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Chapter 2 : Persuasion, structure and language devices

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CHAPTER 2: PERSUASION, STRUCTURE AND LANGUAGE DEVICES

Quotable quotes

“The only person really keen about change is a baby with a wet nappy”, (Anon.)

Introduction

“Persuading people is a matter of paying attention to four things—who says what to whom and how they say it.” (Lasswell, 1948.)

Lasswell tells us that communicator variables (who), message content variables (what), audience variables (to whom) and speaking techniques, together with use of media account (how), for differences between good and bad speeches.

We like to think that we are always rational, that we are persuaded by ideas carefully considered. Yet our knowledge of persuasive techniques in advertising shows us that others (at least; if not ourselves!) are persuaded by things peripheral to rational arguments.

Many people approach lawyers to sort out their bad decisions. They say—“He appeared a credible, genuine person—I’m afraid I didn’t go into it too thoroughly.” “I thought because other people like government ministers and university professors had money invested in it—it would be all right.” Petty & Cacioppo (1981) and Chaiken (1980) have developed theories to explain why people don’t always take a rational route to persuasion. In Petty & Cacioppo’s (1981) Elaboration Likelihood Theory we take a “central route” to persuasion, examining the rationality of the arguments for a course of action if we are very intelligent, or think a lot about decisions, or know a lot about the topic and have plenty of time and are interested. If, on the other hand, we are rushed and the issue isn’t terribly important to us we use Heuristics (Chaiken, 1980) or “quick decision rules”. We take the “peripheral route” to being persuaded, by relying on our own emotions, on how we feel, on what experts say, on what other people are doing, if the issue isn’t very important to us, or we are tired or distracted. So, how we are persuaded depends on the kind of people we are, how much interest we have in the matter, and how much time we have to consider it.

Consequently, when **we** are attempting to persuade others in order to have our arguments appeal to everyone we will need to develop a **central route to persuasion** based on rationality and carefully considered ideas together with a **heuristics-based peripheral route to persuasion** based on “expert” opinion, statistics about numbers of other people who have taken up the idea and “feel good” images, such as pleasant staff, comfortable surroundings and attractive packaging in order to cover the most frequent ways people come to be persuaded.

To test these two theories you might think about why you choose to buy the brand of toothpaste you generally buy. Have you used a central or a peripheral route to persuasion? Similarly, examine how you come to form your opinions on euthanasia or Aboriginal land rights.

Key strategies in persuasive speaking

A Persuasive Speaker:

- appears credible.
- urges listeners to choose between options.
- calls for commitment from listeners.
- often relies on arousing emotions to move audiences to action.
- directs efforts to groups rather than individuals.

A Persuasive Speaker Does This By:

- being introduced as a credible figure who has experience, knowledge or wisdom in the area.
- identifying the message with the values, beliefs and interests of the audience.
- creating common values, needs and interests in his or her audience.
- creating word pictures which provide vivid images that help arouse strong feelings to move people to action. (Martin Luther King has us picturing the hot sun shining on the slaves as they hoe the long rows of cotton.)
- creating clear alternatives and refuting opposing arguments. (Whitlam's "It's time" speech says clearly "It will be good with us and bad with the others".)
- Giving reasons for the choices they want the audience to make.
- using *Antithesis*: setting one idea off against another. Pointing out opposition to help the audience see choices clearly. (Listen for *On the one hand, and then on the other* or for direct comparison of choices in such speeches.)

Persuasive speakers use a number of language devices to engage their audience, keep their attention, make the issues stand out clearly and support their points.

Introduction to the field:

Persuasion is involved in most of our communication as we try to encourage others to share our attitudes, feelings, beliefs and behaviour – to share in our view of the world. As well, advertising and public speaking depend upon persuasion. Lasswell’s (1948) model of persuasion lists the variables involved while Petty & Cacioppo’s (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model and Chaiken’s (1987) Heuristics Model explains why sometimes we follow the arguments in great detail and on other occasions we’re persuaded by glossy brochures or pretty girls rather than by the detail of argument.

