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Van Jones, President, Rebuild the Dream.

LANGUAGE INTELLIGENCE

LESSONS ON PERSUASION FROM
JESUS, SHAKESPEARE, LINCOLN, AND LADY GAGA

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE FIGURES OF SEDUCTION

*My advice, then, young men of Rome, is to learn the noble
Advocate's arts—not only to let you defend
Some trembling client: A woman, no less than the populace,
Elite Senator, or grave judge,
Will surrender to eloquence. Nevertheless, dissemble
Your powers, avoid long words,
Don't look too highbrow.*

—Ovid, *The Art of Love*¹⁵⁰

Rhetoric has a dark side. Rhetoric can manipulate, misdirect, and mislead. Dissembling salespeople use rhetoric to persuade us to surrender our money. Dissembling politicians use rhetoric to persuade us to delay action on global warming, to unwittingly surrender our children's future. The language intelligence needed to thwart those ultra-subtle and ultra-sophisticated seducers comes naturally to very few. To be resisted and debunked, their verbal tricks must be made explicit, which is the goal of this chapter.

The dark side of rhetoric was well-known—and well-feared—in ancient Greece. The term “Sophists” originally applied to those who taught rhetoric (and other subjects) for pay. The Sophist Protagoras boasted he could make the weaker cause appear to be the stronger. Hence *sophistry*, the term for disingenuous arguments.

In his dialogue *Gorgias*, about the master rhetorician, Plato gives him a speech that dramatizes the awesome power of rhetoric:

If a rhetorician and a doctor visited any city you like to name and they had to contend in argument before the Assembly or any other gathering as to which of the two should be chosen as doctor, the doctor would be nowhere, but the man who could speak would be chosen, if he so wished.¹⁵¹

So a rhetorician could persuade any audience, no matter how intelligent, that he was more of a doctor than a real doctor. No wonder climate science deniers, skilled in the art of verbal persuasion, can out-debate a scientist.

Cicero describes the birth of rhetoric's evil twin in *De Inventione*: “But when a certain . . . depraved imitation of virtue . . . acquired the power of eloquence unaccompanied by any consideration of moral duty, then low cunning supported by talent began to corrupt cities and undermine the lives of men.”¹⁵² That's a chillingly accurate description of Shakespeare's Iago and other seducers.

Rhetoric's power was recognized by intellectuals and audiences in Shakespeare's day. In the words of one scholar, Elizabethan rhetoricians repeatedly “celebrate rhetoric for giving its possessor the ability to subjugate others.”¹⁵³

Shakespeare was drawn to seducers. He made them central characters, as in the case of Iago and Marc Antony. He gave them his full range of verbal skills and the power to manipulate his other characters. No one has so expertly and explicitly combined all the figures of seduction as Shakespeare.

RHETORICAL SEDUCTION TODAY

You may not believe that you are under daily assault from those who would seduce you, who would manipulate you with the most subtle and insidious tricks. Believe it.

To find the dazzling array of devices used to manipulate you by salespeople, read Kevin Hogan's books *The Psychology of Persuasion* (1996) and *The Science of Influence* (2004). Hogan promises readers in his 2004 book, “I'm going to show you the ins and outs of *permanent* change in other people's behavior, why it's difficult—and how you can go about making it happen. You want the customer for life? It's here.”¹⁵⁴

Find Frank Luntz's “Straight Talk” memo online and read his deplorable advice to Republicans on how to use language to delay action on fighting global warm-

ing. Read Luntz's memo published before the health-care reform debate of 2009, which the Republicans followed closely, to great success. Read the 2010 book *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*, which explains how so many have been neatly seduced into inaction on climate change using the same rhetorical tactics developed by tobacco companies to delay smoking regulations.

