

Discourse & Power

Language & Politics

Jason Jones and Jean Stilwell Peccei

DA and CDA

- **Discourse** refers to the spoken or written practices or visual representations which characterize a topic, an era, or a cultural practice.
 - Language use above the sentence level
 - Language use in context
 - Real language use
- **Critical discourse analysis (CDA)** examines language as a form of cultural and social practice, focusing on the relationship between **power and discourse**, and between **language and ideology**.
- (CDA) seeks how discursive practices within societal structures secure and maintain power over people.

What is meant by 'politics'?

- George Orwell claimed that 'in our age there is no keeping out of politics. All issues are political issues' (1946: 154).
- Politics is concerned with power:
- the power to make decisions, to control resources, to control other people's behaviour and often to control their values.

- Even the most everyday decisions can be seen in a political light.
- In the supermarket, some brands of coffee are marketed on the basis of fair wages having been paid to the workers in the countries where the coffee was produced. Every time you buy coffee, you choose between these brands and brands which are often both cheaper and advertised more prominently, but which don't make this statement about fair wages. When you choose, you make a small contribution to the continued existence of either a company that claims to pay workers fairly or one that doesn't make this claim.

Environment friendly?

- You make political decisions when you decide whether or not to buy recycled paper goods, organically grown vegetables or genetically modified food.
- When food is imported from countries with political regimes or particular policies opposed by people in your country, you will be lobbied not to buy goods from those countries, as was the case with the boycott on South African produce during the apartheid era.
- There is no avoiding political decisions, even in the most domestic, everyday areas.

Activity 1

- Consider the uses of the word 'politics' in the expressions below. If you had to explain what these expressions meant, perhaps to a speaker from another culture, how would you rephrase them? Avoid using the word 'politics' in your rephrasing.

1 They made careers for themselves in politics

2 Sexual politics

3 Don't get involved in office politics

4 The personal is political

5 Philosophy, Politics and Economics

6 Environmental politics

Politics and Ideology

- Politics is inevitably connected to power. The acquisition of power, and the enforcement of your own political beliefs, can be achieved in a number of ways; one of the obvious methods is through physical coercion.
- Many events regarded as significant in history involve the imposition, by force, of the rule of one group of people on to another group. This is what, in essence, most wars are about.
- Under dictatorial regimes, and military rule, those in power often control people by using force.
- In democracies, physical force is still used legally, for example to restrain people accused of criminal activity.

- **Other kinds of coercion** are implemented in a democracy through the legal system.
- For example, there are laws about where you can park your car, about not destroying other people's mail, about where and when you can drink alcohol.
- If you break these laws, you can be fined, or even arrested and imprisoned. These are all examples of political ends achieved by coercion.

- However, it is often much more effective to persuade people to act voluntarily in the way you want, that is, to ‘exercise power through the manufacture of consent . . . or at least acquiescence towards it’ (Fairclough 1989: 4), instead of continually having to arrest them for wrongdoing. To secure power, it makes sense to persuade everyone else that what you want is also what they want.
- To achieve this, an ideology needs to be established: one which makes the beliefs which you want people to hold appear to be ‘common sense’, thus making it difficult for them to question that dominant **ideology**.

The concept of ideology

- The concept of ideology was first introduced by followers of Karl Marx, notably Louis Althusser.
- Althusser wondered how the vast majority of people had been persuaded to act against their own best interests, since they worked long hours at laborious tasks and lived in poverty, while a very small number of people made enormous amounts of money from their labour, and enjoyed lives of luxury.
- In order to explain why the impoverished majority didn't just refuse to work in this system and overthrow the rich minority, Althusser reasoned that the poor had been persuaded that this state of affairs was 'natural', and nothing could be done to change it.

Can we question & eventually resist ideologies?

- Today, 'ideology' tends to be used in a wider context, to refer to any set of beliefs which, to the people who hold them, appear to be logical and 'natural'.
- People can question the ideologies of their culture, but it is often difficult. Not only can it be a challenging intellectual task, but it can also result in social stigma. People who question the dominant ideology often appear not to make sense.
- In extreme cases, people who ask such questions may even appear to be insane. So, while it is possible to question the dominant ideology, there is often a price to be paid for doing so.

- it is possible to regard our understanding of reality as entirely mediated by the language and the system of signs available to us. That system of signs, according to this argument, is in fact not an unbiased reflection of the world but a product of the ideologies of our culture.
- In the next section, we will see two examples (one fictional, the other real) of the powerful role of language in establishing and maintaining ideologies.

