

Style: the use of language to persuade

Style, meaning how we use language, was emphasized by the Roman rhetor Cicero as one of the key dimension of classical rhetoric. Cicero saw “**Style of Language**” in terms not only of the words we use, but also in the order that we use them.

If invention addresses *what* is to be said; style addresses *how* this will be said. This connection between style and invention essentially links style and content. But not everyone agrees with Cicero on this point. The famous 16th century rhetor, Petrus Ramus, was the main proponent of dividing language (style) from argumentation and this has resulted in rhetoric becoming associated with flowery language in people’s minds today. However, from a classical rhetorical perspective, “***style is not incidental, superficial, or supplementary: style names how ideas are embodied in language and customized to communicative contexts***”¹.

The ultimate test of all kinds of communication is its effectiveness. During the last US presidential election many commentators compared the styles of Barack Obama and George W. Bush; just as in the UK the speaking styles of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were compared. George W. Bush had a folksy way of speaking which was personal and attractive. But this folksy style lacked ‘**gravitas**’,² which greatly lessened his impact on audiences. Obama, on the other hand, who was seen more in a Ciceronian style, made the greater impact on his listeners, which was partly due to his voice, tonality and rhythm, and on how well he communicated a sense of ‘gravitas’.

In this note we shall look at five language devices which Barack Obama used as the current master of the ‘grand’ style during his first election campaign, with a view of illustrating the importance of the connection between language and content to the communication process.

¹ <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/>

² The term ‘gravitas’ is discussed further in separate technical note

The case of Barack Obama

Obama came to the US presidential campaign as a “new man” and skilfully began establishing his credibility (*ethos*) by clearly associating his message and person with respected figures from the past such as Abraham Lincoln, F. D. Roosevelt, and Martin Luther King. If his audience could be brought to make this association, then he would be seen as inheriting part of their mantle. He succeeded, and the question now arises is, how did he do it?

Barack Obama did it partly by successfully linking language and content. He showed that they are interrelated and dependent on each other in the communication process. This practical demonstration is in contrast to the view of the 16th Century rhetor, Petrus Ramus.³ But first and foremost for any communicator is his or her level of credibility (*Ethos*) and especially how to create it.

Gaining credibility

Obama, like his hero Cicero, was a ‘new man’, (*novus homo*) with no clear associations or reference points to secure this initial credibility. So he simply did what Cicero did. Cicero went out of his way to publically associate himself with such personalities as Licinius Crassus and Cato the elder and many of the conservative patricians in Rome.⁴ Obama constantly referred to Lincoln, Roosevelt, Luther King and Kennedy. It worked.

Many politicians have associated themselves with respected figures from the past who are admired across all political boundaries. Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime-Minister is one of the most famous for doing this. She associated herself with Winston Churchill, Harold Macmillan and Disraeli, the icons of the Conservative Party. She even spoke reverently about Edmund Burke, the colorful founder of her party.

In the United States, Ronald Reagan associated himself with the Founding Fathers. He talked about ‘**The Shining City on the Hill**’, ‘**Valley Forge**’, and propounded a philosophy based on individualism, patriotism and personal responsibility. Reagan

³ For a full discussion on Petrus Ramus, see “In defence of Rhetoric”, Brian Vickers, Clarendon Paperbacks, 1990, pp. 475-477

⁴ See “An Introduction to Classical Rhetoric”, Ed. Williams

was never called to the Bar and didn’t graduate from one of the prestigious Ivy League universities; he was a complete outsider to the Washington establishment. Yet he became associated in the majority of people’s minds with what Americans most respect from their history, the Founding Fathers.

But Obama needed to go further, as John McCain, his opponent, had strong military credentials to rely on. So he purposely portrayed himself as an average American senator from Illinois (which he represented in the Senate) who wanted to revive the American dream. He neatly placed himself as a natural part of the evolving American political scene.

By his eloquent speaking voice and attractive message, along with his book, *“Dreams of my Fathers”*, he was able to build connections with the young and blue collar audiences, and for many he even began to personify the American Dream itself. Aristotle tells us that character proof comes from good sense, good moral character (*ethos*) and good will. It creates respect, and audiences tend to believe people whom they respect. So let us briefly look at how Obama brought content (message) and language together successfully by using five of the more popular language devices the use of contrasts, tricolon, antonomasia, anaphora, and epiphora.