THE FIGURES OF SEDUCTION

The figures of speech move us by design. They were modeled after the words and phrases that touch us emotionally. As we've seen, modern social science research reveals that the figures make words and ideas more memorable, that our brains are wired to respond to the figures, and that the figures reflect the way we think. We think metaphorically. As one best-selling Elizabethan author put it over five hundred years ago:

By the great might of figures (which is no other thing than wisdom speaking eloquently), the orator may lead his hearers which way he lists, and draw them to what affection he will; he may make them to be angry, to be pleased, to laugh, to weep, and lament; to love, to abhor, and loathe; to hope, to fear, to covet; to be satisfied, to envy, to have pity and compassion; to marvel, to believe, to repent; and briefly to be moved with any affection that shall serve best for his purpose.¹⁵⁵

That is to say, the basic figures of speech can be used to seduce us, to cause us to take actions that harm us or others. But to persuade moral people to do immoral things, a seducer will also use words whose intended meaning is different from their literal meaning. This looks very much like a job for irony, and indeed many of the figures of seduction are closely related to irony.

Seduction, like persuasion, is a two-step dance for a master of rhetoric. First, a seducer must convince you that he or she is a trustworthy person, a person who shares your values and speaks your language. This is the first strategy for all orators, as Aristotle explained more than two thousand years ago. But since seducers are trying to lead you astray, they must necessarily deceive. Ovid advised the young men of Rome who wanted to seduce women to "dissemble your powers, avoid long words, don't look too highbrow." This may sound familiar, since it is the strategy of the *eirone*, which comes from the Greek for "dissembler," as discussed in Chapter Four. Marc Antony, Iago, and Hal/Henry V all practice this precise strategy.

Once a would-be seducer has established he is trustworthy, that he is a plainspoken, straight-shooting person who means what he says and says what he means, then he can safely start saying what he doesn't mean.

INDIRECT SUGGESTION

One of the most powerful figures of seduction, and certainly the most ironic, is the indirect suggestion.

Very popular with rhetoricians and Shakespearean seducers, this device was rediscovered in the twentieth century by the founders of NLP, neuro-linguistic programming. The creators of NLP systematically modeled the most effective techniques of therapeutic persuasion and suggestion, particularly the work of Milton Erickson.

The basic idea of indirect suggestion is that if you want to move people to do something they have a resistance to, one approach is to state the idea indirectly, even in the negative. In his 1996 book on persuasion, Kevin Hogan gives the following examples of what to say to a possible but reluctant customer:¹⁵⁶

- “Don’t feel as though you have to buy something today.”
- “Don’t decide now.”
- “Don’t make up your mind too quickly.”
- “You probably already know that you’re going to buy this.”
- “I could tell you that you are making a mistake but I won’t.”

The first reason this works is that the negating words (like “don’t” or “won’t”) do not stick in the mind as much as the positive ideas or images that follow them. As George Lakoff explains in his 2004 book, *Don’t Think of an Elephant!*, if I say that to you, you will think of an elephant.

In one 1990 study, undergraduate students observed sugar from a labeled commercial container as

it was poured into two bottles.¹⁵⁷ They then labeled one bottle “sugar” and the other “not sodium cyanide.” Students avoided eating sugar from the second bottle even though they had watched it being poured and “even though *they* had arbitrarily placed that label on it” and knew the label was accurate—that it was *not* sodium cyanide. Such is the power of words or, rather, the insidious lack of power of the word *not*.

Even more insidious, “when people find a claim familiar because of prior exposure but do not recall the original context or source of the claim, they tend to think that the claim is true,” noted a 2005 journal article, “How Warnings about False Claims Become Recommendations.”¹⁵⁸ You must understand this point to debunk those who spread disinformation, as we’ll see.

The second reason this trick works is that the speaker is not telling you what to think. Quite the opposite. The speaker can appear to be on your side, seeming to warn you against an idea or a course of action, all the while carefully planting in your mind the very idea he or she claims to be negating.

The therapists who developed this strategy were not trying to seduce people or lead them astray, but rather were trying to overcome the resistance their patients had to changing their behavior. These behavior patterns were deeply ingrained over many years and thus not easy for patients to change consciously, even when they were made aware of how counterproductive

the behaviors were. So the therapists developed strategies for helping their patients change.

