

Language as an Influential Tool for Persuasion

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Abstract

Persuasion is present in all human activities; people persuade each other while learning, working and socializing. Scholars representing different disciplines like communication, psychology and advertising came to a unanimous conclusion that persuasion is the intended human communication which is used to impact the autonomous judgements and actions of other people. The present article focuses on verbal language in persuasion found in a number of sources like the campaign on human rights by Council of Europe, journalistic article in Health Communication and in Federal Express TV commercial.

Key words: language of persuasion, verbal communication, tag questions, speed of speech, metaphor, repetition.

Introduction

The history of persuasion and its study comes from ancient times. Aristotle developed the first scientific approach to persuasion, and discovered the scientific elements of it. According to him, persuasion is based on three principles: the nature of the communicator, i.e. ethos; the emotional state of the audience, i.e. pathos; the message arguments, i.e. logos (in Zollo 2014:15).

The study of persuasion is conditioned by three shifts. First studies were held in ancient Greek and were focused only on the ability of how persuaders build their speech. The second shift studies, from the 16th up to the 19th century concentrated on the receiver rather than on persuader. On the contrary, the third wave of contemporary scholars, for instance, Richard Perloff believes that persuasion is a bilateral process, which involves both sides: the persuader as well as the receiver the so-called ‘persuadee’ (Perloff 2003).

The aim of this article is to show how persuasive some communications that may happen between the interlocutors are, what kind of language is used in the brochures of human rights published by Council of Europe (hereafter COE), and

what persuasive features were used for the TV commercial of Federal Express (hereafter FedEx).

Verbal Language in Persuasion

An American communication and argumentation theory scholar George J. O'Keefe stressed the fact that it is difficult to give a proper definition of what persuasion is, because there are no concrete boundaries of it. Definitions vary: one might be too broad, thus to be unsatisfactory, the other is too narrow and again seems to be unsatisfactory. Nonetheless, for the surface comprehension of this social phenomenon it is preferable to look at one or two explanations of the term *persuasion*. For example, the Merriam Webster's online dictionary gives the following definition of *persuasion*: "the act of causing people to do or believe something: the act or activity of persuading people"¹. Richard Perloff - a scholar, the author of academic textbooks on persuasion and political communication, defines persuasion as: "a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behavior regarding an issue through the transmission of a message, in an atmosphere of free choice"².

This sophisticated explanation can be understood more thoroughly if we detach the construction and take a deeper glance at its components:

1. Persuasion involves verbal and nonverbal symbols. Symbols include various persuasive words like freedom, justice, equality etc.; non-verbal signs like the flag of this or that country, Holy Cross, McDonald's Golden Arches, etc.
2. Persuasion is an influence, at least, an attempt to have an effect on a particular situation, because not on all occasions persuasion can be found satisfactory. The persuader must be aware that the second party, that is the receiver, has a mental state and he/she is able to change it.
3. People do self-persuasions, rather than persuaders coerce them. It is a widely spread belief that psychotherapists persuade us to make correct decisions. They probably, master the art of persuasion, by offering suggestions, providing comfort zone in their therapy rooms and make people pour out what they have inside. But, if the progress occurs, it is the client who made it happen.
4. The message can be transmitted through various ways such as: interpersonally, through mass media, or via the Internet. It may consist of arguments or simple hints, like music in an advertisement that brings pleasant

memories to mind, and they can be verbal or nonverbal, reasonable or unreasonable, factual or emotional.

5. As it was mentioned earlier, self-persuasion is the main secret for achieving proper influence. To put it another way, an individual is free for making decisions whether to accept the suggestion or to refuse it.

The language of persuasion may have different effects based on the situations in which it is used. If one wants to be successful on persuading the second party, then one should take into account several factors, such as: not using the components of powerless speech. For example, *hesitation forms* like ‘uh’, ‘um’, ‘well, you know’ (show lack of certainty or confidence); *hedges* – ‘sort of’, ‘kinda’, ‘I guess’ (phrases that reduce the definitiveness of a persuader’s assertion); *tag questions* e.g., ‘That plan will cost us too much, don’t you think?’ and last but not least *disclaimers* such as ‘I know this sounds like a stupid question, but ...’, ‘I’m no expert, of course’, ‘This may sound a little out of the ordinary, but ...’ etc. The use of hedges, hesitations, tag questions and disclaimers communicates uncertainty or lack of knowledge.