1. The use of Contrasts

Contrast is the juxtaposition of contrasting words or ideas such as this example from Abraham Lincoln: *“It has been my experience that folks who have no vices have very few virtues.”* This plays one idea or concept off against the other. The use of contrasts can be extended much further in the use of paradoxes, oxymoron (two ordinary opposing terms, e.g. The Sound of Silence) and so on. But let us just look at this short extract from one of Obama’s speeches by way of example for the use of contrasts:

“I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived the depression to serve in Patton’s army during World War 2 and a white grandmother who worked on a bomb

*assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I have gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world’s poorest nations”.*⁵

This speech is full of contrasts. This helps to give listeners a feeling that the speaker is one of them. The audience can make contact with the speaker. We all have contrasts in our lives. For example, *“I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas,” and “I have gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world’s poor nations.”*

2. The use of the Tricolon

A tricolon is three parallel elements of about the same length occurring together in a series. For example, Obama proclaimed: *“Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our nation, not because of the height of our skyscrapers or the power of our military, or the size of our economy ...”.*⁶

Abraham Lincoln was famous in his use of the tricolon. Probably his most famous use explains it far better than any definition can, *“with malice toward none, with charity toward all, with firmness in the right...”*. It has its three parts and each part follows in a series and is of equal length. He used it constantly. For example in his Gettysburg Address he told his waiting audience: *“We cannot dedicate -- we cannot consecrate -- we cannot hallow...”* This rhetorical trick is the use of three words to emphasise his message. The most famous *‘tricolon’* in history is perhaps Julius Caesar’s *‘Veni, Vidi, Vici’* (I came, I saw, I conquered).

Two other examples taken from completely different sources:

- *“You are talking to a man who has laughed in the face of death, sneered at doom, and chuckled at catastrophe.”*
(The Wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*, 1939)
- *“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”*
(Benjamin Franklin)

⁵ Speech by Barack Obama, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-th_n_92077.html

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3. A descriptive phrase: ‘Antonomasia’

The antonomasia substitutes a descriptive phrase for a proper name, or substitutes a proper name for a quality associated with it.⁷ For example, Obama, when referring to Martin Luther King in his acceptance speech, described King not by his name but as ***‘a young preacher from Georgia’***. It is a flattering remark and its great advantage is that it humanizes the character of Luther King. Below is a short collection of descriptive phrases:

- ***"The Philosopher" to refer to Aristotle.***
- ***"The Fab Four" for The Beatles***
- ***"The Material Girl" for Madonna***
- ***"Old Blue Eyes" for Frank Sinatra***
- ***"The Iron Lady" for Margaret Thatcher***

4. The ‘Anaphora’

It is the repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses, sentences, or lines. From the ‘Yes we can’ speech delivered after he won the primary in South Carolina we have this example:

Thank you, South Carolina.

Thank you to the rock of my life, Michelle Obama.

Thank you to Malia and Sasha Obama, who haven't seen their daddy in a week.

Other examples of ‘Anaphora’:

Many other examples exist such as those used by Shakespeare, Lincoln and William Blake.

- ***Mad world! Mad kings! Mad composition!*** (William Shakespeare, *King John*, II,i)

⁷ See <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/> for more examples

- **In every** cry of every man,
In every infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear: (William Blake)
- **With malice toward none;**
with charity for all;
with firmness in the right,... (Abraham Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*)
- **This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,**
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
(Shakespeare's *Richard II* (2.1.40-51; 57-60))

5. The ‘Epiphora’

This is a rhetorical term for the repetition of a word or phrase at the end of successive clauses.

*“And tonight, I think about all that she's seen throughout her century in America - the heartache and the hope; the struggle and the progress; the times we were told that we can't, and the people who pressed on with that American creed: **Yes we can.**”*

*At a time when women's voices were silenced and their hopes dismissed, she lived to see them stand up and speak out and reach for the ballot. **Yes we can.**”*

*When there was despair in the dust bowl and depression across the land, she saw a nation conquer fear itself with a New Deal, new jobs and a new sense of common purpose. **Yes we can.**”*

*When the bombs fell on our harbor and tyranny threatened the world, she was there to witness a generation rise to greatness and a democracy was saved. **Yes we can.**”*