To persuade or to control?

- Politicians throughout the ages have owed much of their success to their skilful use of rhetoric, whereby they attempt to persuade their audience of the validity of their views by their subtle use of elegant and persuasive language.
- Language can be used not only to *steer* people's thoughts and beliefs but also to *control* their thoughts and beliefs.

- If we accept that the kind of language we use to **represent** something can alter the way in which it is perceived, then you might wonder whether, by controlling the discourse, one can control how another person thinks.
- This is the premise explored by George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (first published in 1949). A totalitarian society of the future has Ingsoc (English Socialism) as the dominant political system. The system is enforced by the mandatory requirement for all citizens to use a language called **Newspeak**, a radically revised version of the English language from which many meanings available to us today have been removed.

'The principle of Newspeak'

- In an appendix to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* entitled 'The principle of Newspeak', Orwell explains that 'the purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the worldview and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible' ([1949] 1984: 231).
- The principles of Newspeak are therefore grounded in the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: that language determines our perception of the world.

Orwell wrote:

- It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought – that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc – should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever. To give a single example. The word *free* still existed in Newspeak, but it could only be used in such statements as ‘This dog is free from lice’ or ‘This field is free from weeds’.

It could not be used in its old sense of 'politically free' or 'intellectually free', since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts, and were therefore of necessity nameless . . . A person growing up with Newspeak as his sole language would no more know that equal had once had the secondary meaning of 'politically equal', or that free had once meant 'intellectually free', for instance, than a person who had never heard of chess would be aware of the secondary meanings attached to queen and rook.

([1949] 1984: 231)

Discussion Questions

- Is thought dependent on words?
- Can we think for ourselves outside language?
- Can Newspeak prevent people from thinking of certain concepts simply by removing the words that encode those concepts?

'The principle of Newspeak' vs. 'Political Correctness'

- The principles of linguistic determinism on which the fictional Newspeak is founded could be argued to underlie aspects of moves towards 'political correctness' in language.
- Newspeak, admittedly, was the product of a malign dictatorship in Orwell's novel, while 'political correctness' could be viewed as a benign attempt to improve the world. However, the two interventions into language use, one fictional, one real, may share certain assumptions, which we will now explore.

The concept of 'political correctness' (PC)

- <the terms used to represent minority groups matter>
- Examples of 'PC' terms which have had an impact on language use include *visually impaired*, *blended family* and ethnic origin terms such as *African-American*.
- Non-PC terms are considered by some not only to be offensive but to create or reinforce a perception of minority groups as unequal to the majority, which in turn may have a detrimental effect on the way a society is organised.

- It could be argued that the use of 'PC' language is particularly significant in relation to disability, since many changes could be made to the way most organisations operate which could in turn have a positive effect on the lives of people with disabilities.
- For example, some people make a distinction between impairment and disability, using *impairment* to refer to a condition (such as loss of vision or a limb), and *disability* to refer to activities which are difficult or impossible to undertake (for example, reading small print or climbing stairs). This is intended to draw attention to the fact that someone's inability to read a book or reach the top floor of a shop is as much a consequence of the lack of adequate facilities as of their actual impairment.

- Although 'political correctness' is not an attempt to control people's thoughts in the way that Orwell's Ingsoc did through Newspeak, it nevertheless represents an attempt to alter people's perceptions of certain **signifieds** (concepts) by replacing old **signifiers** (labels) with new ones.
- It should also be noted that there are those who do not support the argument that the language used to refer to a person has any significant impact on the way we actually think about them, but support 'politically correct' language on the grounds that it is important not to be offensive or disrespectful.

- So far, we have considered the use of language to influence people's view of the world, using the examples of George Orwell's invented language Newspeak and of 'political correctness'.
- You may think that any deliberate intervention into language use which attempts to influence the way people think is wrong.
- However, it may be worth considering whether intervention for a good reason (such as to improve the lives of disadvantaged people) can be justified, while the intervention for a bad reason (such as to limit people's lives) cannot. Of course, what constitutes a 'good' or a 'bad' reason is a question for political debate, which takes us back to politics again.

The implications of implications

- One of the goals of politicians must be to persuade their audience of the validity of their basic claims. In this section we look at two of the ways, this can be achieved in political discourse – **presupposition** and **implicature**.
- These tools can lead the hearer to make assumptions about the existence of information that is not made explicit in what is actually said, but that might be deduced from what was said.
- The use of implicature and presupposition is an integral part of all human communication.
- However, it is particularly useful in advertising and political discourse because it can make it more difficult for the audience to identify and (if they wish to) reject views communicated in this way, and can persuade people to take something for granted which is actually open to debate.

