

## **Winning with Words**

### An Argumentative and Rhetoric Approach to Persuasion in Mass Communication

Petra Aczél

As Ernie Kovacs put it, “television is undoubtedly a medium, as it is not rare but not yet well done, either” (Briggs and Burke 2004: 235). Mass media and communication is of this species, something not rare but not yet well done. The consumer has to chew, digest the message and then feel relaxed, fulfilled and renewed, that is: perceive, understand, accept and finally – following the traces – move into the direction of the hinted and suggested opinion and behaviour.

According to H. Lasswell and Charles Wright, functions of mass communication are surveillance, correlation, cultural transmission, entertainment and mobilization. Among the tasks of mass media and the phenomena attached to it we should list the following ones:

- It is an arena, a virtual place where things happen. We may wonder whether things could happen outside this place, or this place is the reason for, stimulus for why things, events really occur.
- It is the creator, founder, and adjuster of norms, definitions and images of reality, values, virtues and desires.
- It is the source of meanings for the publicity.
- It is the owner of public speech.
- It is the area of social life and significant issues.
- It is the very source of social and personal power, a device of persuasion and manipulation, the mover of mind and soul.

Moving the soul and mind, creating an atmosphere where the ‘meeting of minds’ (Perelman 1982: 11) is successfully (virtually) done, is the topic of persuasion.

Persuasion is originally a notion of rational argumentation and emotional style. It is the effect of *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*: that of the *ratio*,

the character of the speaker and the aesthetics of style. Persuasion is an intention of the transmitting to produce a common spirit and mind in the audience. It is a detected fact of social psychology and it is to be defined as the restructuring of mind with rational and emotional elements. It is significant to point at the word ‘restructuring’ for it is not the news that moves the audience to feel a common whole, persuasion offers a new order, a new structure of information and thus orients but is not newsworthy.

The third core notion of ours now is the text: a functional unit into which the persuasive effect was coded; the process made up of logical, ethical and pathetic elements.

All these notions above, mass communication, persuasion and text, can be rooted back to the classical science of rhetoric. The science that has been handled narrowly in Hungarian linguistics for decades has enabled the offering of theory and method to generate and code persuasion into texts in order to gain power, and to move the souls and minds of the public. According to this, the three facets of rhetoric are text as the corpus, persuasion as function and effect and mass communication as its appearance.

How is persuasive strength encoded into the text, and how is it performed acceptably through media appearance? Persuasion is built up by the classical structure and order of the text. We are usually taught to view texts as forms of differentiated contents, to see parts of texts forming and reforming the same global and linear meaning. Nevertheless, texts as functional units, even pieces of news, are structured upon intention offering a pre-context and a post-context to our understanding. In the case of news, “news organising”, “news structure”, “order of importance” devices, can be mentioned (Antal, Gázsó and Kubínyi 2005).

Classical text organisation as a scheme, agenda was established in the classic Greek and made definite in the Roman silver age and no other structure has proved to be more effective since then. The structure is made up of seven parts, resolving the archetypical frame of introduction–discussion–ending into a more detailed form. The first three parts (*printipium*, *narratio*, *digressio*) serve as motivation, the second three parts (*propositio*, *argumentatio*, *refutatio*) function as presentation and the final passage (peroration) is there to end up with the suggestion of application to the receiver.

Persuasion research has long focused on the paradigm of attitude change. According to the models of these theories, attitude consists of beliefs about the attitude objects, each belief having some associated evaluation representing the perceived desirability of the attribute. The strategy to change one’s attitude has to take several important elements of the

circumstances, the context, the receiver's self esteem, the sender's authenticity and, naturally, the message, the text itself into account.

The text, however, has a significant role in the process of attitude change. It is the element that activates all elements in order to sum them up to move into the desired direction, the targeted attitude object. The message itself is built up to stimulate and reflect the stages of attitude change. Perception is changed by the very beginning and the short narration of a text (1); affiliation is modified by the digression, the telling of a personal narrative, a story (2); opinion is altered by argumentation and the logical forms of premises in it (3); and, finally, action is changed through the elevated end of a well structured text (4).

