The *Collateral Circumstances of Place* Rhetorical Device in Political Speeches: Some Psycholinguistic Remarks

Valentina CURELARIU
University of Suceava

Résumé: L'une des plus importantes fonctions du discours politique est la *persuasion*. Pour qu'un discours politique exerce cette fonction sur le récepteur, il est nécessaire qu'il soit stimulé du point de vue *intellectuel* et *émotionnel* par les mots du locuteur dès le début du discours. Habituellement, le politicien construit son discours par une ample série de figures rhétoriques et stylistiques pour persuader ses récepteurs. Cette communication représente une approche – du point de vue psychologique – d'une telle figure rhétorique mentionnée par Giambattista Vico dans son ouvrage *Institutiones Oratoriae*, figure qui suggère que le locuteur connaît et apprécie le *contexte* des locuteurs au moment de l'acte de communication.

1. Preliminaries

1.1. Persuasion in Political Speeches

Rhetoric is known as the art of persuading by speaking beautifully[1]. In the present paper I agree with Giambattista Vico's opinion that "**to persuade** is to instill in the listener conformity to the spirit of the oration so that the listener wills the same as that which the oration proposes."[2] It is worth pointing out that in this definition Vico does not refer to the orator, but to the oration

[1] *Cf.* Aristotle, **The Rhetoric**, Book I, Part 1 (http://graduate.gradsch.uga.edu/archive/Aristotle/Rhetoric_rhetoric.txt).

[2] Giambattista Vico, 1996, **The Art of Rhetoric**, GA: Rodopi, Amsterdam-Atlanta, p.5.

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only. One can assume that this definition shows its author's certainty that generally it is not the public speakers themselves that make up or write the speeches they deliver. Whether this is true or not is not of major significance here as it is not the actual speaker's works of mind that I am interested in this paper. To put it differently, what is relevant here is *the actual form of the speeches* and *the articulations of the mind* that *conceived* them. The orator's name, as well as the terms *locutor*, *speaker*, or *orator* is used for easier reference. It can also be argued, however, that once the form of a speech is approved of by a certain orator who actually delivers it, s/he holds full responsibility for its possible psychological and pragmatic implications as the recipients of such messages put the equal sign between the words they hear or read and the person who utters or signs them, respectively.

Taking Vico's definition a little further, the term **persuasion** may be considered to encompass three aspects: a **communicative** one, a **seductive** one, and an **inciting** one.[3] That is to say that in order to persuade orators have to communicate ideas, they have to seduce their audiences with the beauty of their words and mind, and, when appropriate, to incite them to action.

Political orators are known to have been some of the best manipulators of masses of people along the history of mankind, along with the religious ones. In order to manipulate or to influence people, the speeches they deliver combine the three above-mentioned components in various proportions.

There is no one best recipe for an effective speech: some inform more, others seduce more, and others aim to incite people to action. They are devised according to their **topic**, to the **place** of the event, to the **moment in time** when they are delivered, to the **type of audience** they are addressed, and last but not least, according to the **oratorical skills** of the speaker. Whereas the *communicative* aspect characterises all types of speeches, *seduction* and *incitement* describe those whose aim is to move both the

[3] *Cf.* Gheorghe Mihai, 1998, **Retorica traditionala si retorici moderne,** Editura ALL, Bucuresti, p.15.

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spirit and the emotions, namely, the manipulative ones. Thus, in my analysis I consider all three aspects, stressing especially on the last two ones.

The corpus of texts from which I draw my conclusions consists of a series of authentic[4] **political speeches**. They have been delivered by famous British and American politicians along the time and have been put on-line for public access.

In the present paper I avoid any judgmental evaluations, as it is not my intention to show how beneficial or harmful this social institution can be to the majority of people. The focus on the rhetorical and stylistic devices visible in the written form of these speeches aims at pointing out their persuasive undertones.

1.2. The Speaker's Audience-Awareness

Attracting the audience's benevolence from the outset has always been one of the most difficult tasks that orators have had to undertake in their art. The success or failure of their speeches depends to a great extent on their fame, their charismatic attitude and pleasant appearance, but the first words they utter in front of their listeners are crucial in this respect. Influencing people's thoughts, behaviour and actions, that is, *persuading*, *dissuading*, *seducing* or *inciting* them, always requires that these people should be sympathetic with the speaker and they should be attentive and receptive to the speech. If the people addressed sense from the very beginning that they are looked down upon by the speaker, or that their origins and the place they live in are underestimated, or even that the occasion on which the speech is delivered is of little value to the orator when they feel the opposite, then it is very likely that they should lose interest in what they are told. Consequently, if the speaker lacks what is generally called **audience-awareness**, he loses credibility. Once credibility jeopardised, he has to take great pains, if not in vain, to re-gain the audience's sympathy and to channel their attention and receptiveness to the speech.

[4] I.e. that have actually been delivered.