You may not believe in indirect suggestion. But those who developed rhetoric did. The Greeks called this *apophasis* (from the Greek word for "to deny"), the figure of speech that emphasizes a point by pretending to deny it, that stresses an idea or image by negating it. I am labeling apophasis one of the powerful figures of seduction.

For me, the most compelling two reasons to believe in the power of this figure is, first, Shakespeare believed in it, and, second, he knew his audiences did, too. His plays openly reveal what so many have tried to keep hidden.

LEND ME YOUR EARS

The play *Julius Caesar* is explicitly about seduction. Cassius, he of the "lean and hungry look," has assembled a group of conspirators to assassinate Caesar. To add credibility to the proposed assassination, Cassius seduces the noble idealist Brutus—highly respected throughout Rome—into joining them, though Brutus turns out to require only modest persuasion. Cassius even says of Brutus, "*For who so firm that cannot be seduced?*" This is the motto of all seducers: Who is so firm that they cannot be seduced? Anyone can be led astray—any of us, all of us.

After Brutus, Cassius, and the other conspirators murder Caesar, Brutus speaks to the citizens in the

forum and convinces them the assassination was justified. How can Marc Antony turn Brutus's words against him and convince the Romans that Brutus did not act honorably in killing Caesar? He does it with good old-fashioned verbal irony, as we have seen. And it is no surprise that Antony also uses the ironic figure of apophasis. Antony and Shakespeare wield the figures with more devious skill than had ever been seen before on stage.

Antony's primary goal is to enrage the citizens to "mutiny," so he uses the word three times, stressing it each time by pretending to deny it. First, Antony says he would be doing wrong to the conspirators "if I were disposed to stir your hearts and minds to *mutiny* and rage." He puts the idea in the conditional, using *if*. Second, Antony says, "Sweet friends, let me not stir you up to such a sudden flood of *mutiny*." He puts the idea in the negative, using *not*. Here is apophasis directly. Third, Antony says he is not an orator like Brutus, but if he were Brutus, he would give a speech that would "move the stones of Rome to rise and *mutiny*." What is particularly remarkable, in our efforts to divine Shakespeare's rhetorical technique, is what he wrote for the very next line:

All: We'll mutiny.

In other words, directly after Antony plants the idea of *mutiny* in their minds through three conditional and negative statements, directly after he ends his speech with the embedded suggestion *rise and mutiny*, all the

Roman citizens shout the word, adopting it as their plan of action.

Antony criticizes the citizens for failing to mourn for Caesar: "O judgment! Thou art fled to brutish beasts, and men have lost their reason." This is another classic verbal trick, using a word that sounds very similar to one that you want someone else to think of. Antony wants the citizens to associate the word *Brutus* with the word *brutish*, with beasts that lack reason. He wants to negate the idea that Brutus is either honorable or reasonable. He succeeds.

He wants the citizens to lose *their* reason. He tells us he must not read Caesar's will to them because "It will inflame you, it will make you mad." This is apophasis. To make sure we understand that the citizens have lost their reason, Shakespeare inserts a short scene after Antony's speech in which a mob of citizens slaughter an innocent poet just because he has the same name as one of the conspirators—Cinna. Madness rules.

Shakespeare expected his audience would follow what he was doing in this scene, having Antony use every classical rhetorical device for indirect suggestion to plant ideas in the unconscious minds of the Roman citizens. The best proof that Shakespeare did this intentionally is that he does it in all his great plays, including *Othello*.

We fail to learn from Shakespeare's wisdom at our own peril.

MODERN APHOPHASIS

Determining whether someone is using this devious device today is not always easy. We often use the phrasing of apophasis, pretended denial, without intentionally trying to plant ideas or manipulate people. Indeed, mild forms of apophasis are such a common language pattern in politics that they barely qualify as seduction. For instance, on New Year's Day 2011, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney said of his rivals for the GOP presidential nomination:

"Like Speaker Gingrich, Sen. Santorum has spent his career in the government, in Washington. Nothing wrong with that. But it's a very different background than I have, and I think that the people of this country recognize with our economy as the major issue we face right now, it would be helpful to have someone who understands the economy firsthand, who's spent the bulk of his career working in the private sector."¹⁵⁹

Obviously, Romney intends to leave people with the idea that there is something wrong with being a career politician—otherwise, why mention it? Indeed, it is widely seen as a negative label and had been the subject of an earlier back-and-forth between Gingrich and Romney. Here the line isn't fooling anyone. It's just Romney's way of pretending he's not engaging in a negative attack.

