

## Enough said: What's gone wrong with the language of politics? (A review)

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Mark Thompson has had a stellar career in media journalism and administration, as former Executive Director of Channel 4, in the BBC as Director General and currently the New York Times, where he serves as Chief Executive Officer. His journalistic career has encompassed the huge acceleration of news through the introduction of the 24-hour news cycle with the speeding up of communication through the Internet and the explosion of outlets with the proliferation of news channels via satellite and the emergence of blogs, vlogs and other online communications. This acceleration has actually affected the style of language and how it is presented. Headlines are shortened to fit the rolling footer at the base of your newscasting TV screen. If a concept can be presented in two words so that it communicates well on Twitter then it may be used to create an impact even if it oversimplifies or even falsifies the story it is intended to present. Practical insights

into how journalism and media work is one of the valuable lessons of 'Enough Said' but far more important is the argument and philosophy behind the book. 'Enough Said' is about the art of rhetoric, the ability to persuade your listeners and readers through the power of language.

*'It is through an effective public language that average citizens can both understand and contribute to important questions and issues of the state. It is for this reason that rhetoric was considered so important in both Greek and Roman cultures,' – Thomas writes.*

Rhetoric can be defined as the language of explanation and persuasion. It enables collective decision making to take place and the mastery of public language creates power, as the great political orators, such as Churchill have demonstrated.

For Thompson, the originator of rhetoric as a political art was Aristotle. In the 'Art of Rhetoric' Aristotle distinguished between two forms of discourse – dialectic (argument) and antistrophos (rhetoric). Aristotle divided rhetoric into three core qualities:

1. LOGOS (pure argument)
2. ETHOS (the social standing of the speaker)
3. PATHOS (the ability of the speaker to connect with the audience)

As part of pathos Aristotle also introduced one more quality AUXEXIS, defined as Amplification, the ability to heighten or exaggerate what you say for effect.

Thompson's thesis, as indeed was Thucydides on ancient Athens and Callust on ancient Rome, is that the decline in the quality of public language in the media in politics leads to distrust between the citizenry and its leaders and to the decline of democracy through a descent into demagoguery. *'A healthy public language,'* he writes *'knits public and political leaders together and precisely because it succeeds in drawing ordinary citizens into the debate, ultimately leads to better and more widely supported policy decisions. When public language loses its power to explain and engage, it threatens the broader bond between people and politicians.'*

As an example of how Aristotle's three qualities

work Thompson cites the former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, nicknamed 'the Iron Lady'. According to Thompson, Mrs Thatcher as a trained lawyer was excellent on LOGOS (argument) but was perceived to lack ETHOS (empathy). She saw her 'Iron Lady' image as a strength. In fact, according to Thompson, it was a flaw in rhetoric.

As a broadcaster, Thompson is especially interesting on how language and media interact. Broadcasters look for what are called 'sync-bites' (US – 'soundbites'), short sequences with sound and vision. These are short snappy extracts from a speech, one which is headline grabbing and one more substantive. His comparison of UK and US news requirements is revealing (he worked as a news broadcast producer in both countries). US news broadcasts tend to be shorter, tend to focus more on double shots than single focus on the speaker, would use one soundbite per speaker rather than up to three for the British and would run shorter sequences of thirty to forty-five seconds rather than a minute or more in the UK. This leads to shortened and simplified news and compressed and intensified information. The effect is to achieve immediacy and relevance but at the possible cost of superficiality, distortion and error as TV coverage is compressed into seconds.

The emergence of the 24-hour news and 24/7 news updates introduced by CNN in the 1980s

and spread worldwide through the Internet in the 90s means that the language of news broadcasting has increasingly permeated how we write and speak about world events in the press in the media and in 'citizen journalism.'

A further development in news manipulation is the development of 'spin'. Spin was originally an American English media term used to describe an off-the-record briefing by government or management. Now it is used as a way of manipulating news or even burying bad news by publishing it in the shadow of a major news story. One of the most egregious examples of this was an email sent by a British Labour government adviser who, on the day of the attack on the twin towers in New York, remembered worldwide as 9/11, sent an email saying, *'It is now a very good day to get anything out we want to bury.'* Needless to say, she did not continue long in her post.

