

Chovanec, Jan

**[Ponton, Douglas Mark. Understanding political persuasion: linguistic and rhetorical analysis]**

*Brno studies in English*. 2020, vol. 46, iss. 2, pp. 297-301

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2020-2-17>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/143220>

License: [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International](#)

Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

**Douglas Mark Ponton:** *Understanding Political Persuasion. Linguistic and Rhetorical Analysis*. Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2020. ISBN: 1-62273-932-9, 226 pp.

The analysis of the language of politics has enjoyed significant attention from scholars across various disciplines. While in the past decades, linguistic analysis has been concentrated around the various theoretical strands of critical discourse analysis (van Dijk 1991; Fairclough 1996; Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Chilton 2004; Richardson 2004; Hart 2010), much work has been done from other points of view as well, e.g. the social sciences and argumentation theory (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004), not to speak of the countless books written about the topic in the field of political science and communication. Thus, given the attention paid to political rhetoric and oratory ever since the Antiquity, one might wonder whether there is some need for another publication in this rather broad field of human interest. The new book on political rhetoric by Douglas Mark Ponton will, however, prove the sceptics wrong: it is, by all counts, a timely addition to the discipline of political discourse analysis, and one that is, in my view, likely to find its appreciative readership.

In the preface, Ponton lays out the motivation for writing the book and the rationale behind its organization. He means the book to be an introduction to political rhetoric and persuasion, grounding his approach in the traditional Aristotelian perspective, but using the tools of the modern discourse analyst in order to identify the diverse linguistic features on the micro-level of analysis that contribute to the powerful persuasive effect of political texts. Ponton does not ground his study in a single theoretical or methodological framework. Instead, he provides an overview of a broad range of various techniques and approaches to political discourse analysis and applies them to famous speeches by political orators from various epochs. In this way, he documents the linguistic and rhetorical features that the individual approaches concentrate on and provides a step-by-step explanation of how they operate in actual political texts. Here, Ponton's goal is to give "would-be students of political rhetoric, of whatever level and from a variety of fields within the Humanities [...] tools and techniques that will assist them in actual work on texts" (xiii).

The book is structured into ten chapters. After the two introductory theoretical chapters come the seven core analytical chapters (and a brief conclusion), each presenting a case study of a famous speaker, ranging from Edmund Burke and Winston Churchill to Malcolm X, but also addressing US Republican rhetoric and UKIP's communicative strategies. The shift from public speeches in the early chapters to such aspects of political rhetoric as election campaign videos and public posters towards the end of the book provide a welcome extension of the analytical tools from purely linguistic to visual and multimodal.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the Aristotelian perspective, discussing the three traditional main dimensions of persuasion, namely ethos, pathos and logos. While these concepts are central to the conception of persuasive political

discourse in the rest of the book, Ponton supplements them with the key concepts from appraisal theory, based in Halliday's systemic functional linguistics. The discussion of evaluation, engagement and alignment is accompanied with a documentation of the various linguistic tokens through which speakers express their standpoints as well as delineate boundaries between groups. Ponton's choice of the appraisal framework is very apt in this context because its categories are quite central to political discourse; indeed, as he correctly states, "alignment is a component of most, if not all, persuasive political rhetoric" (15).

Chapter 2 concentrates on *logos*, i.e. on how politicians construct the logical argument in their speeches. Ponton argues that the classical concept of *genus deliberativum*, i.e. public decision-making, is retained by modern politicians (or at least the illusion of it). He sees its most direct linguistic correlate in modality, particularly the shift from the modality of certainty to deontic modality: from 'is' to 'ought to be', which is closely linked to the construction of the argument in terms of the problem/solution pattern. The analysis concentrates on the use of the modals 'must' and 'should' in the various subcorpora (historical and modern) that Ponton draws on in the later chapters. Here, he traces how modal verbs are consistently used within the argumentative structure 'data-warrant-claim' and shows how the analysis of these modals can reveal the shared belief systems – the implicit axiological frameworks – that skilled speakers allude to. In other words, how, and eventually why, their arguments may appear convincing (or not).

