics, and texts to maximum its persuasive function.
 - It is not oratory by nature, but is generally "read" and goes through a continual process of modification and refinement.
 - It is based on logical referential algorism, and largely supported by dialectic methodology (Chilton, 2004; 6).

3. Persuasive elements used in political language

3. A Equivocation

Equivocation has been defined as deliberate vagueness (Goss & Williams, 1973), strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984, 1998), non-straightforward communication

(Bavelas, Black, Bryson & Mullett, 1988; Bavelas et al., 1990) and as the intentional use of imprecise language (Hamilton & Mineo, 1998). According to Watzlawick, Beavin, Bavelas & Jackson (1967: 76), equivocation includes speech acts in human communication such as: "self-contradictions, inconsistencies, subject switches, incomplete sentences, misunderstandings, obscure style or mannerisms of speech... etc." A major theory of equivocation has been developed through the pioneering studies of Bavelas and her colleagues (Bavelas et al., 1988, 1990; Bavelas & Smith, 1982). Their theory, based on Haley's (1959) communication model, analyses equivocation in terms of the four dimensions of sender, content, receiver and context. In measuring equivocation, they make an assumption that "*all messages that would (intuitively or otherwise) be called equivocal are ambiguous in at least one of these four elements*" (Bavelas et al., 1990: 34).

In other words, if any of the four elements (Sender, Content, Receiver and Context) is unclear, this will result in difficulties in understanding in human communication. Meanwhile, in defining equivocation more precisely, they have presented the four dimensions in terms of the following questions:

Sender: To what extent is the message the speaker's own opinion?

Content How clear is the message, in terms of what is being said?

Receiver: To what extent is the message addressed to the other person?

Context To what extent is this direct answer to the question?

Moreover, the focus on equivocation has increasingly shifted from work in psychoanalytic settings to studying the patterns of speech by politicians (Clementson, 2016; Johansson, 2006). The initial focus shared the original perspective from Lewin (1939) that equivocation was problematic as it broke from the expectation of clear speech designed to be properly understood by the audience. However, in practice, the ability to answer a question without necessarily dealing with the substance of the issue and without resorting untruths has become a key skill for many politicians (Clayman, 2017; Ekström, 2015).

The early work by Lewin (Lewin, 1939) tends to see equivocation as a flawed form of discourse designed to avoid addressing a difficult situation. This negative framing has been adopted in studies of political discourse where equivocation is seen as a tool used by politicians to avoid difficult questions (Vrij, 2008) and the concept is now often used to evaluate how politicians interact with interviewers (Clementson, 2016). However, other studies suggest that equivocation can be a successful tool to avoid conflict and to handle a difficult conversation with no loss of status or esteem (Williams & Goss, 1975) attributed to the speaker. Thus, equivocation is seen as a form of speech that does not directly answer a question that has been posed. From this perspective, equivocation can be seen in terms of lack of clarity over one of the core elements in the communication process (Bavelas, Black, Bryson, & Mullett, 1988). Thomas (1992) argues, following Lewin's original work (Lewin, 1939) that one reason for such lack of clarity is when the individual does not wish to answer the question as posed but realizes they have no choice but to provide some form of answer. In a political context such avoidance may be seen as a smart response and one that many modern politicians are coached to use so as to avoid directly telling a lie even if the response is deliberately unclear (Bavelas, et al., 1990) and the interpretation may be

incorrect as the listener responds to the answer provided rather than the answer in the context of the original question. In both its psychological and political setting, a common argument is that the use of equivocation is situational (Clementson, 2016) rather than "any intrinsic characteristic of the individual" (Bavelas et al., 1988, p. 137). In effect, the common assumption is not that someone answers every question with equivocation but instead that is a strategy deliberately chosen in a given situation. This also suggests that the process of interpretation is situational to both speaker and observer/recipient. Depending on the circumstances the same response to a given question may elicit a very different response and may or may not be an instance of equivocation. So asking 'how are you' to a friend in a social situation may well elicit the perfectly accepted response of 'ok'. If the same question is posed by a doctor to a patient, it is quite likely that such a response would be seen as a form of equivocation and lead to further prompting by the doctor to understand what is meant by 'ok'. Thus both the wider situation, and our expectation of what is an acceptable response, have a role in determining how we interpret a particular comment. From this, a wider issue is whether or not a particular response is something we might expect to hear in response to a question in a particular set of circumstances.

