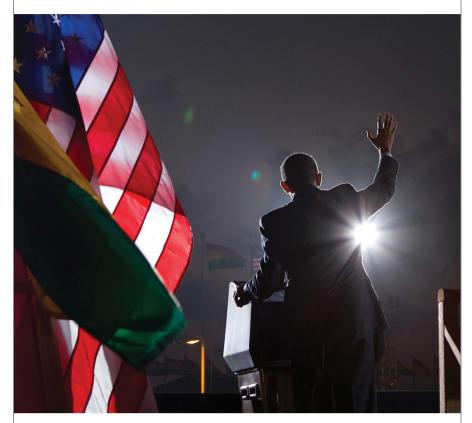# Speeches and speech-making

Speeches and speech-making

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Introduction

The terms 'voice' and 'text' are multifaceted. Both have a wide range of possible meanings in everyday speech and academic usage. You may encounter the two words used in a variety of ways, in connection with different subjects, and they won't always mean exactly the same thing. In the following sections we will explore the shifting meanings and associations of 'voice' and 'text', and then examine the way the two terms come together in a particular kind of language use: speeches and speech-making.

One of the best ways to uncover the various meanings of concepts like 'voice' and 'text' is through engaging in activities where you can see the terms being used, and this is what we are about to do.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 1 study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- demonstrate an understanding of some fundamental aspects of rhetoric
- demonstrate skills of textual analysis
- appreciate the importance of audience in relation to speech-making.

1 Voice

Having said that the word 'voice' is multifaceted, it might be helpful now to differentiate between some of these usages. As a first step, we can distinguish between literal and metaphorical usages. A metaphor is a type of figurative language that describes one thing by comparing it to another thing. We find explicit forms of comparison in similes, which include words such as 'like' or 'as'. But metaphors omit the 'like' or 'as' stage, and foreground the common qualities of the things compared in a way that is sometimes striking, but sometimes so 'natural' as to be unremarkable.

When we are reading poetry, we may be more self-consciously on the alert for figurative language in general, and thus metaphors specifically. For example, D.H. Lawrence, evoking an Italian evening in his poem 'Bat', refers to 'the tired flower of Florence' (Muldoon, 1997, p. 95); in comparing the city to a flower he implies a shared quality of beauty, and perhaps also – more unexpectedly – fragility.

But everyday language is full of metaphor, too. When we talk about 'the leg of a table' or a 'branch of an organisation', we are using metaphors probably without noticing them, because they have become such familiar elements in our language. 'Voice' is often used in this everyday, metaphorical sense. We'll pause on this point so that you can consider it for yourself.

Activity 1

In each of the sentences below, decide whether the word 'voice' is used literally or metaphorically:

- (a) He spoke in a soft, soothing voice.
- (b) The members spoke with one voice in rejecting the new proposal.
- (c) Tenor voices are in short supply in our local choir.
- (d) We were startled by the sudden voice of thunder.
- (e) I had a bad bout of laryngitis and lost my voice.
- (f) I took a creative writing course and found my voice.

Discussion

When we're trying to pin down literal uses of the word 'voice', we're on the lookout for meanings where a connection with sounds and vocal organs is not too far away. Sentence (a) fits this requirement clearly, and so does (e). I've also included sentence (c) in my list of literal usages, although 'voice' here is acquiring a more specialised musical sense.

What about sentences (b), (d) and (f)? Noticing the reference to speech in sentence (b), we might be inclined to think that 'voice' is used literally here, too. But since people (plural) can't actually speak with one voice (singular), I think we're in the realms of comparison: several or many people are speaking as if they just have one voice between them – that is, unanimously. In sentence (d) we have a clear connection with sound – but this particular sound isn't produced through vocal organs, so I'd choose metaphorical rather than literal for the 'voice of thunder'. That leaves us with sentence (f), and here 'voice' seems to be related to expressing oneself in writing rather than through speech, so again the usage seems more metaphorical than literal.

There is much more that could be said about voices in the literal sense, including the way that they convey individuality, but for now we will continue to explore different usages of 'voice' by turning our attention to metaphorical usage.