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1.3. Collateral Circumstances

In the majority of cases, whether they use any introductory formula or not, at the beginning of their speeches orators resort to a rhetorical device whose function is to show the audience that they are well anchored in the realities that they all face[5] – namely, the **collateral circumstances**, as Giambattista Vico calls it. In his *Art of Rhetoric*, he enumerates the **collateral circumstances of *place*, of *time*, of *issues*,** and **of *persons*.**[6]

Politicians use various aspects of this rhetorical device in their orations. A few examples of **collateral circumstances of place** are discussed in more detail in the subsequent section.

2. The Collateral Circumstances of Place

This rhetorical device aims at moving the audience's feeling of pride. The speakers *praise* the *beauty* and the *importance of the place* and show their *gratitude* for having been given the opportunity to deliver their speeches in *such locations.*

An illustrative example of this type has been taken from Margaret Thatcher's famous *Bruges Speech*:

1). "First, may I thank you for giving me the opportunity to return to *Bruges* […]

Second, may I say what a pleasure it is to speak at *the College of Europe* […] *The College* plays a vital and increasingly important part in the life of the European Community.

Third, may I also thank you for inviting me to deliver my address in *this magnificent hall*. What better place to speak of Europe's future than in a building which so gloriously recalls the greatness that Europe had already achieved 600 years ago?"[7] (my emphases)

Although notorious for her toughness and lack of sympathy for her fellow politicians who do not share her conservative views, Margaret Thatcher is a very skilful orator. She always knows how

[5] What was called, in 1.2., **the speaker's audience-awareness.**

[6] *Cf.* Giambattista Vico, **op. cit.**, p. 71.

[7] Margaret Thatcher, *Britain & Europe*, Bruges, 20 Sept. 1988 (http://www.eurocritic.demon.co.uk./mtbruges.htm).

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to touch the strings of her audience's souls by using the appropriate words.

In the exhortation[8] to the *Bruges Speech* she shows her oratorical skills; she proves that she has an organised mind by referring to the place she is in from three different perspectives, gradually arranged in her enumeration. First, she mentions *the city*, second, *the host institution*, and then *the hall* in which she is delivering her speech. In doing so, she gains the audience's goodwill by thanking, praising, marvelling – thanking for being given such an opportunity, praising the importance of the place, and implicitly that of the people there, marvelling at the greatness of the place and that of its people in the remote past.

Her linguistic competence is manifest in this excerpt especially in her choice of superlative constructions to describe the place, e. g. *a vital part*, *magnificent hall*, *what better place*. In addition, the positive meanings of the nouns *opportunity* and *pleasure*, the adverbs of manner that develop a superlative function modifying both adjectives and verbs, such as ***increasingly*** *important*, ***gloriously*** *recalls*, and the superlative tinge of the noun *greatness*, all account for her being very good at handling both words and people. Such a skilful use of language may seduce any kind of audience. Moreover, her listeners feel proud and important. By considering them important in the world today, as well as praising them for being not only Belgians, but also representative European citizens, the speaker attains one of her major goals: gaining their confidence and respect – the premises for an unhindered reception of the message from now on.

This device is employed in the next example, too, where the American speaker delivers her speech to the people of France. Therefore, she uses an introduction to her argumentation very similar to that used by Margaret Thatcher in the fragment above. The great stress that Anna Eleanor Roosevelt lays on the importance of the place in terms of its outstanding accomplishments of

[8] I.e. the opening part of the oration by which the audience is prepared to listen.

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the past instils a particular feeling of national pride in the listeners. This feeling, as already mentioned, seduces the audience:

2). "I have come this evening to talk with you on one of the greatest issues of our time – that is the preservation of human freedom. I have chosen to discuss it *here in France, at the Sorbonne,* because *here in this soil the roots of human freedom have long ago struck deep* and *here they have been richly nourished. It was here the Declaration of the Rights of Man was proclaimed,* and *the great slogans of the French Revolution – liberty, equality, fraternity* – fired the imagination of men. I have chosen to discuss this issue *in Europe* because *this has been the scene of the greatest historic battles between freedom and tyranny.*"[9] (my emphases)

In the next example Thomas Woodrow Wilson addresses the people in Pueblo, Colorado, insisting on the beauty of the place they all are in. Between this and the warm feeling he has about the people here he finds a very seductive connection that cannot but win the listener's goodwill, therefore their attention and receptiveness to his speech:

3). "[…] It is with *a great deal of genuine pleasure* that *I find myself in Pueblo,* and *I feel it a compliment in this beautiful hall.* One of the advantages of *this hall,* as I look about, is that *you are not too far away from me* […]."[10] (my emphases)

A shorter example of this kind belongs to Abraham Lincoln:

4). "*I am filled with deep emotion* at finding myself standing *here*, in *this place*, where we collected together *the wisdom, the patriotism, the devotion to principle,* from which sprang the institutions under which we live."[11] (my emphases)

[9] Anna Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Struggle for Human Rights*, 28 Sept.1948, France (http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/eleanorroosevelt.htm).

[10] Thomas Woodrow Wilson, *League of Nations Final Address*, 25 Sept. 1919, Pueblo Colorado (http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/wilson leagueofnations.htm).

[11] Abraham Lincoln, *Address in the Independence Hall*, 22 Feb. 1861, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/philadel.htm).