The *Who* or **communicator variables** involves the communicator’s credibility, expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness.

The *What* or **message content variables** involves such things as whether the content should appeal to reason or the emotions or whether you need to answer the opposing side’s arguments or only put your own.

The *Whom* or the **audience variables** involve asking who your audience is, how old they are, what they know already about the topic and how involved they are.

The *how they say it* or **channel variables** involves delivery, enthusiasm, media, as well as placement and organisation of the argument. Should you argue inductively from particular cases building up to a conclusion, or should you argue deductively putting your view or main idea up front and provide supporting evidence?

Should you put your most telling points first where they will capture people’s attention or save them until last where they will stay in the memory because they were most recently presented?

Petty & Cacioppo’s (1986) model along with Chaiken’s (1987) Heuristics model explains how differences in audience characteristics lead to differences in the kind of processing of information or ideas we undertake.

Audience

If the audience is:

- knowledgeable about the topic
- intelligent
- educated
- very interested in the topic

If the audience is

- not educated or intelligent
- find the issue or topic not important
- haven’t got time to think

Kind of Processing

- look at all the evidence
- explore details
- investigate contrary claims
- use heuristics or “quick ways” or “recipes”
- I will buy the soap my mother buys
- the Prime Minister said it–it must be true

Key issues in the area

- Should you appeal to reasons or emotions?
- Does fear persuade? (Drink driving, AIDS campaigns.)
- Should you give both sides of the case when you are trying to persuade?
- Is it more persuasive to put the positive details first or last?
- Are fast talking people more persuasive?
- Under what conditions is it better to let people read your argument rather than tell them?
- Which is more persuasive?
 - a TV ad
 - a letter in your mailbox
 - someone calling at your house
- What's the evidence for your view?
- How can you inoculate someone against the argument that drinking is essential for a good time?
- List the persuasive messages that can be used by people seeking to persuade you to:
 - join a cult
 - take up smoking
 - begin using drugs

Language to Keep Attention

Repetition of words

As in this example from Churchill's famous speech during World War II

We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end; we shall fight in France; we shall fight 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 the beaches; we shall fight on the landing grounds; we shall fight in the fields and in the streets; we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender.

Whitlam uses a similar pattern in his "It's time" speech.

Repetition of ideas in groups of two.

Listen for this in Kennedy's speech.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country. Technically this is an example of a *chiasmus*; "a sentence with two parts in which the second is syntactically balanced against the first but with the parts reversed" (Bradley, 1991, p. 265.)

Repetition of ideas in groups of three:

This is called a *tricolon* and occurs in almost all the speeches. Listen for it at the end of the Gettysburg address. In a speech in Parliament, Prime Minister Keating said, ". . . it's bad luck; bad luck for them, bad luck for the Budget, and bad luck for the nation."

Alliteration:

Using words beginning with the same sound captures the audience's attention. *Until now we have taken a rambling road. From henceforth lets us ensure that our route leads us rapidly to a republic.*

Strong verbs:

Frank Devine, writing in *The Australian Magazine* (September, 1992 p. 36.) drew attention to Prime Minister Keating's use of active verbs such as *asked, announced, create, increase, rebuild, give, think, implemented, increased, drafted, passed, progressed, commenced, commissioned, introduced and endorsed*. Australians have a saying "He or she is good on his or her feet". This has nothing to do with dancing but means that a person is able to speak extemporaneously. Devine says about Prime Minister Keating's language:

Look at the cumulative power and purpose of all the verbs, selected by Keating on his feet, mostly improvising or adapting written notes as he goes along. They convey an overpowering, almost subliminal, message of a new era dawning—announced, introduced, create, drafted, commissioned, give and endorsed.