Activity 2

Think for a moment about the list of phrases below. Some of them may be familiar, some unfamiliar. Starting from what you know, or might guess, about the phrases, can you spot any links or common features? (If you are a keen internet user, and have time to dot his, you might try typing any of the unfamiliar ones into a search engine to see what comes up.)

(a) The voice of the people

(b) Vox populi

(c) The voice of the oppressed

(d) The Voice of America

(e) American Voice.

Discussion

'The voice of the people' is a widely used phrase in which 'voice' generally means the expressed opinion – often a political opinion – of a group of people viewed as a united whole.

'Vox populi' is the Latin version of 'voice of the people'. We often hear it in its abbreviated form, 'vox pop' – a broadcasting term used to refer to interviews with the general public, or the 'man/woman in the street'. Both these phrases, like sentence (b) in the previous activity, attribute a single voice to a group of people; although 'vox pop' interviews present us with individuals, they are usually anonymous, seen as representatives of 'the people' in general.

The same idea of 'representation' crops up in phrase (c), 'the voice of the oppressed'. This is a more specialised phrase that we might find in certain kinds of political writings, sometimes in variant versions such as 'a voice for the oppressed' or 'giving voice to the oppressed'. The difference here is that 'the oppressed' are usually conceived of as not having voices, so someone else must speak for them, or create the conditions in which they can be heard.

Some of you may have recognised 'The Voice of America' as the name of the official radio and television broadcasting service of the United States government. 'American Voice' is also the name of a radio network, a self-styled alternative to the government's service.

In phrases (d) and (e) the concept of 'voice' is very firmly linked to broadcast media, as well as to a political context. Political and/or media associations have cropped up in all our examples here, suggesting that the idea of 'voice' has considerable potency in relation to representation, rights of expression and means of expression.

2 Text

I have focused on some common and widely understood meanings of the term 'voice'. We'll approach the multifaceted term 'text' in a slightly different way.

Activity 3

Invent a few sentences that include the word 'text' or 'texts', varying the meaning with each example. Aim to produce four or five sentences before you go on to read the discussion below.

Discussion

When I tried this activity, I found myself preoccupied with questions about length. Perhaps this was because the first two examples that came into my mind were radically different: one was the text message from a friend that popped up in my mobile phone's inbox today, about a dozen words in length, and the other was the Charles Dickens novel *Hard Times*, about 300 pages long, that is sitting on my desk. Did your examples also span an enormous range in terms of size? What other variations emerged? And did any of your examples take you outside the realm of writing/written words?

'Text' is certainly a term that we encounter frequently in an academic context. My example of Dickens's novel illustrates the fact that in literary studies, people are forever talking about texts. Historians, though, are more likely to refer to original writings as 'documents' or 'sources'. In both areas, 'text' refers to something written, and this is often, though by no means always, the case.

So let us try coming at the issue from a different angle and ask what counts as a text in relation to different academic subjects. The most inclusive approach I can think of is that of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who viewed cultural practices – any cultural practices – as texts: in his essay 'Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight' he laid claim to a very generous interpretation of 'text' in asserting that 'the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts' (Geertz, 1975, p. 452). Even if we narrow the range of possibilities to rule out cock-fighting and other activities, we often find things that have been made, though not made from words, being studied as texts on academic courses.

It is perfectly appropriate, in certain contexts, to refer to buildings, paintings and many other kinds of objects, as 'texts'. But very often the texts we study in academic courses are made of words, and for the most part those words are written.

3 Speeches and speech-making

To round off this initial exploration of our key terms, we will look at an aspect of language use where voices and texts converge. The ancient art of rhetoric, in which a speaker employs eloquent devices to achieve persuasive effects, was an important element of a university education in the Middle Ages, and it is still very much alive today in the public sphere. Speeches by figures such as politicians are usually carefully crafted affairs, designed to be spoken, but relying on a written script. Analysing the construction of a speech, and its manner of delivery, can give interesting insights into the techniques of rhetoric, but what matters most of all in any situation where a speech is being made is the audience. The audience, and therefore the context for and the purpose in speaking, will shape not only what is said, but how it is said.