Numerous other theories (voluntary action, persuasion theories, variable oriented research) were born and are existent beside and together with the research of attitude change. Petty and Cacioppo's ELM (elaboration likelihood model) is a model of dual process in persuasion. One route to persuasion depends upon issue-relevant thinking, the degree of elaboration; thus on the sequence of arguments. The other is called peripheral route being dependant upon the communicator's credibility, likeability and the others' reaction to the same message. The former, central route is identified by the structure of argumentation, the core of the rhetorical text.

Argumentation or confirmation provides texts with a message of strength. We may argue with examples, signs and arguments in the narrow sense. When defining the latter, we all may face the difficulty to say what an argument really is and what the *differentia specificas* are. To put it simply, an argument is the strong statement of a text. In different genres of mass communication information is presented in a frame and it inevitably orientates at the same time. Facts and data as cores of information are presented as parts of reality, their credibility is gained not from what they really are, but from the pragmatic context of presentation. Therefore the 'fact' of the persuasive text is the argument. An argument can be a verbal unit, either a sentence, utterance, or a coherent sequence of them which does not need any further verification.

On what basis are arguments built? Aristotle stated that statements of common truth (*gnome*), signs necessarily pointing at a certain meaning (*tekmerion*), probabilities (*eikon*) and allusions (*semeion*) can be basic units of arguments and argument structures. These elements resemble certain phenomena in mass communication such as stereotype reduction and heuristics.

Where does the argument, the verified statement gain its truth from? Some theories emerged endeavouring to give a relevant answer to this question.

- The **foundationalist** approach presumes that in each verified argument there is an aggregation of primary statements that serves as the basis of the argument built upon it. These primary statements are axiomatic, acquired from experience. The founding statements assign a tautological point over which no explanation can reach: “Just because”. These are the foundational claims. In mass media we often here commercial slogans of this foundational type, which seem to be sensible but turn out to be tautological: “*Because you deserve it*”, “*Very-very*”, “*Just because*” (Alston, 1993).
- The theory of **verification** introduces the practice of argument validation that is based upon the structure of the argument itself. An argument is confirmed when it does not contradict anything assumed and is known to be true and it is faultless structurally, too (Brown, 1998).
- **Instrumentalists** reckon that a statement is true when it accomplishes the outlined aim attached to it, and it is false if it does not. The aim, the target of the statement has to be identified and has to be of sufficient value to validate and justify the attention directed towards the statement, the argument (Toulmin, 1953). Verifiers to support the argument can be explicit (citational, common knowledge, personal background, procedural and demonstrative verifiers), and implicit cues (sincerity, emphasis, credibility, accuracy, confirmation cues) (Adamik, Jászó and Aczél, 2004: 330–332).
- The approach of **conventionalism** supposes that valid statements are designated by commonly established features of proprieties, such as simplicity, elegance, reliability, clarity, and digression.
- **Social relativism** and **determinism**, however, think that a statement is true as the operating element of society.

According to foundationalists, the statement can be true in and about itself. Instrumentalists claim that an argument is true if it offers an effective instruction on how to act. Conventionalism, social relativism and determinism presume that there is a common background knowledge of society upon which a statement functions as a true argument (Anderson 2005: 123–143). This latter approach brings us closer to the ancient theory of common places (*topoi*, *common loci*) that has functioned as basis to argument formation. Common places in this sense are branches of contents, meanings connected to either the person, the circumstances, or the reasons. Commonplaces are collections of shared knowledge, prejudice, and experience, from which statements can be formed into true arguments.

Commonly shared social knowledge that lets us understand jokes, and enables us to predict easily offers a basis to the truth of arguments, too.

On the other hand, the truth of an argument can be the result of the placing of the statement in a logical form. Formal logic offers the structure of a syllogism with three premises, one functioning as conclusion. Any statement that turns out to be a concluding element of a causal verbal process can be thought to be true just because of its finalising role, or place. That is why enthymemes are so effective in persuasion.