The Iraq war provides numerous examples of more sophisticated use of pretended denial and indirect suggestion. For instance, a key aspect of the Bush Administration's justification for war was that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, which in turn made Saddam Hussein a unique threat we could no longer ignore. As one analyst explained in 2004, "Under international law, specifically under the U.N. Charter, one nation may go to war with another only in self-defense; pre-emptive action only constitutes self-defense when an imminent danger to a country's security can be demonstrated."¹⁶⁰

In January 2004, ten months after the war began, White House press secretary Scott McClellan said that the issue of the failure to find weapons of mass destruction was not important because the administration had never said Iraq was an immediate threat. He said, "I think some in the media have chosen to use the word 'imminent'. Those were not words we used."¹⁶¹

The principals had generally been too clever, using apophasis and indirect suggestion. In November 2002, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said:

"I would look you in the eye and I would say, go back before September 11 and ask yourself this question: Was the attack that took place on September 11 an *imminent threat* the month before or two months before or three months before or six months before? When did the attack on September 11 become an *imminent threat*? Now, transport your-

self forward a year, two years or a week or a month. . . . So the question is, when is it such an *immediate threat* that you must do something?"¹⁶²

These lines would make eiron Marc Antony proud. Rumsfeld managed to fashion a reputation for himself as a "plain blunt man" like Antony, and he wields words as skillfully as any Greek rhetorician. Rumsfeld is particularly good at asking questions that he then answers: "Is it [post-war Iraq] going to be as efficient as a dictatorship? No. Is it going to be vastly more desirable? You bet."¹⁶³ It should be no surprise to learn this is also a figure of speech (*anthypophora*).

Note that in the lines quoted above, Rumsfeld beats the drum on September 11 three times and seemingly links Iraq and September 11, but only seemingly. And he thrice repeats the phrase "imminent threat" or "immediate threat" without ever directly calling Iraq one.

In his January 2003 State of the Union address, Bush matched his secretary of defense. He gives a lengthy description of all of the various weapons of mass destruction that Saddam Hussein was supposed to have, although, as we learned much later, he didn't. Bush says, "The only possible explanation, the only possible use he could have for those weapons, is to dominate, intimidate or attack." Then he continues:

And this Congress and the American people must recognize *another threat*. Evidence from intelligence sources, secret communications and statements by

people now in custody reveal that Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of Al Qaida. Secretly, and without fingerprints, he could provide one of his hidden weapons to terrorists, or help them develop their own.

Before September the 11th, many in the world believed that Saddam Hussein could be contained. But chemical agents, lethal viruses and shadowy terrorist networks are not easily contained.

Imagine those 19 hijackers with other weapons and other plans—this time armed by Saddam Hussein. It would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known.

We will do everything in our power to make sure that that day never comes.

Some have said we must not act until the threat is imminent. Since when have terrorists and tyrants announced their intentions, politely putting us on notice before they strike?¹⁶⁴

Impressive. He linked Al Qaida and September 11 to Saddam Hussein again and again. He sums up with the pithy alliterative phrase “terrorists and tyrants.” As we know from the 9/11 Commission Report, there was no actual link between 9/11 and Saddam Hussein, beyond the linguistic link you can make by mentioning them in the same sentence and connecting them with the word “and.” The administration knew this but nevertheless took every opportunity to make the link anyway, which is no doubt why so many of the people who voted for Bush thought there was a link. Like Rumsfeld, Bush

made a vivid appeal to the listener’s imagination, in this case to visualize the hijackers armed by Saddam Hussein. As psychologists know, that which we can visualize, we are more likely to believe.