3. B Personal pronouns in political discourse

This section provides a brief review of research on personal pronouns, with particular reference to political discourse. Many studies have shown that the employment of pronouns may serve communicatively to present various aspects of the speaker's attitudes, social status, gender, motivation and so forth (Wilson 1990: 46). Applying power and solidarity semantics to investigate the pronominal usage in Indo-European languages, Brown and Gilman (1960) argued that the exchange of pronouns can shape or confirm the power dynamics and solidarity of a relationship. A reciprocal use of address forms implies relative equality and solidarity, while a non-reciprocal use signifies social distance and an unequal power relationship, with the dominant speaker using the informal pronoun. From this point of view, personal pronouns play an important role in negotiating social status in interaction. In other words, personal pronouns may perform not only a person deictic function, but also a social deictic function in discourse.

In the deictic function of personal pronouns, Helmbrecht (2002) explicates one of the classic uses of personal pronouns with respect to the case of the first person plural pronouns (e.g., English *we*):

One almost universal means to refer to speaker-groups are first person non-singular pronouns such as English *we*, German *wir*, and French *nous*. The usage of the first person plural pronouns consists of at least three important operations. Firstly, the speaker refers to a set of human individuals which were introduced in some way or other in the previous discourse. Secondly, the speaker determines this set of people as a group, and thirdly, the speaker he/she explicitly states that he is a member of this group excluding others from membership of this group at the same time. (Helmbrecht 2002: 31).

Further, Helmbrecht (2002: 42) indicates that the employment of the first person plural pronoun *'we'* is closely associated with the linguistic establishment of social

groups. This prototypical usage of *we* pronouns provides a strong approach to establish and reinforce social identities.

Similarly, as proposed by Pyykkö (2002: 246), "*the pronouns do not carry their own concept meaning, they get their meaning from the nouns, in whose stead they are used. This makes it easy to hide behind the pronouns and to use 'we' as a central political force of influence.*" Given the essentially ambiguous nature of personal pronouns acting in the reconstruction and negotiation of identities and social roles, it is perhaps not surprising that politicians tend to use personal pronouns to equivocate in reply to awkward questions in political interviews, to accept, deny or distance themselves from responsibility for political action, to create and reinforce solidarity, and to signal and identify both supporters and opponents (Bull & Fetzer, 2006; Fairclough, 2001; Skarzynska, 2002; Wilson, 1990).

In the strategic use of pronouns, Gastil (1992: 484-485), along with Wilson (1990), further proposed that politicians are likely to strategically manipulate their pronominal references for four reasons.

Firstly, politicians make use of pronouns to set forth their ideological views on specific issues. For example, they may refer to the government as *us* or *it* depending on their view of the public's role in governance.

Secondly, pronoun selection is able to reveal how close or distant the speaker is to the topic under discussion or to the participants involved. For instance, Maitland and Wilson (1987) and Wilson (1990), analyzed personal pronouns used by three influential British politicians: Margaret Thatcher, Neil Kinnock and Michael Foot. For example, they argued that Mrs Thatcher was skilled at the use of the first person singular pronoun *I* in establishing rapport with her audience and in expressing her inherent attitudes and sincerity.

By shifting from the pronoun *I* to the pronoun *we*, Mrs Thatcher could separate her role in private from the public figure as a leader of the Government and the Conservative Party. She also employed the pronoun *we* to convey positive connotations in reference to those groups, countries or individuals who were in agreement with her; conversely, the use of the pronoun *they* with negative connotations allowed Mrs Thatcher to distance herself and her Government from opposition groups.