An enthymeme (*en thumos* = in the brain) is a truncated form, a syllogism. "Rhetorical demonstration is an enthymeme which, generally speaking, is the strongest of rhetorical proofs" (Aristotle 1355a). One premise is missing, so that the receiver, the audience has to work out the missing element. The hypothetical statement we the audience conclude and state is hidden in the logical form, it is implied. An enthymeme is a heuristic tool for both communicator and audience. When a renowned weekly magazine writes the following enthymeme about a man (formerly chairman of a bank) accused of misappropriation: "*In Hungary, embezzlers of billions are sent and kept in prison. XY has not been treated like this,*" we may think, and definitely not by accident, that XY has had no part in any embezzlement. The enthymeme always implies a premise, a statement that is to be thought and articulated by the receiver. It is outstandingly successful in persuasion and manipulation because implicit messages are often thought by the receiver as his or her own ideas and thus it flatters his/her vanity.

Enthymemes are the very units of planned communication, campaigns and the whole of mass communication. The underlying, shared knowledge behind, form the enthymemes into rhetorical schemes in several cases. Acumen is a less known but often used "surface" form of argumentative speech. Contradictory harmony, harmonious contradiction: paradox and thus enjoyable: "*Who should adopt the child? The parent who throws or the drag queen who grows?*" says the headline of a news program. The underlying parallelism shows us how manipulation works through enjoyable verbal forms: it suggests that notions of parent and drag queen can be socially seen as equal roles and equal chances. In the spontaneous answer we may give to this acumen, we do fulfil the intention of the communicator, and validate the presuppositions of statement prior to the question made.

The argument and its manipulating logical form, the enthymeme, can also work as devices to 'switch on' interest, inclination of understanding, and acceptance from the receiver's side. Clyde Miller has identified four types of device:

- Virtue device – with which words of originally positive meanings are attached to the image (person, product, notion) to be built up: democracy, justice, beauty, etc.: “*Life is Good*” (Suzuki ad), “*The Colour of Justice*” (campaign of the Hungarian Socialist Party).
- Poison device – when words with negative meanings join the mass media product: catastrophe, war, murder. “*Make love not war.*” (Anti-war slogan), “*Stealing is sin. Illegal copying of a DVD is stealing. Do not steal*” (home DVD propaganda).
- Testimonial device – when the text refers to an authentic source of truth. Commercials and newspaper articles use this device very often: a reputed sportsman stands for a new vitamin pill, or a famous scientist protests against a social issue, a reality show participant takes part in a political campaign (‘everyday life politics’). According to Lionel Bellenger, the sender’s authority is laid upon the receiver to make the message alluring and desirable.
- Together device – to show we are not alone in thinking or doing something (see *argumentum ad populum*): “*Strength is in oneness*” (political slogan), “*Further together in coming and going*” (commercial of a bank), “*Our car*” (Suzuki commercial).

Persuasive text develops personal motivation, as it:

- arouses goodwill and attention. Classical rhetorical introduction has three traditional functions at the beginning of a text: *captatio benevolentiae* (the capturing of goodwill), *attentio* (to raise attention) and *docilitas* (the promise of the topic). As we may see, this part of the text serves as arousal of personal motivation.
- offers opportunity to personal identification. Digression is there in the structure (third part of speech – given to the structure by Quintilian) to help emotional identification with the speaker through a personal story loosely attached to the topic of speech.
- brings forward advantages or disadvantages and excludes or includes opinions. Argumentation as part of the text proves by demonstration of advantage and disadvantage. However, as Hugh Rank’s model suggests, the persuader either intensifies his/her own strong arguments, the advantages, by intensifying the weak points, i.e. the disadvantages of the adverse party; or downplays his/her own weak arguments, the disadvantages of the standpoint, and downplays the strong elements, the advantages of the adverse standpoint.

- proves that the offered object (subject or topic) is applicable in one's life. The ending part, the peroration of the rhetorical text functions this way. The elevated style, the aesthetically figured exclamations and the interrogations force the audience to apply the instructions of the speaker, writer.

In shaping up personal motivation, repetition of the message, dramatizing, and the introduction of the case as a public and common issue play important roles. Pragmatic figures of speech and commonplaces provide this arousal textually.

Media and mass communication is ready to offer solutions to the audience members and is successful in persuasion if:

- the receiver does not have time to think,
- a huge amount of information flows onto him/her, which is impossible to process,
- the issue is not treated as significant by the receiver,
- he/she is not well informed.