The italicized line above is an advanced form of apophasis where the pretended denial is put in the mouth of an imaginary third party, “Some have said.” It allows Bush to say “the threat is imminent” without actually saying it. What would a typical listener take away from all this? Here’s how one highly informed listener, Maura Reynolds of the *L.A Times*, heard the speech:

BUSH CALLS IRAQ IMMINENT THREAT

By Maura Reynolds

WASHINGTON—A somber and steely President Bush . . . provided a forceful and detailed denunciation of Iraq, promising new evidence that Saddam Hussein’s regime poses an imminent danger to the world and demanding the United Nations convene in just one week to consider the threat. . . .

Calls have mounted in recent weeks for the president to make a better case for going to war. In response, Bush argued that use of force is not only justified but necessary, and that the threat is not only real but imminent.¹⁶⁵

That is how the story was heard by a news reporter whose business is words and clarity, who could write her

story with a copy of the speech in front of her. Imagine how the general public would hear the speech.

The Bush team appears to have wanted to create the impression of an imminent threat while maintaining what might be called "rhetorical deniability" that they ever used the specific word "imminent" themselves. After all, Bush had spoken of the "unique and urgent threat posed by Iraq" in November 2002.¹⁶⁶ And the administration had worked hard to create a similar rhetorical deniability that they ever said Saddam Hussein was behind 9/11, even though they clearly wanted to create the impression the two were directly connected.

Is this seduction? When you use devious rhetorical devices to intentionally mislead, that is the definition of seduction. Is all this intentional? Your answer no doubt depends on your politics. For me it strains credulity to think that these wizards of word usage have done this unintentionally when they have so brilliantly used every other element in the periodic table of rhetoric. Scott McLellan himself later accused President Bush of pursuing a "propaganda campaign to sell the war to the American people," as he wrote in his 2008 book *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception*, which *Politico* labeled a "surprisingly scathing memoir."¹⁶⁷

Apophysis works. You should keep your eyes—and ears—open for it, especially if someone is trying to sell you something when the pitch is emotional, and a wrong decision could be costly.

We should all minimize the use of negative suggestions in everyday life. For example, avoid saying to your children things like "Don't whine" but instead say "Use your normal voice." Similarly, when you make an important phone call to someone who is busy, don't ask, "Are you busy?" or, "Is this a bad time to talk?" as the words "busy" and "bad time" will ring in their ears. Ask, "Is this a good time to talk?"

Finally, understanding apophysis is crucial for those in the business of debunking myths, as I am. The 2005 study "How Warnings about False Claims Become Recommendations" concluded:

Telling people that a consumer claim is false can make them misremember it as true. In two experiments, older adults were especially susceptible to this "illusion of truth" effect. Repeatedly identifying a claim as false helped older adults remember it as false in the short term but paradoxically made them more likely to remember it as true after a 3 day delay. This unintended effect of repetition comes from increased familiarity with the claim itself but decreased recollection of the claim's original context. Findings provide insight into susceptibility over time to memory distortions and exploitation via repetition of claims in media and advertising.¹⁶⁸

When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention put out a flier to debunk myths about the flu vaccine, it repeated several myths, such as, "The side effects are

worse than the flu" and labeled them false. A study of people given the flier found that "within 30 minutes, older people misremembered 28 percent of the false statements as true." Worse, "three days later, they remembered 40 percent of the myths as factual." And they identified the source of their erroneous beliefs as the CDC itself. As explained in a 2007 *Washington Post* article, "Persistence of Myths Could Alter Public Policy Approach": "Indeed, repetition seems to be a key culprit. Things that are repeated often become more accessible in memory, and one of the brain's subconscious rules of thumb is that easily recalled things are true."¹⁶⁹ This, of course, is precisely why repetition is so important for persuasion, why rhetoric has some four dozen figures of repetition.

A 2004 journal article, "'I am not guilty' vs 'I am innocent'," found that for many people, the "negation tag" of a denial falls off with time:

"If someone says, 'I did not harass her,' I associate the idea of harassment with this person," said [lead author Ruth] Mayo, explaining why people who are accused of something but are later proved innocent find their reputations remain tarnished. "Even if he is innocent, this is what is activated when I hear this person's name again. If you think 9/11 and Iraq, this is your association, this is what comes in your mind," she added. "Even if you say it is not true, you will eventually have this connection with Saddam Hussein and 9/11."