Presupposition

- Presuppositions are background assumptions embedded within a sentence or phrase. These assumptions are taken for granted to be true regardless of whether the whole sentence is true.
- Take this sentence from the 2001 British Conservative Party Manifesto: 'We want to set people free so that they have greater power over their own lives.' What does statement presuppose?

Presuppositions can be 'slipped' into a sentence in several ways via:

- *adjectives, particularly comparative ones.* 'A future Conservative Government will introduce a *fairer* funding formula for schools' (Conservative Shadow Education Secretary, Damian Green, 2003).
- *possessives.* 'You will never hear me apologising for highlighting *Labour's* failures time and time again' (Iain Duncan Smith, Leader of the British Conservative Party, 2003).
- *subordinate clauses.* 'We have arrived at an important moment in *confronting the threat posed to our nation and to peace by Saddam Hussein and his weapons of terror*' (George W. Bush in the White House press conference of 6 March 2003).
- *questions instead of statements.* 'Is it not now time for him to ensure that his Government get control of the situation in Belfast?' (David Trimble, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party addressing Prime Minister Tony Blair in Parliament on 3 July 2002).

- **Presuppositions** are widely used not only in political debates and speeches but also by journalists to ‘position’ politicians in an interview or press conference.
- Here is an example from the BBC *Newsnight* television programme of 6 February 2003. Jeremy Paxman to Prime Minister Tony Blair: ‘Yes, an unreasonable veto, as you put it. But if that happened, would you be prepared to go to war despite the fact that apparently the majority of people in this country would not be with you?’.
- ‘How’ questions can be particularly useful for positioning the interviewee, as we can see from a 1990 interview with Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister at the time. Gerry Foley, of ITV news starts off with: ‘Prime Minister, how isolated do you think you now are on [European] economic and monetary union?’.

Activity 2

- Listen to or read transcripts of interviews with politicians and find instances where the presuppositions in the interviewers' questions can help put the politician on the spot. Pay close attention to the politicians' answers. Do they sometimes explicitly try to deny the presuppositions as well as answering the main question? Or do they ignore them? There are now many resources on the internet where you can access transcripts of political debates, speeches and interviews. Here are a few suggestions:
 - *US sites*
 - www.pbs.org / www.cnn.com / www.americanrhetoric.com / www.loc.gov (Library of Congress)
 - *UK sites*
 - www.parliament.uk / www.bbc.co.uk / www.itnarchive.com / www.margaretthatcher.org

Implicature

- Like presuppositions, implicatures lead the listener to infer something that was not explicitly asserted by the speaker. However, unlike presuppositions, implicatures operate over more than one phrase or sentence and are much more dependent on shared knowledge between the speaker and hearer and on the surrounding context of the discourse.
- Here, Oliver Letwin, a Conservative MP, addresses a question to David Blunkett, the Labour Home Secretary, concerning the government's plans to institute a system of national identity cards:

This issue is too important an area of our national life, too central to the protection of society against fraud, and too fundamental to the preservation of our liberties, for us to accept such obscurity and spin. Will the Home Secretary assure the House that in the coming days and weeks he will make it clear what he is actually asking us to debate?

- Although in some respects implicature is more indirect than presupposition, what Letwin was implying was clearly not lost on the Home Secretary:

There appears to be a presumption by the Opposition that if they mention the word ‘spin’, the whole world will believe that someone has been spinning. Although I specifically instructed all those around me not to spin, appeared on no programmes – unlike the right hon. Gentleman – and kept away from saying anything about this over the last few days, I am accused of spin. I will tell the House what I am spinning. I am spinning the right of the British people to decide over the next six months whether they want a sensible way of confirming their own identity.

(Hansard, 3 July 2002)

- In that exchange, Blunkett acknowledged the power of implicature, but also made the point that it is often easy to see through it. Here is another example of implicature which caused quite an uproar in some sections of the British press, although this time it was from a journalist not a politician. Is it obvious to you what Jeremy Paxman was implying in this exchange with Prime Minister Tony Blair?

PAXMAN: The question is what freedom he has under the current inspection regime but we've discussed that already, I want to explore a little further about your personal feelings about this war.

Does the fact that George Bush and you are both Christians make it easier for you to view these conflicts in terms of good and evil?

BLAIR: I don't think so, no, I think that whether you're a Christian or you're not a Christian you can try perceive what is good and what is, is evil.