Chapter 3 provides the first case study: Edmund Burke's Conciliation with America (1775). In this chapter, Ponton deals with rhetorical figures or tropes and concentrates on how they achieve an explicit persuasive function. To do so, he avails himself of the discourse-historical approach to CDA and points out the importance of context. This conception helps Ponton to substantiate the importance of the pragmatic type of rhetorical figures (alongside the decorative and focusing types). It is into these three types that the author arranges such traditional rhetorical figures as alliteration, litotes, anadiplosis, polysyndeton, allusion, antithesis and many others. Burke's speech is then analysed not only in terms of those figures but also of how metaphor and analogy are used in the argumentative structure.

In Chapter 4, the focus is on the genre of the parliamentary speech, exemplified by Benjamin Disraeli's Vindication of the Suez Canal shares (1875). Though presented as monologues, such speeches are heavily intertextual, interweaving with previous debates and other MPs' responses. They are based in a specific socio-cultural context that calls for the listeners' appreciation of the speaker's rhetorical confrontation and display of skills. Hence, strawman arguments, rebuttal clauses and other strategies are used to construct the real or fictive arguments of opponents and express objections, often in order to trivialize the other MPs' views. Noting the presence of complex heteroglossia in parliamentary speeches, Ponton demonstrates that speakers' use of dialogical stances and evaluation are central in their alignment with listeners (or, more precisely, in achieving that listeners are aligned with the speakers' opinions).

Chapter 5 shifts attention to the analysis of social actors, as documented in Winston Churchill's 'their finest hour' speech (1940). Here, Ponton draws on Theo Van Leeuwen's classic study (1996) into how polarisation is achieved at

the discursive level by consistently delimiting two opposing groups – ‘us’ and ‘them’. Churchill’s speech is shown to boost the morale of the British audience by emphasizing the capacity of the allied forces, while the adversaries are marked by frequent non-representation, including exclusion and backgrounding. The representational techniques applied in the chapter involve such devices – well-known and documented in critical discourse analysis – as passive agent deletion and nominalisation of verbal processes.

Chapter 6 introduces a more comparative approach to the data, looking at patterns of argumentation in the speeches of the 1960s leaders Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Ponton’s analysis of the speech acts and the argumentative structures shows that Malcolm X treats the social reality differently. He tends to assign blame and name the enemy, arguably in order to demarcate the group boundaries clearly and persuade listeners to align with his position. Interestingly enough, Malcolm X is particularly effective in expressing the historical outrage and the current frustration of the African American community; thus, his persuasive appeal is based on strong emotions, rather than rational argument. By contrast, King does not demonize the white man in his speeches, and prefers to construct a utopian vision in which both white and black people can regain their freedom. Ponton convincingly shows that the rhetoric of the two speakers is actually in a contrast, and that “their real target is the other, and their real intention is to bring over to their cause as many of the black community as possible” (138).

In Chapter 7, the discussion moves to a more recent past – Gerry Adams’ 2005 speech on disarming the IRA. The analysis applies Halliday’s theory of information structure to show how the speaker uses marked themes for foregrounding particular elements of the clause and backgrounding others with the aim of creating a general consensus on the need to disarm. What does not escape Ponton’s skilled analytical eye is how Adams foregrounds *chronos* in the marked themes. In this way, the leader emphasizes “the possibility that society itself is in a state of flux” (155), thereby justifying the need for changing the formerly rigid and entrenched political position. In other words, Adams manages to communicate rhetorically the view that “changing times require changing strategies, and that to continue with violent methods in today’s context is to remain somehow trapped in the past” (156).

Chapter 8 provides another comparison, this time of visual metaphors in the videos from Ronald Reagan’s and George W. Bush’s presidential election campaigns in 1984 and 2004, respectively. The two videos are similar in that they construct an external threat and exploit the viewers’ negative emotions of fear. Reagan’s ‘Bear in the Woods’ video responded to the perception of external threat at the height of the Cold War. By contrast, Bush’s ‘Wolves’ video targeted the threat of global terrorism at the time of the war on terror. Performing a shot-by-shot analysis, Ponton shows how Bush’s video intertextually relates to its predecessor, and how the threat metaphor is reframed to explicitly refer to the actions of Bush’s presidential opponent, John Kerry.