The idea of 'audience' is, of course, crucial in any form of communication, and as you work through this course you will frequently be thinking about the audiences (or readers) for written texts. But for the purposes of the next activity we will move away from the printed page so that we can listen to some examples of famous speeches, and begin to analyse their effects.

Listen to the following audio, 'Speeches and speech-making', and then answer the questions below.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Speeches and speech-making

Question 1

Rhetoric is usually defined as:

- ○ a) the art of the possible.
- ○ b) the art of persuading and pleasing people.
- ○ c) the art of prediction.

Answer

a) It is usually politics, not rhetoric, that is described as 'the art of the possible', a saying attributed to a nineteenth-century German statesman, Bismarck.

b) The art of persuading and pleasing people is the definition used in the audio piece.

c) Since rhetoric is designed to persuade people, it is sometimes concerned with future actions, but prediction is not necessarily associated with rhetoric.

Question 2

Which of the following claims about the relationship between a good orator and his/her audience are made in the audio piece?

- ☐ a) Making an emotional connection between speaker and audience is a good strategy.
- ☐ b) Rhetoric only works if the speaker and audience are already in agreement.
- ☐ c) A degree of ambiguity in a speaker's words can be effective because it allows the audience to make their own interpretations.

Answer

a) This claim is made in the audio piece with reference to Earl Spencer's eulogy (12:49 – 14:40, from 'Making an emotional connection ...' to 'on both counts he succeeded').

b) This is not a claim being made here. While it can be helpful for a speaker to have 'supporters' in the audience, one of the purposes of rhetoric is to persuade people or make them change their minds, so it is not necessary for speaker and audience to be in agreement from the outset.

c) This claim is made in the audio piece with reference to the extract from Tony Blair's speech (11:32 – 12:00, from 'One example of this ...' to 'and yet that shows empathy').

Question 3

Read the following extract from the speech made by Barack Obama in Grant Park, Illinois, on 4 November 2008, after winning the American presidential election. Then identify examples of the following rhetorical techniques:

    a) the rule of three

    b) imagery

    c) contrast.

Use the box beneath the extract to record your thoughts.

Extract from Barack Obama's speech at Grant Park on 4 November 2008

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.

…

It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled – Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been a collection of Red States and Blue States: we are, and always will be, the United States of America.

It's the answer that led those who have been told for so long by so many to be cynical, and fearful, and doubtful of what we can achieve to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day.

It's been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America.

Provide your answer...

Answer

a) The first paragraph of this extract uses three balanced clauses beginning with 'who still' (doubts/wonders/questions).

b) There is a good example of imagery in the third paragraph of the extract, where Obama uses the metaphor of history as an arc that can be bent.

c) The second paragraph of the extract contains plentiful examples of contrast: 'young and old'; 'rich and poor'; 'Democrat and Republican'; etc.

Conclusion

We said earlier that looking at speeches and speech-making would allow us to see the ideas of 'voice' and 'text' converging. Let's review the 'voice' element first.

Since a speech is, by definition, a form of oral communication, the speaker's voice is a key component in the process, both literally and metaphorically. At a metaphorical level, anyone who makes a speech is articulating a particular, individual point of view, so their ideas and opinions are in a sense embodied in their voice. At a literal level, the actual sounds, pace, rhythm, dynamics and expression in a speaker's voice all have an effect on the listeners and contribute to the effects of a speech.

But a speech is also a text that has usually (though not always) been written down. Even in apparently impromptu examples, such as the powerful speech of the miner's wife selected by Tony Benn in the audio piece, we notice that the words have been crafted to achieve particular effects. Like written texts, speeches are *composed*, often using the tried and tested devices of classical rhetoric. Sometimes the real speech-writer may be an anonymous figure standing in the shadow of a famous orator who actually delivers the speech – but if the speech is to sound authentic, listeners need to be persuaded that there is no gap between composition and delivery.

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