The authors found that rather than deny a false claim, it is better to make a completely new assertion that makes no reference to the original myth. It takes a lot of message discipline to do this, but if you want to debunk a myth, you need to focus on stating the truth, not repeating the myth.

Accidental use of apophysis has always been one of the most common mistakes speakers make, even the most experienced. Richard Nixon said, "I am not a crook," and only his final word still rings in our ears.

MORE FIGURES OF SEDUCTION

Two other figures of seduction are closely related to apophysis and embedded suggestion. The first is *aposiopesis* (from the Greek "becoming silent"), an abrupt breaking off of speech. A two-thousand-year-old Latin textbook on rhetoric and persuasion writes of this technique, "A suspicion, unexpressed, becomes more telling than a detailed explanation would have been." It gives an example: "He who so handsome and so young, recently at a stranger's house—I am unwilling to say more."¹⁷⁰

An Elizabethan author warns of *aposiopesis*, "If it be used in malice, it commonly leaves the venom of some false suspicion behind it, all which faults are in wisdom and charity to be eschewed." Simply pausing in one's remarks, "becoming silent," raises suspicions that all is not what it seems.¹⁷¹

The second figure is *paralipsis*, passing over a subject briefly to create an ominous suggestion about what is not being said. The Latin textbook gives an example: "Your boyhood, indeed, which you dedicated to intemperance of all kinds, I would discuss, if I thought this the right time. But at present I advisedly leave that aside." The Roman author cautions, "This figure is most abused by malice, as when it is applied in false accusation."¹⁷²

The master of both these techniques is, no surprise, the master of false suspicion and false accusation: Iago. He wields these weapons best in the "temptation scene," Act Three, Scene Three of *Othello*, called "perhaps the most breath-taking scene in the whole of Shakespeare."¹⁷³

Iago's goal is to poison Othello's mind, to seduce him into believing that his lieutenant, Cassio, has been having an affair with his wife, Desdemona. Iago starts slyly and slowly, just after Cassio departs from a meeting with Desdemona (that Iago had set up):

<i>Iago</i>	Ha, I like not that.
<i>Othello</i>	What dost thou say?
<i>Iago</i>	Nothing, my lord; or if—I know not what.
<i>Othello</i>	Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?
<i>Iago</i>	Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it
	That he would steal away so guilty-like
	Seeing you coming.

Here we have all the tricks in one place. In a single sentence he manages to combine the pretended omission of paralipsis ("Nothing, my lord") with the sudden breaking off of aposiopesis ("or if—I know not what"). He then follows quickly with his own brand of apophasis ("I cannot think . . .") to introduce the suggestion that Cassio would "steal away so guilty-like" upon seeing Othello coming. This scene may be the best dramatization of the dark side of rhetoric ever written.

Modern day eirons use these tricks because they are playing dumb. They gloss over a subject quickly to draw their victims' interest. Con artists, for instance, let some rich mark overhear a scheme, and then when the mark asks for more information, they say, "I really can't talk about this." TV cops use paralipsis all the time. Lieutenant Columbo's favorite phrase, "Just one more thing," was a variation, where he made the most important thing he wanted a suspect to hear seem like an afterthought that almost escaped his mind entirely. Or he'd bring up a series of insinuations until the person he is talking to demands to know, "What's your point, Lieutenant?" to which his reply is, "Point? No, no. No point."¹⁷⁴

My favorite political aposiopesis occurred in the final presidential debate of the 2004 election during an exchange on healthcare:

KERRY: Well, two leading national news networks have both said the president's characterization of

my healthcare plan is incorrect. One called it fiction. The other called it untrue. . . .