The last case study is to be found in Chapter 9, which develops the theme of multimodal analysis by studying UKIP’s anti-EU discourse from the pre-Brexit period. The discussion reflects the shift in the discourse of politics in the 2000s,

particularly towards such commercial processes as branding, when techniques of product advertising are being increasingly imported into the political sphere (in what has been referred to as “a post-modern ‘commodification of politics’”, 194). Partly grounded in the methodology of Ruth Wodak’s discourse-historical approach, Ponton analyses UKIP’s posters, as well as corpus data from British newspapers, and shows how they tap on the recipients’ cultural and historical knowledge. Explicit negative evaluation is revealed to be, once again, at the centre of Farage’s ideological positioning towards Europe.

The final chapter sums up Ponton’s basic model of argumentation in political discourse, ultimately derived from Toulmin (1958) and applied in many of the previous chapters. The conclusion also briefly mentions the recently changing ethos of politicians, which represents a step back from the tradition of cultivating oratory and rhetorical skills, so characteristic of political communication during the past centuries.

That observation foreshadows one of the dominant strands of current research into political discourse and communication, namely the shift towards populism (Wodak et al. 2013; Ekström and Firmstone 2017), new forms of politicians’ public communication (e.g. as exemplified by Donald Trump’s idiosyncratic discourse; see Sclafani 2017), and the performance of largely mediatized styles of rhetoric (Ekström et al. 2018). Ponton’s book does not seek to address those issues: its’ aim is to combine argumentative and rhetorical analysis, discourse analysis and appraisal theory in order to show the complexity of political discourse. In this way, it provides a well-rounded stepping stone for all those who wish to analyse the modern forms of political discourse.

All in all, the book provides a sophisticated discourse analytical account of the persuasive nature of traditional political oratory. While many current studies in the field of political discourse tend to adopt a specific theoretical framework, such an approach may – paradoxically – make them less suitable for those who wish to understand what the genre of political oratory is all about. The strong point of Ponton’s book is that it does not presuppose substantial prior knowledge in some theoretical or methodological paradigm; instead, the book can be used by would-be analysts to guide them in the understanding of the textual structures that can have a powerful rhetorical effect. The author’s qualitative analysis of the rich material assembled in the book is well-informed and insightful and will be appreciated by scholars as well as students in various fields, such as linguistics, political science and communication.

## References

- Chilton, Paul (2004) *Analyzing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ekström, Mats and Julie Firmstone (eds.) (2017) *The Mediated Politics of Europe: A Comparative Study of Discourse*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Ekström, Mats, Marianna Patrona and Joanna Thornborrow (2018) Right-wing populism and the dynamics of style: a discourse-analytic perspective on mediated political performances. *Palgrave Communications* 4(1), 1–11.
- Fairclough, Norman (1996) *Language and Power*. Harlow: Pearson.
- Hart, Christopher (2010) *Critical Discourse Analysis and Cognitive Science: New Perspectives on Immigration Discourse*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reisigl, Martin and Ruth Wodak (2001) *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Anti-Semitism*. London: Routledge.
- Richardson, John E. (2004) *(Mis)-representing Islam: The Racism and Rhetoric of British Broad-sheet Newspapers*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Sclafani, Jennifer (2017) *Talking Donald Trump: A Sociolinguistic Study of Style*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Toulmin, Stephen E. (1958) *The Uses of Argument*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Dijk, Teun (1991) *Racism and the Press. Critical Studies in Racism and Migration*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Van Leeuwen, Theo (1996) The representation of social actors. In: Caldas-Coulthard, Carmen Rosa and Malcolm Coulthard (eds.) *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*. London and New York: Routledge, 32–70.
- Van Eemeren, Frans H. and Rob Grootendorst (2004) *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation: The Pragma-Dialectical Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wodak, Ruth, Brigitte Mral and Majid KhosraviNik (2013) *Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse*. London: Bloomsbury.

JAN CHOVANEC

Address: Jan Chovanec, Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Arna Nováka 1, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic. [email: chovanec@phil.muni.cz]



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as image or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.