In contrast to powerless speech, powerful speech is marked by the vivid absence of those features that were mentioned above. After examining the effects of powerless and powerful speech on persuasion, researchers stated, that powerless speech is perceived as less persuasive and credible than powerful speech. Communicators who use powerless speech are considered to be less competent, dynamic and attractive than those who speak in a powerful way.

Of course, powerful speech is more persuasive than powerless speech, however there is a case when powerless speech may have an effective result. An article by Annette Harres entitled “But Basically You’re Feeling Well, Are You?: Tag Questions in Medical Consultations” published in the journal of Health Communication is a definite example of powerless speech being successful. The above mentioned article is considered as a qualitative study investigating the use of tag questions by three Australian female practitioners. Tag questions such as: “You’ve been here before, haven’t you?” or “That’s the last straw, isn’t it?” can show empathy with patient’s concerns³. Thus, after studying the physicians’ use of language devices it was indicated by the researcher that: “the affective tag question signals to the patient that the doctor is not just interested in her medical but also her psychological well-being” (Harres 1998:122).

It is a well-known fact that the how of what you say is as important as what you say. Early studies suggested that the speed of speech increases persuasion. If we affirm that faster speech is persuasive because it acts as a reliable key, it means we look only at the one side of the coin. The other side of the coin reduces persuasion if it interferes with message processing or annoys the audience. Therefore, the most reasonable conclusion is that the speech rate depends on the context, as contextual factors are of great importance.

Speech rate can raise the productivity of the persuasion when it is relevant to the peculiar message. An old advertisement for FedEx, represents a businessman facing an urgent deadline. The man gives orders to his subordinate and speaks in a short voice at a lightning-quick speed.

Businessman: You did a bang up job. I'm putting you in charge of Pittsburgh.

Employee: Pittsburgh's perfect.

Businessman: I know it's perfect, Peter. That's why I picked Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh's perfect, Peter. Can I call you Pete?

Employee: Call me Pete⁴.

This ear-catching ad helped make FedEx a prosperous name. The ad shows a nice symmetry between the theme of the ad, speed of the speech and also the product which is being sold. That is, a courier delivery service with its slogan of being there '*absolutely, positively, overnight*'.

In the list of persuasive intensifying tools can be included such tactics as the use of figurative language, e.g. metaphor, repetition; the use of personal pronouns; some fascinating stories like the testimony of a person who has experienced violation of human rights and a number of other language-enhancing instruments. For example, in the following excerpt from the campaign "*I have rights...*" the repetition of the same verbal structure raises awareness on children's rights, makes the message more memorable, also intensifies the COE's good aims:

You are entitled to have your basic needs such as food, clothing, housing and health looked after.

You are entitled to a high standard of education [...].

You are entitled to a wide range of objective information.

You have the right to life and to a balanced and healthy physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

(from the poster *I have rights*⁵...).

A metaphorical example as a persuasive device is noticeable in the campaign against abortion. The opponents of anti-abortion movement in the United States chose the metaphor “**pro-life**” and since, the metaphor was officially added to various dictionaries as a definition of people who express heartfelt opposition to abortion. This is another case which shows that cleverly chosen strong words may greatly affect the audience.

Pronouns are of great significance in persuading readers, as well. Particularly the pronoun *you*, which is generally used to shorten the distance between persuading and receiving parties. This can be illustrated in the following examples suggested by COE again – “*Talk to your children and make sure they can talk to **you**.*”; “*Good secrets make **you** happy. Bad secrets don’t.*” (from the campaign *One in five*⁶).