*She was there for the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma, and a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that “We Shall Overcome.” **Yes we can.**”⁸*

The ‘**epiphora**’ does the same at the end of the sentence as the tricolon does at the beginning. Of course, the most popular example here is Obama’s use of ‘**Yes we can**’ at the end of paragraphs (yet another tricolon). In fact, he used the phrase at the end of some five paragraphs, and its effectiveness was widespread. Indeed, there is hardly a person who listens to, or watches the media, who hasn’t been touched by this call to

⁸ http://news.yahoo.com/s/ynews/ynews_p1135

action. For example, one paragraph ends this way which is a mixture of the *‘epiphora’* and the *‘tricolon’*:

“And where we are met with cynicism and doubt and fear and those who tell us that we can’t, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of the American people in three simple words -- yes, we can.”

The Likeability Factor

Many people throughout history have been attracted towards the ‘grand’ style⁹ but likeability in relation to word formation cannot be taken in isolation from the other dimensions of likeability, as laid out in the research of Robert Cialdini.¹⁰ In the cases of John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan the issues of politeness and likeability played an enormous role. Both of these speakers were masters of the ‘grand’ style in their day. They were liked by many people and this helped greatly in creating their credibility. Mrs. Thatcher, however, relied on argumentation (forensic style) as she dealt with immediate problems within a parliamentary system. When she began to move out of immediate issues to the long term ones such as the UK’s role in the European Community, her level of politeness and likeability became a real issue. Margaret Thatcher is reported as saying that it didn’t matter to her whether people liked her or not, it was the details of the argument that mattered. Having the right policies was of the utmost importance to her.¹¹ She subscribed to Petrus Ramus’ thesis that argumentation was what mattered most.

So how does likeability affect the communication process? Unfortunately there is not much research in this area. But we can rely on the research of academics such as Robert Cialdini to help us.

According to Cialdini in his very readable book “The Science of Influence”, people like to say ‘yes’ to those they know and like.¹² Cialdini goes on to identify five points from his research that may be useful in creating a situation of likeability:

- Physical attractiveness,

⁹ See technical note on “Styles of Oratory”

¹⁰ *Influence, The Psychology of Persuasion* by Robert Cialdine, Collins, 2007

¹¹ See *Profile of a Forensic Speaker: Margaret Thatcher*, IESE case, DPO-109-E

¹² *Influence, The Psychology of Persuasion* by Robert Cialdine, Collins, 2007, pp. 167-297

- Personal similarities
- Compliments given in a clever way
- Positive associations
- Co-operation: working generously with others

Conclusion

Argument as found in forensic speaking does not build a team, a community or offer the fellowship of humanity. It does not offer the emotional glue that leadership needs to offer. In argumentation there is a winner and a loser. All organisations, like any relationship, need to pay attention to the form of language used. Language, purpose, and context are intractably linked and in an interdependent world need to be handled carefully.

Note

We have seen from the classic study by Dr. Albert Mehrabian at UCLA that only 7 percent of any interaction with another person transpires through the actual words that we say. The other 93 percent is communicated through body language (gestures), voice, tone, grammar, language devices, and facial expressions.

Albert Mehrabian’s¹³ research is based on the total **liking** of the actual words used by a speaker, 7% of the whole process; while the total **liking** of the voice (tonality etc.) takes up to 38%, and that the remaining 55% is taken up with the total **liking** of the speaker’s body language (gestures, facial expressions ...).¹⁴ It is worth noting that this and other equations regarding the relative importance of verbal and nonverbal messages were derived from experiments dealing with communications of feelings and attitudes (i.e., like–dislike). They do not concern argumentation so unless a communicator is talking about his or her feelings or attitudes to a speaker, these

¹³ Albert Mehrabian, is currently [Professor Emeritus](#) of [Psychology, UCLA](#) and published his first research on this topic in 1971

¹⁴ Mehrabian, Albert (2009). [""Silent Messages" – A Wealth of Information About Nonverbal Communication \(Body Language\)""](#). *Personality & Emotion Tests & Software: Psychological Books & Articles of Popular Interest*. [Los Angeles, CA](#): self-published. <http://www.kaaj.com/psych/smorder.html>. Retrieved April 6, 2010.

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results cannot be used as a yardstick. For example, we are not including the message here.