BUSH: In all due respect, I'm not so sure it's credible to quote leading news organizations about—oh, never mind.¹⁷⁵

The president abruptly cut off his attack on the credibility of the mainstream media. The beauty of this aposiopesis is that Bush's remark sent a strong message to his supporters, who don't like the media, but because he did not finish his sentence, most of the media didn't treat it as a fully completed thought about Bush's dismal view of them. Thus the line was hardly subjected to the same kind of scrutiny that every other line in the debate was. As one puzzled blogger wrote, "I listened hard afterward to commentators on CNN, MSNBC, NPR and Fox and not one mentioned this very strange moment."¹⁷⁶ Had the president completed his sentence, then the remark might well have become the subject of widespread scrutiny and perhaps scorn.

The aposiopesis allowed him to speak to his supporters and to all those who are skeptical of the media—and no one else. This has long been seen as one of the aims of rhetoric: dividing people into groups (those who are in the know and those who aren't) and targeting your message. Was this intentional on the president's part or did he really think better of finishing his sentence in the spur of the moment? We can't know, but either the example shows it is a powerful rhetorical device or

it shows how the figures of speech do, in fact, capture the essence of real emotions and real speech patterns.

ENIGMA

There are certain common privileges of a writer, the benefit whereof, I hope, there will be no reason to doubt; particularly, that where I'm not understood, it shall be concluded, that something very useful and profound is couched underneath; and again, that whatever word or sentence is printed in a different character shall be judged to contain something extraordinary either of wit or sublime.

—Jonathan Swift¹⁷⁷

Clarity is rightly seen as one of the most important virtues of a speech. If our goal is to persuade people honestly, then we should be as clear as possible about what we are trying to say. Clarity is most important when we are trying to convince people with the facts, with logic. As we've seen, however, truly persuasive speech requires a simultaneous appeal to mind and heart, logic and emotion, especially if you are trying to penetrate and change someone's worldview.

Aristotle and others writers on rhetoric argued that making a persuasive emotional appeal means sounding genuinely emotional yourself. But emotional people often do not speak with clarity. They omit words, they misuse words, they don't speak smoothly, they make

mistakes. The craftiest of orators have long recognized this. In his treatise *On Style*, the ancient Greek rhetorician Demetrius explained that "loose word-arrangement" can make one sound more forceful, and cites as an example the orator Hipponax: "When he wants to attack his enemies he breaks his rhythm, makes it halting instead of straightforward, less rhythmical, and this suits the forcefulness of his attack."¹⁷⁸

Lack of clarity has also been seen as a rhetorical strategy. There are actually a number of closely related "figures of obscuring." One such figure is *enigma* (from the Greek for "riddle"), which is deliberately "obscuring one's meaning," or using speech where "the sense may hardly be gathered." Another is *schematismus*, which is using figurative language to conceal a meaning, either because it would be unsafe or indecent to "speak directly and openly." A third figure of obscuring is *noema*, the "figure of close conceit" (from the Greek word for "understanding"), which might best be described as speech that is unclear to one group of listeners but clear to another. It is used "to conceal the sense from the common capacity of the hearers: and to make it private to the wiser sort, who by a deep consideration of the saying, are best able to find out the meaning." Examples of *enigma* and *noema* are given below.¹⁷⁹

Why would a rhetorician want to be intentionally confusing or enigmatic? One reason is to send a message that would be clear to one group of people but not to another. This is *noema*, a private message to those

"best able to find out the meaning." To use a modern metaphor, this is called "dog-whistle politics," referring to the device that emits a high pitch only dogs can hear—hence any message "only fully audible to those at whom it is directly aimed," as the *Economist* put it in 2005.¹⁸⁰

Bush's chief speechwriter, Michael Gerson, an evangelical Christian who had at one point been a theology major in college, seeded Bush's speeches with words meaningful to the religious but innocuous to others, including *whirlwind*, *work of mercy*, *safely home*, *wonder-working power*. This is *noema*, courtesy of a master logographos. Biblical scholar Bruce Lincoln explains that Bush's October 7, 2001, speech announcing the war in Afghanistan had allusions to Revelation, Isaiah, and the gospels. By the end of the speech, "America's adversaries have been redefined as enemies of God, and current events have been constituted as confirmation of Scripture," Lincoln notes. "Bush could only make these points indirectly, through strategies of double coding." Bush's speech had a surface meaning for secular listeners and a deeper meaning for the devout.¹⁸¹

A second reason you might choose to be enigmatic is to appear more profound, as Swift wrote slyly in the quote that opens this section, to stimulate your audience's interest, its craving for answers to the myriad mysteries of life. Poets have always employed obscure language for this purpose. Modern-day bards, especial-

ly lyricists, are very fond of this technique, which is why the lyrics to so many songs are never fully explained.