Another persuasive strategy that can be applied is the narrative. It can be considered as a kind of discourse which can be found reasonable and meaningful if one applies intensive words in his/her narration. For example, testimonies by various people especially those by women who have gone through a domestic violence can serve as an effective way for persuading people. The following testimony from COE’s Human Rights Campaign which was found in Zollo’s book can be presented:

Excerpt 7 – “*Today I am waiting for the trial so that he can be judged and imprisoned. He says he is sorry and wants me to come back. There is no way that is going to happen. I was beaten by my husband but also by my parents-in-law for ten years. For all those years I never left the house except to go to work, and always accompanied by my husband. I’ve really had enough. Every day I cry and think of my children. I am tired but I am going to win through. I managed the first step by coming on the refuge and a second one by finding work. I want to go on from there: get my children back, find a flat and have a quiet life. In the end it is me who is going to win, and not my husband.*”

This type of persuasion can be experienced by observers who directly read those testimonies and indirectly experience the violence that the victim has undergone in her life.

Conclusion

Thus, the article presented verbal means of persuasion, mainly focusing on several language tactics that were found in a TV ad, COE's brochures and in the journal of Health Communication. So, it can be concluded that the speed of speech, intensive and emotionally charged words and in some cases even tag questions, can be found as effective assets on persuading the second party. However, it should be mentioned that the 'persuadee' is the only person who is responsible for his/her decision, because coercion is not welcomed at all.

Notes:

1. For more details consider the Merriam – Webster Online Dictionary. Available at: <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/persuasion>> [Accessed April 2016].
2. See Perloff, R.M. *The Dynamics of Persuasion: Communication and Attitudes in the Twenty-First Century*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003:8.
3. For more details read Annette Harres “But Basically You’re Feeling Well, Are You?” // *Tag Questions in Medical Consultations*. Health Communication Vol. 10, Issue 2, 1998. Available at: <<http://sarah-riley.net/courses/571/Articles/Harres1998.pdf>> [Accessed March 2016].
4. For further details on FedEx advertisement campaign follow: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeK5ZjtpO-M> > (*FedEx commercial with John Moschitta*).
5. The continuation of children's rights (suggested by COE). Available at: <<http://www.coe.int/web/children/children-corner>> [Accessed March 2016].
6. The examples can be found in COE's campaign *to stop sexual violence against children (One in Five)*. Available at: <http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/children/1in5/News/CampaignGuidelines_en.pdf> [Accessed April 2016].

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1. Zollo, S.A. (2014) *Promotion, Popularization and Pedagogy: An Analysis of the Verbal and Visual Strategies in the COE's Human Rights Campaigns*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

2. Perloff, R.M. (2003) *The Dynamics of Persuasion: Communication and Attitudes in the Twenty-First Century*. UK: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishing.
3. Harres, A. (1998) *But Basically You're Feeling Well, Are You?: Tag Questions in Medical Consultations*. UK: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishing.

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1. *Three Oranges, FedEx commercial with John Moschitta*. Sep. 2, 2006. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeK5ZjtpO-M>> [Accessed March 2016].
2. *Children's Rights, I have right, you have rights, he/she has rights...* Available at: <<http://www.coe.int/web/children/children-corner>> [Accessed April 2016].
3. *Merriam Webster's Dictionary*. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>> [Accessed April 2016].

Լեզուն որպես համոզման կարևոր միջոց

Խոսքի ներգործման հարցում հատկապես կարևորվում է լեզվի համոզման գարծառույթը, որը սույն հոդվածի քննության հիմնական առարկան է: Համոզման գործառույթը առկա է խոսքային գրեթե բոլոր ակտերում և մարդու գործունեության տարբեր ոլորտներում: Տվյալ հոդվածի սահմաններում դիտարկվում են հատկապես ազդեցիկ խոսքն ապահովելու համար գլխավոր դեր կատարող բառերի և շարահյուսական կառույցների ճիշտ ընտրության, ինչպես նաև խոսքի տեմպին առնչվող հարցեր: Որպես ուսումնասիրության նյութ են ընտրվել մի շարք գովազդներ, ինչպես նաև համապատասխան ամսագրերի հոդվածներ: