

The art of rhetoric

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Politicians know they have to shape the debate and that well-honed phrases win votes as headlines sell papers. A phrase can contain a whole political philosophy. 'Social mobility' for instance implies poverty and wealth are conditions that one family could move between while 'income inequality' suggests they are different families in fixed and opposing classes to be brought together by redistribution.

You may with Plato deplore the art of oratory making right wrong and wrong seem right. In *Gorgias*, he calls it a branch of the art of flattery like a cookery that makes unwholesome dishes taste good. But if you ever thought you saw a truth and wanted to carry others with you, you might also conclude that truth to be heard needs the assistance of art. The sound-bite is sometimes blamed for overshadowing the context in which it was said but how else can even a good cause communicate? Don't die of ignorance. A dog is for life not just for Christmas ...

This is the latest field of literary enquiry to which Mark Forsyth turns his attention. Bestselling author of 'The Etymologicon', writer, blogger and journalist with a special interest in words, Mark says he is someone who would love to live in a world where there was a word meaning 'to sit idly gazing at a canal'. And there is – it's gongoozle. His latest book 'The Elements of Eloquence' wittily explains 40 or so forms and devices from the rhetorical system of the ancient Greeks.

Events dear boy events

Callaghan never actually said his iconic phrase, it was invented by a Sun headline writer, but it is a classic example of *diacope* repetition split by another word. Much loved and used by Shakespeare: Juliet's 'Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo', Hamlet's 'villain, villain, smiling damned villain!' and of course 'To be or not to be'. But from the sublime to other *diacopes* we get 'Bond, James Bond', 'Mud, mud glorious mud' and 'Love me, love me say that you love me!'

Since JFK said 'Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country,' *chiasmus* has become a staple of US presidential speeches. Kennedy also said 'Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.' and 'Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind' Bill Clinton reckoned 'People the world over have always been more impressed by the power of our example than by the example of our power' and his wife added 'In the end, the true test is not the speeches a president delivers; it's whether the

president delivers on the speeches'. 'You stood up for America. Now America must stand up for you'. Mark notes this latter *chiasmus* of Obama in fact reverses the substance of Kennedy's original!

When Churchill intoned: "We shall fight on the beaches" a series of places were launched with a repeating opening phrase. Rousing, memorable ... but how many can you list? They were: France, the seas and oceans, the air, the beaches, the landing grounds, the fields and the streets, ending "we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender." It was in fact a description of retreat and defeat. But the thing about *anaphora* is it is the repeating first phrase that we mostly recall. That may be exactly what Mr Churchill wanted each individual to carry away in his heart. Elsewhere it has been noted that this long sentence used only Old English derived words – except the final 'surrender' which is French.

Vanity and vexation

Ecclesiastes ch 3 juxtaposes opposites. 'To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven; a time to be born and a time die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up ...' etc a *progressio* of 14 *antitheses*. 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times', Dickens famous opening to his Tale of Two Cities continues 'it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness ...etc' modestly breaking off after 7 *antitheses* to mock 'superlative degrees of comparison'. The form is alive and well. And has sold 5m downloads of Katy Perry's 'Hot N Cold': it has 8 from 'you're hot then you're cold. You're yes then you're no' to 'We fight we break up. We kiss we make up ...'.

In *synaesthesia* one sense is described in terms of another. *Catachresis* drops in something startlingly wrong. And there are many more all with beautiful names like *Hendiadys* and *Anaphora* and many too beautiful or complicated to explain.

But some are dead simple. If the AABA of *diacope* is simple enough, nothing could be simpler than *alliteration*. Ariel's 'full fathom five thy father lies' so bitter sweet. For some reason 'f' *alliteration* is specially evocative. *Alliteration* was ubiquitous in 1960s politics: 'Burn the bra', 'Ban the bomb' and 'Power to the people'. Is there a common thread of leftishness? Is there a touch of Orwell's chilling recipe for moving the masses with slogans: 'Four legs good! Two legs bad!'

Parataxis is simple, punchy, journalistic short sentences. Favoured by Orwell. English at its most natural – without conjunctions. *Hypotaxis* the opposite has



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trails of subordinate clauses. *Epizeuxis* is repetition. Thatcher's 'No. No. No.' to the European project. And her protégé Blair's 'Weak! Weak! Weak!' that destroyed John Major in the Commons. And his famous 'Education. Education. Education.'

A coalition of the unspun?

From their three years in government not a single memorable line has come out of the coalition Mark notes. 'Hug a hoodie' was more News of the World than Cameron. The soundbite is seen as too New Labour and the coalition prefers to come across as 'unspun'. Which Mark Forsyth regards as just another form of spin. But perhaps the Labour movement has always been more comfortable with PR *agit-prop* than Tories and Liberals. They harness it in their ad campaigns: 'Labour isn't working' (a *veridical paradox* apparently) but perhaps their supporters expect full sentences?

The field of rhetoric is wide. As Mark says it covers the whole art of persuasion – from the use of hand gestures, to the structures of logical proof, to dilemmas, and even to *argumentum ad baculum* – beating your protagonist with a stick until he agrees with you. Mark's special interest is in the ordering of words. He claims to have no comment on content or substance but only that playing with word order makes the beautiful and memorable. Of Truth and Beauty Mr Forsyth clearly holds Beauty the nobler or at least more effective. He repeatedly insists we will be governed by form. Yet in another moment reflecting on the utility of these (beautiful) Greek names for forms he concludes that to have a name for a thing is to have power over it, which is why, he says, the name of God was not to be spoken but became written cryptically in Hebrew YHWH. Jehova. Yahweh. But what could be more deeply meaningful? Or mysterious. A brilliantly concise *diacope* that reaches for the essence of the Absolute in the Abrahamic religions. Its translation in English 'I am that am' seems to conjure the Eastern religion's absolute Self and Western Philosophy's great question of identity. Isn't superficial beauty of words a leader to a deeper beauty in meaning? And is that not a place, as Jane Mason put it, words can take us toward but not to?

See Mark's blog inkyfool.com