

**Lecture 13:
Subtleties:
Word Choice, Speech Patterns, Accent**

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Maxwell Nurnberg's *I Always Look Up the Word "e•gre•gious": A Vocabulary Book for People Who Don't Need One*.

This lecture examines some more of the nuts-and-bolts material that we discussed in lectures eleven and twelve, but it will also move us back into engagement with the more big-picture ideas we discussed in the earlier part of the course. We are going to examine the subtleties of rhetoric, both written and spoken, discussing word choice and the tricks that contemporary politicians and advertisers use in terms of accent, tone of voice, and speaking style.

Etymology

The study of individual words is in some ways the most interesting part of an English professor's job. Rhetoric is, after all, made up of words, and for a philologist like me, it is all about words. Words and their changing through time are intrinsically fascinating, and the study of the changes in words is called etymology. Words often carry their histories inside them, and the job of the etymologist is to explain not only what a word means now, but what it meant before and how these changes shape the subtle implications of words today.

For this analysis to make sense, we need to define the terms *denotation* and *connotation*. Denotation is the dictionary definition of a word, what a word actually means. Connotations are what a word implies by its use (for mnemonic purposes, you can think of the "con" in connotations as being related to "context": the connotation gives some of the context for the word). All words have both denotations and connotations, and usually only the denotations are listed in a dictionary. But it is the connotations that produce some of the strongest rhetorical effects. For instance, "body," "corpse," and "stiff" all mean the same thing, but think how you would feel if a eulogist used the last word in a funeral oration. The connotations of "stiff" are significantly different than those of "body." Etymology can be important because it can explain the reason why words have some of the connotations that they do. Learning etymologies (just paying attention to them when looking words up in the dictionary) can go a long way to improving the subtle effects of rhetoric.

It is also important to avoid offending people. Being aware of the connotations of words helps in this task, but it is also important to note that sometimes accidental figures of speech can create problems and so should be avoided. The trope of *paranomasia* (one word sounding or looking like another, different word) often plays out here, also. Even if the denotation of a word is acceptable, if the word *sounds* like something else, it can be risky to use it. The seventh planet in the solar system is called Uranus. Newscasters hate to say that there were mysterious rings discovered around Uranus, but there

were, and they had to say it, provoking much hilarity. Likewise the name of a country in Africa and an adjective meaning “miserly” are close to a certain horrible racial slur, and so people reasonably avoid them. This behavior has a long pedigree, going back at least as far as the tenth century in Old English, when monks avoided using the word “rot,” which meant “glad,” because it sounded too much like the word “hrot,” which meant “scum.”

The Monstrosity That Is S/He

A related subtle problem is the lack in English of a singular pronoun for a person of undetermined gender. Tradition was that if you wanted to talk about your reader, you would say “he,” as in “The reader of this book will find that he has learned a lot from Professor Drout.” But recently this became socially unacceptable and was marked as “sexist language” in many contexts. Saying “he or she” is clumsy but still better than monstrosities like “s/he,” which one can’t even read aloud. Many people in colloquial speech use the plural—“The purchaser of this lecture will discover that they’ve bought a great course,” but that is actually grammatically incorrect, no matter how much people try to spin it as acceptable (it is grammatically incorrect because it sows confusion, by suggesting that there is a plural where there really is no plural).

To solve this problem, I recommend trying to cast all the unclear nouns in the plural. Then “they” is acceptable. Instead of “the purchaser” or “the reader,” say “readers” and “purchasers.” But you can also be aware of audience traditions. If you are speaking to older or conservative hearers, use “he.” If you are speaking to other groups, use “he or she” if you cannot rework things to use the plural.

Sub-lexical Elements

Word choice can be subtly manipulated to create the right connotations for a speaker’s purpose. But word choice is only one of the subtle techniques that rhetorical experts like advertisers or politicians use. Possibly more important and, unfortunately, more difficult to discuss, are what linguists would call “sub-lexical” elements of language: accent, tone of voice, and self-presentation through timing and body language.

Let me give you a few examples. Former Senator John Danforth had multiple degrees from Yale University. He was also from a quite upper-class part of Missouri. Yet when Senator Danforth went out campaigning, he would talk about what was best for the great state of “Mizzourah.” I lived in Missouri when Danforth was campaigning, and in rural Missouri, people definitely said “Mizzourah.” But not in the upper-class St. Louis enclaves from which Danforth came. Likewise on campaign stops Danforth would use more of a Missouri accent: In Missouri, when you have a word that ends in “p” and then you put an “ed” on it, instead of changing the whole “ped” morpheme to “pt,” which is what most American speakers do, you change the accent profile of the word and say, for example, “stripe – ed.” There is no way John Danforth ever talked about a “stripe – ed” tie in Washington, D.C., but he talked about trouble farmers were having with “stripe – ed” cucumber beetles on the campaign trail.