Thirdly, politicians are able to get hearers involved in their argument through making use of the pronoun *we* to include them. In this respect, both the politician and subject matter may weaken the hearer's own independent thinking, which makes hearers more receptive. Fourthly, the choice of personal pronouns can designate the attributions of responsibility. Wilson (1990: 48), for instance, indicated that the use of pronouns, *I* and *we* in similar sentences will express the different distribution of responsibilities.

3. C Employing rhetorical devices to applaud

The studies shown in this section are concerned with the way in which politicians employ rhetorical devices to invite audience applause in political speeches. In this context, especially politicians at election campaign rallies, audience reactions such as clapping and booing provide an important barometer of their popular appeal; hence, politicians often make use rhetorical devices in evoking applause, meaning that they

agree in what is said.

Thus, applause can be interpreted as a highly noticeable expression of group identity or solidarity with the speaker and the party the speaker represents. In this respect, applause would seem to play a crucial role in the development of a politician's image and career as a popular figure. The other rhetorical device frequently used for obtaining applause is the *contrast*. Atkinson (1984a) proposed that contrast points for the message in question, since audience members have to make up their minds not only *whether* they will applaud, but also *when* to applaud.

To address this issue, a follow-up study was conducted by Heritage and Greatbatch (1986) with more comprehensive sampling of political speeches.

They analyzed all the 476 speeches that were televised from the 1981 British party political conferences (Conservative, Labour and Liberal parties). They examined seven basic rhetorical formats (contrasts, lists, puzzle-solution, headline-punchline, combinations, position taking, and pursuits). Their results showed that nearly 70 per cent of all the collective applause was associated with these seven rhetorical devices. In particular, contrasts and lists were by far the most effective: contrasts were associated with around 33.2 per cent of the incidences of collective applause during speeches, lists with 12.6 per cent. In short, nearly half the collective applause was related to the two rhetorical formats originally identified by Atkinson.

Apart from abovementioned rhetorical devices, seven new additional categories are also identified as rhetorical devices which evoke applause and they are listed as below based on (Bull and Feldman, 2011):

Greetings/salutations

Opening utterance in which the candidate introduces him/herself by name, and requests the audience's support. Following an introduction by the master of ceremonies, the candidate will usually appear from behind the audience, and walk through the room while shaking hands with several of the people attending the meeting. Eventually the candidate moves forward, takes his/her position in front of the audience (it can be also on stage behind a podium or desk), bows deeply and then briefly introduces him/herself.

Expressing appreciation

This is the next utterance after the greetings/salutations in which the speaker expresses thanks or gratitude to the audience for attending the meeting. To this utterance, the audience will respond with applause

Request agreement/asking for confirmation

A statement in which audience agreement/confirmation is requested explicitly in response to what the speaker has just said, through expressions such as "Don't you think so?", "Wouldn't you agree with me?", "Don't you think this is the truth?" To such requests, the audience will always respond, either with applause or, most often, with phrases such as "Yes, it is true," "Naturally," and "This is correct."

Jokes/humorous expressions

Witty or amusing remarks intended to invite laughter from the audience

Asking for support

The speaker explicitly requests the audience's support for his/her candidature. These requests may be quite direct and straightforward. For example, some of the statements can be: "Please,

stay with me until the end [of the election campaign] and to this kind of appeal, the audience will typically respond with cries of encouragement, such as "Do it!" "Go for it!" "Do your best!" "Give it your best!" and "You can do it".

Description of campaign activities

The speaker relates details of his/her campaigning activities: of their travels, of people they met, of talks with voters and supporters in other parts of the constituency. By doing so, candidates may demonstrate their commitment, their communication skills, and their ability to work hard and sincerely. Thereby, they may seek to persuade as many voters as possible to support their candidature.

Explicit and Implicit Devices

A notable feature of the traditional seven devices is that they are all implicit, embedded in the structure of speech. In contrast, the seven new devices are predominantly explicit, in the sense that the speaker is overtly asking for an audience response.