Universal metaphors

Like *Light and Dark*, where the light is positive and the dark is negative. Listen for this in Martin Luther King's speeches: *Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice.*

In the following excerpt from J.F. Kennedy's inaugural Presidential address you can find examples of most of the speech devices noted above. Consider the use of *twilight* and its purpose in this speech:

Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need—not as a call to battle, though embattled we are—but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle year in and year out, 'rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation'—a struggle against the common enemies of man, tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.

Other metaphors that are often used are: storms and seas, disease and cure, and family metaphors such as the university family, our brothers and sisters in Somalia.

Examples of these devices occur in the speeches quoted above and in speeches by:

- Cicero (an orator in Ancient Rome),
- Prime Minister Gough Whitlam,

- President Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address,
- Prime Minister Winston Churchill in World War II,
- President John Kennedy’s speeches and
- The Reverend Martin Luther King in a sermon called *A Knock at Midnight*. In groups of four identify techniques used in these speeches.

Individual tasks: Speech Plan

Monroe’s Motivated Sequence lists the steps contained in a successful persuasive speech. These are attention, need, satisfaction, visualisation and action. Following Monroe’s sequence plan a speech on a topic of your choice or from the list on p. **** to persuade your audience to give up smoking.

1. Attention–Get the audience’s attention and make them aware of the problem.
2. Need–Make this problem relate to the audience you are addressing. Help them see how it affects them.
3. Satisfaction–Explain how the solution you are advancing will meet their needs.
4. Visualisation–Enable the audience to imagine, to “see” the effects of what you describe.
5. Action–Get the audience to do something as a result of being convinced by your message.

Plan

Attention: _____

Need: _____

Satisfaction: _____

Visualisation: _____

Action: _____

Speech opportunities

–Give a speech of introduction to explain why your classmate is a credible speaker on the topic he or she has chosen.

–Practice tongue twisters in groups of two. Say each sentence slowly and clearly and increase speed to your normal rate.

“Terry Triggs pats big fat pigs”

“She sells seashells on the seashore”

“She insists on seeing ghosts gliding with stoutest boasts”

“Grass grows green on Grace Grey’s grandfather’s grave”

Individual task

Annoying Speech Mannerisms

At some time or another during their education, most people can remember being bored by speech presentations. Relief from boredom is sought through doodling, talking to the person next to you or by counting the speech mannerisms of the speaker. Some speakers produce 78 “ums” in half an hour. Other lecturers use “fill in” words like *basically*, or *actually* while their brains are catching up with their mouths. Student seminars are frequently studded with “you know” (when the whole point is that we don’t know!) and “right”. Silence would be better.

Many men cannot summarise without saying “at the end of the day”. (I have only once heard a woman say this on radio while I have frequently heard men say it.) Some of these speech mannerisms are attempts to hold the *conversational turn* (the unwritten rule of conversation that lets you talk until you either stop talking or someone else starts talking while you are pausing for breath or when they think you are about to stop talking) for longer than the speaker has ideas to justify it. Holding on to a conversational turn is an attempt to dominate or assert power by preventing others from speaking.

Avoiding speech mannerisms is a matter of thinking of how one appears to the listener and of becoming aware of the clichés, tautologies, and “fillers” that have crept into one’s speech. Sometimes a good friend can help you remove them by telling you what they are. Listening to oneself on audio or video is an ego-deflating experience but one which helps avoid the situation where the audience is counting your “ums” or other speech mannerisms. Also annoying to audiences are non-verbal mannerisms such as grimaces, table tapping and pacing up and down the room.

Listen to and watch yourself on video explaining something.

What did you like about the way you explained it?

How clear were you?

Did you use an **inductive** organisation – examples leading up to the main point, or a **deductive** organisation—key points first then supporting evidence?

Which is likely to be more efficient for this audience?

Do you have any speech mannerisms?

What can you do to improve next time you speak?

Further sources of information

Lucas, S.E. (1995) *The art of public speaking* (5th ed.). New York: McGraw–Hill

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