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Here the speaker transmits to his listeners the same deep emotion that he feels both by expressing his own feelings directly and by implying why this place is so special to him. The Declaration of Independence – which is metaphorically called by the name of the intellectual and moral values all Americans believe in: *wisdom, patriotism, devotion to principle* – was signed in the same place. As those present identify themselves with their forerunners who are said to have possessed the high intellectual and moral values that Lincoln refers to, their feelings of pride and self-esteem are stimulated. Therefore, his message is received with maximum attention. What is also special about this fragment is Abraham Lincoln's conciseness of expression: in a very few words he expresses what other speakers, some of those mentioned above included, do in more numerous and longer sentences.

After thanking, in her introductory formula, those present for the warm welcome, Barbara Pierce Bush refers to the beauty and the spirit of the college she is delivering her speech at:

5). "[…] More than ten years ago, when I was invited here to talk about our experiences in the People's Republic of China, I was struck by both *the natural beauty of your campus* and *the spirit of this place*.

Wellesley, you see, *is not just a place but an idea – an experiment in excellence in which diversity is not just tolerated, but is embraced.*"[12] (my emphases)

After greeting those present and thanking President Pitzer for having given him the opportunity to lecture at their college as a visiting professor, John F. Kennedy declares:

6). "I am delighted to be *here* and I'm particularly delighted to be *here* on this occasion.

We meet *at* ***a college*** *noted for knowledge, in* ***a city*** *noted for progress, in* ***a state*** *noted for strength* […]."[13] (my emphases)

[12] Barbara Pierce Bush, *1990 Wellesley College Commencement Address*, 1 June 1990 (http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barbarabushwellesley commencement.htm).

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The stylistic mark of this fragment, with evident seductive rhetorical effects, is rendered by the three symmetric constructions linked asyndetically:

*"at a" + **PLACE** + "noted for" + intellectual and social **VALUES**.*

The three **PLACE** coordinates, *college – city – state,* that are arranged in an ascending order of importance[14] directly related to the gradual increase in the size of the places referred to, attract the same gradual increasing ordering of the **VALUES** related to each of them, respectively: *knowledge – progress – strength.* In a rather short statement, the locutor manages to render many meanings, stressing in only a few words the idea that the listeners are valuable citizens of the whole country of which he himself is very proud.

All the preceding fragments illustrate the most common ways in which politicians speak highly of the place they deliver their speech in. In the next example, the last in this section, the tone of praise and admiration is replaced by vehemence against a place where the human rights and values are disregarded and disrespected by its inhabitants:

7). "*Washington, D.C., has been called «The Colored Man's Paradise»"*. Whether this sobriquet was given to *the national capital* in bitter irony by a member of the handicapped race, as he reviewed some of his own persecutions and rebuffs, or whether it was given immediately after the war by an ex-slaveholder who for the first time in his life saw colored people walking about like free men, minus the overseer and his whip, history saith not. It is certain that it would be difficult to find a worse misnomer for *Washington* than "The Colored Man's Paradise" if so prosaic a consideration as veracity is to determine the appropriateness of a name."[15] (my emphases)

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[13] John F. Kennedy, *We Choose to Go to the Moon*, 12 Sept. 1962 (http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/jfk-space.htm).

[14] This figure of speech is known as **auxesis.** *Cf.* Chris Baldick's **Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms,** Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 22.

[15] Mary Church Terrell, *What It Means to be Colored in the Capital of the U.S.*, 10 October 1906.

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The **collateral circumstances of place** device in this excerpt is only a pretext for the speaker to introduce a very serious issue of the time: that of racist discrimination among the people of the same country. It is clear that the place is mentioned here only to highlight the seriousness of this issue and to refer to the lack of consistency in its people's adopting and defending the democratic values. This is to say that this device combines here with that of collateral circumstances of issues and of persons in a very elaborate manner.

There should also be noted that the style of the speaker is rather complex: the vocabulary contains words rarely used, including words of French origin (e.g. *sobriquet, handicapped, misnomer*), the long and complex sentence in the middle begins with a conditional subordinate clause and ends with the main one between which other several conditional, comment and relative clauses are inserted (*Whether…, as…, or whether…who…, history saith not*), this sentence is preceded by a most simple clause (*Washington, D.C., has been called "The Colored Man's Paradise"*) and it is followed by another less complex sentence, the passive voice is used as a way of avoiding to name those responsible for such an inconceivable situation (*has been called, was given*). All these discursive features describe a minutely elaborated style, characteristic of a speaker with visible oratorical skills, in a period of time when such a carefully built discourse was still highly cultivated in order to be distinguished from the everyday speech, considered inappropriate in public speeches.

3. Conclusion

Throughout this paper I pointed out the importance of the **collateral circumstances of place** rhetorical device that is often used by politicians at the beginning of their speeches. I also stressed on the psychological implications – especially the cognitive and the emotional ones – that such a device has for the audience.

The listeners' benevolence, their receptiveness and attention to the speech are essential to all orators if they intend to exert any influence upon the masses of people. By showing concern and

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respect for their power of understanding by speaking clearly and beautifully from the outset, orators stimulate their audience's cognitive and emotional reception of the message. Consequently their words persuade and seduce.

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