Audience Responses

All the early interactional research on political speeches was focused principally on applause (e.g., [Atkinson, 1984](#)). But, of course, audiences do other things beside applaud. They may, for example, cheer or laugh. In the two studies of Japanese politicians, laughter and cheering were analyzed, as well as applause.

3. D The role of Metaphor in political communication

Metaphor is a figure of speech that describes a subject by asserting that it is, on some point of comparison, the same as another otherwise unrelated object. Metaphor is a type of analogy and is closely related to other rhetorical figures of speech that achieve their effects via association, comparison or resemblance including allegory, hyperbole, and simile. Metaphor helps to simplify concepts in the complex domain of management and politics. Kumaran Rajandran (2013) argues that metaphor can convey a particular ideology, and separate or unite participants on a topic. In short, metaphor management describes reality by the manipulation of words.

In recent decades, the study of the relationship between language and political behavior has drawn much attention in the linguistic ground (see e.g., Carver & Pikalo, 2008; Chilton, 2004; Fairclough, 2000; Wilson, 1990). For example, Wilson (1990) argued that metaphor, a sort of language form, can achieve three main roles in political communication. Since metaphors allow us to think, act and talk about one kind of experience in terms of another, they can help simplify complicated political arguments through reducing them to a metaphorical form. They may also be used to evoke emotions and emphasize particular goals. Finally, Wilson claimed that politicians may manipulate metaphors to unfold absurd images which can be then utilized to ridicule their political opponents. In other words, metaphor allows politicians to present themselves in a positive light, to disgrace their opponents, to justify their own behavior and to assert particular political issues.

Recent research topics have been focused on the role of metaphor in political discourse (e.g. De Landtsheer, 1998; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Taran, 2000; Wilson, 1990), the strategic use of equivocation (e.g. Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullet, 1990; Bull, 1998), how rhetorical devices are employed by politicians to invite audience applause (e.g. Atkinson, 1983, 1984a, b; Bull, 2002, 2003) and the use of pronouns

(e.g. Bull & Fetzer, 2006; Duszak, 2002; Fairclough, 2001; Gastil, 1992; Wilson, 1990). By examining four aspects research on political discourse, the article here is designed as a starting point for readers into the type of research methodology in political language.

Metaphors are linguistic symbols which give concrete labels to abstract ideas. This is possible because of the perceived similarity between objects and concepts as regards particular features that one wants to convey. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) hold that the conceptual system of human beings is metaphorical. Metaphors are not merely linguistic instruments. They actually permeate perception, thought and behavior (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:3).

Conclusions

Studies in sociolinguistics have made it clear that people living in different areas display differences in the use of language, which can reflect and cement the ideas of groups they are used in. As a result, attitudes towards language can be positive or negative, stemming from issues such as social or cultural background, power and status. Our attitudes to language are significantly important, and our perceptions of the characteristics of a person or a social group may be influenced by these attitudes. An awareness of language attitudes, thus, may not only help one understand himself and his abilities better within a society, but also help him evaluate others and their influence more correctly. Furthermore, politicians speak, and language is the main focus of linguistics. It is the intention of this paper to show and discuss political language and how figures of speech like metaphor, rhetorical devices, equivocation, personal pronoun are used by politicians to attract the attention of their audience and convince them of voting for these politicians. In other words, metaphor helps to simplify complicated messages for public understanding, but it may also be used to distort reality and mislead individuals. In addition, politicians use strategically personal pronouns to designate their attitudes, social status, gender and motivation. By studying language in circumstances where all its functions and variations are taken into consideration, it is possible to learn more about how perceptions, convictions and identities are influenced by language. In political speeches during election campaigns, ideas and ideologies need to be conveyed through language so that they are agreed upon by the receivers as well as by others who may read or hear parts of the speech afterwards in the media. Words and expressions are used or omitted to affect meaning in different ways.

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