The latest development in news manipulation in the 21st century is the use of big data to obtain statistical information derived from social psychology and behavioural economics to drive policy presentation. In other words, to manipulate the way in which new policies are put forward to match what the public would like to hear (algorithmically selected) rather than what actually needs to be said. Nothing new here, you may say, but what Thompson emphasises is that the 24-hour news cycle, the huge choice of media made

available by digital technology and the acceleration of news access via the Internet has led to a political language characterised by the briefest of soundbites, the bluntest of posters and delivering only the broadest of messages. As Thompson says, Silicon Valley engineers see news as organic. They think consumers want headlines and summaries put together from different sources and prioritised by algorithms, sometimes but not always tempered by editorial judgement.

Returning to Aristotle, in Thompson's view public language has moved from LOGOS (the facts and the argument) to ETHOS (the personality of the news giver) and PATHOS (the ability to tell the public what it wants to hear rather than the truth). Presidents Reagan and Clinton, in Thompson's view, were past masters at ethos and pathos, as is to some extent Donald Trump. Not only the UK and the US but other countries as well also involve themselves in the same strategies to publicise news.

One of the most interesting debates around the use of ethos and pathos as the most effective conveyors of information and adaptation of language to convey is the issue of 'authenticism', looking and sounding as if you really mean what you say even if you don't. The Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler is cited as an example of a speaker who fused ethos and pathos to give his speeches an image of authenticism. Most dangerous is the

concept of 'manufactured authenticity', the image of the speaker manipulated to give credence to his or her words. Using narratives about 'our community' and 'my struggle is your struggle' are tactics used, and Thompson, amusingly but worryingly cites the spin doctor's playbook on how to relax in front of a TV camera. Roll up your sleeves, lose the tie (if you're a man), show visible concern, sometimes a flash of anger, move around a bit but always remember the shotlist – where you are supposed to stand so that the audience can see that there is an audience you are addressing. It is an environment in which ethos and pathos act against logos. The British will not forget the advice of the Brexiteers leading up to the decision to leave the European Union in June 2016. 'Don't listen to the experts'; the denial of logos.

Is there an answer? Thompson feels that there is an urgent need to balance the three Aristotelian qualities of logos, ethos and pathos and to let the facts speak and the issues to be argued. He points to the culture of suspicion, if not mistrust, which extends towards politicians and, to a degree, the media. But there are dangers. As Thompson puts it, *'Argument without character is lifeless. The crowds drift away. Character without argument is dangerous.'* An audience needs to use both its logical and emotional faculties to accept an argument.

So, what advice does Thompson offer presenters

and especially politicians?

First, is to be aware that emotive problems, buried for ideological reasons tend to recur, such as immigration, inequality and cultural differences.

Second is to watch spin. When it was nameless it was useful but now it can be tracked back to you and your spin can rebound to your disadvantage.

Third, your audience needs to feel that you are human. Always try to look and sound like a real person. Polished, disciplined control may be counterproductive.

Fourth, amplification (Aristotle's *auxesis*) may be useful, especially to provide clarity, crispness and short news headlines.

Fifth, think pathos. Think of your audience. Many successful presenters are able to 'read the sea ahead' and recognise the needs of their audience on the day.

Above all, he advises, hold on to investigative reporting. It is expensive and time consuming but properly done it exposes injustice and can improve lives. This imposes responsibilities on today's media and press.

First, it is important to reject perspectivism, the reliance on a single point of view. Report facts and

avoid both conscious and unconscious bias in reporting and interviewing.

Second, in interviewing don't just be inquisitorial. Allow space for explanation.

Third, using BEXBOS (brief expositions of background to a story) to explain situations is fine but always distinguish clearly between objective news reporting, features and opinion pieces.

Finally avoid *'accidie or sloth, losing grip on the real meaning of words and actions and tailoring to what the audience expects. There is a danger that the language of reporting has become 'marketing*

*speak'* according to Thompson.

This review has focused primarily on Thompson's analysis and views on how to improve media literacy, an important field of language and communication study but the book also contains fascinating information on the development of basic English, including writer and broadcaster, George Orwell's criticisms of the use of English and a highly enjoyable and informative review of advertising language, including 'Don't sell the steak, sell the sizzle' from a 1937 book on advertising by Elmer Wheeler and his phrase that sold a million gallons of gasoline back in the day, 'Shall I fill it up?'