PAXMAN: You don't pray together for example?

BLAIR: No, we don't pray together Jeremy, no.

PAXMAN: Why do you smile?

BLAIR: Because – why do you ask me the question?

PAXMAN: Because I'm trying to find out how you feel about it.

(BBC *Newsnight* broadcast of 6 February 2003)

Persuasive Language – the Power of Rhetoric

- Rhetoric is the skill of elegant and persuasive speaking, perfected by the ancient Greeks.
- The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it more precisely as ‘the art of using language so as to persuade or influence others; the body of rules to be observed by a speaker or writer in order that he may express himself with eloquence’.
- In the following sections we will look in more detail at some of these devices.

1. Metaphor

- Metaphor is a way of comparing two different concepts. A distinction is often made between metaphor and simile in that a metaphor asserts that something is something else, e.g. 'The mind is but a barren soil', while a simile only asserts that something is similar to something else, e.g. 'The mind is like barren soil'.
- However, in both cases the mechanism is similar. As listeners or readers we know that the mind is not literally barren soil. Rather, the speaker or writer is inviting us to understand the mind in terms of barren soil.

- One of the challenges politicians face is that they often have to talk about abstract concepts in ways that make them seem more concrete, partly so that they can be more easily grasped, and partly to avoid boring their audience.
- A very frequently appearing metaphor for the economy in political discourse is *economy as machine*.
- For example, Margaret Thatcher on inflation in the 1970s in a speech to Confederation of British Industry, 19 April 1983, said: ‘That vast wealth-producing engine of the West began to splutter, to hesitate and occasionally to backfire.’ Graham Stringer of the Manchester Airport Board on the planned construction of a second runway said: ‘The airport is already acknowledged as the *economic motor* of the region’ (*The Times*, 16 January 1997).

- **Personification** is a special type of metaphor that entails giving human characteristics to inanimate objects or abstract ideas. In political discourse, it is frequently used when referring to countries.
- Sometimes this is done largely for poetic effect, as in US President Lyndon Johnson's address on the assassination of Martin Luther King: 'Once again the heart of America is heavy.'
- At other times, the goal is more clearly ideological. For example, various British television news broadcasts during the 1990s referred to Germany's strong and influential position in the European Union with the metaphor 'Germany is the bully in the playground'.

- The potential of this kind of metaphor for helping to construct or reinforce a particular perception of events or of whole societies can be seen by thinking of other metaphors for Germany's predominance in Europe that could have been used instead, e.g. *the conductor of the orchestra* or *the captain of the ship*.
- In this respect, it is worth remembering that many of the metaphors we use in daily discourse, not just political discourse are so commonplace, so frequent and so pervasive that we scarcely realise that they are metaphors. For example:

- Your claims are *indefensible*.
- He *attacked my position*.
- His criticisms were right *on target*.
- He *shot down* all my arguments.
- I've never *won* an argument with him.

Activity 3

- Think about the effects of conceptualising the economy not as an engine but as a flower, a fire or an octopus. Then rewrite Margaret Thatcher's statement on inflation in the 1970s (see p. 46) in line with each of these new metaphors.

2. Euphemism

- Euphemism is a figure of speech which uses mild, inoffensive or vague words as a means of making something seem more positive than it might otherwise appear.
- Euphemisms are commonly used when talking about taboo subjects, such as death or sex. We might talk about *passing away* instead of *dying*, or *making love* rather than *sexual intercourse*.
- It is a device which can help to make what might actually be seen as questionable ideas or issues more palatable and 'normal' and is a potentially useful tool for politicians when engaging in what Orwell called the 'defense of the indefensible'.

- the use of euphemism is particularly extensive when discussing military matters. Two of the examples, 'surgically clean strikes' and 'clean bombs', achieve their effect in part from the positive connotations of *clean* and the associations that exist in everyday discourse between *clean* and *healthy*.
- In the 1990s Slobodan Milosevic, President of the former Yugoslavia, embarked on a programme of what he termed 'ethnic cleansing'. In reality, this referred to the forcible removal of the non-Serbian civilian population in an attempt to redesign Yugoslavia along purely ethnic lines. He did this by bombarding towns with heavy artillery, besieging villages and massacring civilians. The term *ethnic cleansing* could be seen as an attempt not only to 'hide' these details from public discourse but also to present them in a positive light.