Likewise, if you listen to tapes of John Kerry from the 1970s, you hear a very definite Kennedy accent. Some of this is real, as Kerry and Kennedy are

both from Massachusetts. But Kerry is a Boston Brahmin, a different social and accent grouping from the Kennedy family, and his natural accent, to someone who knows Massachusetts accents, is quite different. But in the 1970s Kerry put on a much more Kennedy-like accent than he did in his 2004 presidential campaign. This was not an accident. Likewise, when Kerry speaks *in* Massachusetts, he lets his Boston accent have free reign, while when he speaks to a national audience, it is very much toned down: “I’m John Kerry and I’m reporting for duty” was his opening line at his 2004 acceptance speech. In a true Massachusetts accent it would be “repawting” or “repahting” for duty.

The problem of speaking with the accent of the place you are in is difficult for transplant people as well: On the one hand, it is difficult to communicate; on the other, an outsider using the accent can sound phony. For example, where I live in New England, they pronounce the word for good topsoil “loom” even though it is spelled

“loam” and pronounced everywhere else “loam.” I cannot bring myself to say “loom,” but no one knows what I am talking about when I try to order “loom.” So I exercise my power of word choice and say “topsoil.”

It would be easy (and partly accurate) to call Danforth and Kerry phonies for putting on one voice for the home crowd and one for the away. But the point is more significant: Your hearers are very much going to be influenced by whether or not they think you are one of them, and in America (in England as well, though the subtleties of class, rank, and region are somewhat different), a large country with a lot of regional accents, it is important for people to think, in certain circumstances, that you are one of them. That makes for a real challenge for mainstream politicians. You will also notice

TWO PET PEEVES: *Unique and Literally*

Never use the common phrase “very unique.” First of all, as a piece of rhetoric, it is a tedious and boring cliché; you should distrust anyone who uses it as not being very original. But even more, it is logically incorrect. “Unique” means “only one of its kind.” It is impossible for something to be “very” “the only one of its kind.” Unique cannot take a modifier.

The word *literally* means that an actual thing in the real world has turned out to be the same as an *idiom* or a *figure of speech*. For example, if I pick up a baked potato off of the grill and it burns my hand, I say “that was literally a hot potato.” But nothing else that is not a high-temperature tuber can be called “literally a hot potato.” Literally does not mean “very much.” If you want to say that something is “a literal dagger pointed at the heart of America,” you had better be able to show me the dagger, and it had better be pointy. Hilary Clinton recently said that she was worried about people who thought that “work” was “literally a four-letter word.” Unfortunately, “work” is *literally* a four-letter word (count the letters). My advice: the “literally” trope has gotten worn out and should now be avoided.

that local advertising often uses speakers with much *heavier* local accents than the average: Advertisers have found that local buyers find those voices more trustworthy even if they themselves do not use such a strong accent.

Challenges are also opportunities. Bill Clinton played this up beautifully, making *more* of his Arkansas accent in the 1992 campaign than he had in his widely panned 1988 convention speech. There, he came across as a Yale-educated, new-class intellectual. In 1992 he came across as a semi-rural, basically unsophisticated politician arriving to fix a broken system. It worked beautifully: Clinton allayed fears that as a Democrat he was too leftist by communicating to Southern and midwestern voters, through his voice and body language, that he was one of them.

Other tricks that all politicians use, but which Clinton mastered, include eye contact, appearing to “listen” very hard when asked a question, and a subtle trick in which the speaker, instead of nodding along to a hearer (which looks stupid, particularly on television, though it is totally natural), slowly drops his chin and then executes a slow and deliberate nod as the interlocutor finishes speaking. Speakers in America, anthropologists and linguists note, generally look at a point somewhat above and to one side of a speaker’s head while they are listening, darting their eyes back and forth. If you look *too* straight-on at a person’s eyes, you look crazy. But good politicians have learned how to vary that behavior, not staring in the eyes enough to seem crazy, but just enough to communicate sincere interest. The experience of talking to an elite politician, a Clinton or a Reagan or a Giuliani, gives one the impression of being the center of that person’s world for just a moment. And it works because, as George Burns said, if you can fake sincerity, you’ve got it made.

This lecture has moved from the nuts and bolts of crafting rhetoric—as both writing and speaking—to the subtleties that separate the great from the average. We’ll now move on to the analysis of some of those great pieces of rhetoric and see how all the things we have learned over the past thirteen lectures can be pulled together.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is the difference between denotation and connotation?
2. What “tricks” did Bill Clinton master to communicate sincere interest?

Suggested Reading

Nurnberg, Maxwell. *I Always Look Up the Word “e•gre•gious”: A Vocabulary Book for People Who Don’t Need One*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Strunk, William, Jr., and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4th ed. London: Longman, 2000.