Mass communication theories have attempted to describe the effect of media on the audience, or society. Following the traces of agenda setting, framing and priming could model the reasons for the success of mass media in persuasion when the above conditions exist (and at least some of them usually do exist). Much attention in the research of agenda-setting has focused on the concept of priming. Priming is a cognitive psychological concept which refers to the enhancing effects of media by offering the audience a prior context. It is a concept that will be used to interpret subsequent messages of communication. It offers a frame of reference; and priming, as a phenomenon of mass communication, tells the audience what is good or bad, what an authentic personality or a news program is like. Priming is definitely based upon two rhetoric text features. One is order (deduction or induction, natural or artificial), the other is common knowledge as the source of truth and level of acceptance. As agenda setting theorists had formerly stated, the press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it. The theory of priming drew our attention to the shaping of reality by virtues and values. This also refers to the characteristic of the persuasive text; it never depicts the real but belongs to what is probable (*doxa*).

Framing is defined as a quality of communication that leads others to accept one meaning over another. The frame in which something is presented to the audience is chosen also by journalists. The created context,

the frame, organizes and structures social meaning. It affects and influences perception: the way we see, hear or experience events and patterns of behaviour. Framing places events within a field of meaning and thus narrates reality in an intentional way. Stories are frames. To explain the concept of framing, Fairhurst and Sarr give a comparison to the craft of the photographer: “consider how gifted photographers show us their view of the world through their photographs. They capture a viewpoint for others to understand and appreciate. They focus their cameras and frame their subjects so that by seeing their photographs, others can know what each photographer intended” (1996: 3). From a semiotic perspective, framing is indexical to the content and to the perception of the receiver of the message.

Narration in the classical rhetorical text is of this function; it mixes real facts with fictitious motives, highlights certain elements while downplaying others in order to create a frame of perception or understanding. According to Fairhurst and Sarr, framing has three elements to consider: language, thought and forethought. To act somehow (even spontaneously) needs forethought, language helps to remember information and acts, it is a symbolic tool to transform how we view situations and thought is necessary to use language.

To frame situations we shall use the following verbal means:

- Metaphor. “Language is vitally metaphoric,” as Shelley had put it, and we may add that the procedures of human cognition and recognition are originally metaphoric, too. A. Danto compared the metaphor, the unique trope of immutation, to enthymeme. As the *tertium comparationis*, the field of comparison is implied in the metaphor, and it is we who find out why two things, notions, emotions events could be moulded, and on what basis, it is also we who conclude the deliberately missing premise of the truncated syllogism. Metaphor in cognition is analogous with enthymeme in dialectic thinking and both frame a new idea by logical or cognitive comparison.
- Stories (anecdotes, myths and legends). When using a personal story, or a vivid anecdote, we fix certain elements in the audience’s mind, as narratives offer memorable structures and thus persuade.
- Slogans. The gaelic ‘sluagh-ghairm’, cry for battle has become the instant form of messages in the modern ages. Slogans using alliteration, ambiguity, pun, rhyme and rythm imprint their contents, meanings into our memory and mind. Similarly to instant coffee that dissolves in hot water these short sentences, texts dissolve in our brains. They wrap up a feeling, and we are to receive it as a gift. It is



not understanding but remembering and repeating that keep slogans alive.

- Contrast. To describe something in terms of what it is not is an old and well-known method of definition. It is also a technique on a slippery slope and of irrelevant syllogisms. “If you do not want to earn more and do not want to live a happier life, do not click to visit our website,” says an internet banner and we get a more forceful message frame to click than in the case of a positive, direct hypothetical syllogism (see peripheral route of persuasion). However, contrasts using negative premises are usually not relevant logically but persuasive rhetorically.

Fairhurst and Sarr also enlist non-verbal possibilities of framing, such as traditions, rituals, ceremonies and artefacts.

In his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776), George Campbell defined rhetoric as “art or talent by which discourse is adapted to its end. The four ends of discourse are to enlighten the understanding, please the imagination, move the passion, and influence the will” (I.1., xii). Persuasive functions of text in mass communication highlight the usefulness of rhetorical methods and elements and turn our attention to the classical discipline that enables us make any medium well-done.

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