- Today *ethnic cleansing* is not a euphemism at all. It is a highly pejorative and emotive term, which has become virtually synonymous with the very acts that the euphemism was trying to disguise.
- In recent political discourse it has been applied to the government policies of, among others, Israel, India, Macedonia, the Philippines and Sudan.
- It has been applied retrospectively to Nazi Germany's treatment of the Jews and Hungary's treatment of the Slovak minority in the late nineteenth century.
- Rather more subtle and arguably more benign uses of euphemism are frequently to be seen in the discourse of diplomatic negotiations. Thus, when a spokesman describes a diplomatic meeting as 'a free and frank exchange of views', people familiar with 'diplo-speak' interpret this as 'a flaming row'.

3. The 'rule of three'

- One of the best-known structural devices in political rhetoric is the use of the 'three-part statement'. For some reason, we seem to find things that are grouped in threes particularly aesthetically pleasing. Goodman (in Cockcroft and Cockcroft 1992) has looked at the predominance of 'triads, threes and eternal triangles' in cultures from all around the world. She points out the frequent occurrence of the number three in fairy or folk tales (e.g. *Three Little Pigs; Goldilocks and the Three Bears; Three Blind Mice*) and of groups of three in films (e.g. *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly; Sex, Lies and Videotape; Truly, Madly, Deeply*).

- The importance of the three-part statement as a rhetorical device is widely found in political documents and oratory.
- Three of the most famous three-part statements from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are to be found in:
 - ❖ the cry of the French Revolution: ‘Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite’ (liberty, equality, brotherhood)
 - ❖ the *American Declaration of Independence*, ‘We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’
 - ❖ Abraham Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*: ‘that government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from this earth’.

- Here are two examples from the 1997 British parliamentary elections. The first uses a three-part group of words, the second a three-part group of sentences.
- This is the result of four years of Liberal Democrat and Labour *waste, whinge and weakness*.

(British Conservative Party election pamphlet, 1997)

- We cannot secure peace by standing aside from war. We cannot end danger by putting safety before our friends. We cannot conquer fear by fearing to act ourselves.

(Iain Duncan Smith, Leader of the Conservative Party in Britain, addressing the party's annual conference, 10 October 2001)

Activity

- Listen to or read the transcript of a politician delivering a speech in Congress or Parliament or on an occasion such as a party conference, convention or political broadcast. How many times does s/he make use of three-part statements? Would the ideas expressed have been more or less effective if they had been delivered in any way other than as a triad?

- The three-part statement is such a powerful structure that politicians have used it even when they have only one point to make. At the 1996 Labour Party conference, Tony Blair claimed that the three main commitments of the Labour Party were ‘education, education, education’, while at the Conservative Party conference in the same year, that party’s main concerns were presented as ‘unity, unity, unity’.

4. Parallelism

- When politicians want to draw attention to a particular part of their message and make it stand out from the rest of the speech, they often use parallelism, a device which expresses several ideas in a series of similar structures. This can serve to emphasise that the ideas are equal in importance and can add a sense of symmetry and rhythm, which makes the speech more memorable.
- *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.

(Winston Churchill, Speech to the House of Commons, 4 June 1940)

- In Winston Churchill's speech, we see not only the repetition of specific phrases, *We shall* and *Let freedom ring*, but also parallel structures. Note the repeated use of prepositional phrases by Churchill: *on the beaches*, *on the landing grounds*, *in the field*, etc.

5. Pronouns

- Even the pronouns that political speakers use to refer to themselves or their audience can be a significant part of the message. They can be used either to foreground or to obscure responsibility and agency. Consider, for example, former US President George Bush's use of pronouns in the extract below; why do you think he changes from *we* to *I*?

- As we announced last night, we will not attack unarmed soldiers in retreat. We have no choice but to consider retreating combat units as a threat and respond accordingly [. . .] From the beginning of the air operation, nearly six weeks ago, I said that our efforts are on course and on schedule. This morning, I am pleased to say that coalition efforts are ahead of schedule. The liberation of Kuwait is close.

(The Guardian, 27 February 1991)

Summary

- In this chapter we have argued that politics is a widespread phenomenon, not restricted to people who make their career as politicians.
- We proposed that ideology is important in constructing a worldview and that people in a society tend to collaborate in the production of certain value systems and ways of talking about things.
- In the section on the language of persuasion we examined the uses of presupposition and implicature which can be used to convey ideas without explicitly stating them and can make notions which are in fact debatable seem like 'givens'.
- Finally we looked at a variety of frequently occurring rhetorical devices in political discourse, metaphor, euphemism, the three-part statement, parallelism and pronoun use and at ways they can be used to achieve ideological and communicative potency.