John Lennon and Paul McCartney repeatedly use allegory and enigmatic phrasing in songs like "I Am the Walrus," "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," and "Norwegian Wood," to name but a few. Countless explanations have been offered for the lyrics of what is surely the longest allegorical pop song ever written, "American Pie" by Don McLean, as McLean no doubt expected and desired ("The jester sang for the king and queen in a coat he borrowed from James Dean").¹⁸²

Then there is the jester himself, Bob Dylan, singing, in McLean's allegorical words, with "a voice that came from you and me." Dylan's masterpiece, "Like a Rolling Stone," is filled with enigmatic expressions such as "the mystery tramp" and "Napoleon in rags" and "You used to ride on the chrome horse with your diplomat."

The mysterious words help connect us with the main lyric "How do you feel?" by conveying the confusion of the life of Miss Lonely, the once too-proud woman now brought low. Ever the jester, Dylan offered comments on his song that sum up the ultimate meaning to be found in *enigma*:

Anybody can be specific and obvious. . . . That's always been the easy way. . . . It's not that it's so difficult to be unspecific and less obvious; it's just that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, to be specific and obvious *about*. My older songs, to say the least,

were about nothing. The newer ones are about the same nothing—only as seen inside a bigger thing, perhaps called nowhere.¹⁸³

LADY GAGA'S POKER FACE

Who could be more of an enigma than someone with a poker face? Lady Gaga's monster hit "Poker Face" repeats the title phrase thirty times, repeats the phrase "he can't read my poker face" ten times, and throws in the phrase "can't read my" another twenty times to make sure no one misses the point. Not surprisingly, then, the song has multiple layers of seduction and enigma in it.

Gaga is seducing the man, as this repeated line makes clear: "I'll get him hot, show him what I've got." That is one of the many gambling puns or double entendres in this extended metaphor of love as a game of poker and chance. In poker, if you are called in the final round of betting, you have to show your cards at the end. The music video builds on that metaphor by turning the game of Texas hold 'em into strip poker where most of the participants show most of what they've got by the end.

On the surface, the point of the song is that the man can't read her true feelings. She has a poker face. The deeper meaning is that Gaga "used to fantasize about women when I was with my boyfriend."¹⁸⁴ Gaga

is famously non-traditional, non-heterosexual, like much of her fan base, so the multiple layers of meaning allow her to appeal to multiple audiences.

The song contains the rhetoric-filled line, "I won't tell you that I love you, kiss or hug you, 'Cause I'm bluffin' with my muffin." Here "muffin" is a sexual reference, so this metaphorically restates the theme that she is deceiving the man and would rather be with a woman. This deeper meaning would appear to be *noema*, since it was clearly lost on some of her listeners, which became clear after Kanye West took Gaga's vocals from an acoustic version of "Poker Face" to make his own song. MTV interviewed Gaga about the song:

"It's funny, because a lot of my fans were like, 'Gaga, Kanye wrote a song . . . and it's not about what your record's about. Your record is about gambling. And this song is about dirty sex things'

"I said to them, 'You're wrong. Kanye was right,'" she laughed. "That's exactly what this song is about."

It's not clear to me how listeners could have missed the sexual references, but obviously Gaga appeals to a great many young and very literal fans. MTV described Gaga's revelation this way: "Kanye broke her musical Da Vinci Code."

In fact, West revealed yet a deeper seductive element of the song—and the real reason why Gaga used the poker metaphor. He heard the line as "I poke

her face." In its entry on "poke her face," *The Urban Dictionary* goes so far as to say, "The song subliminally advocates oral sex by repeating the phrase poke-her-face" multiple times.¹⁸⁵

Wikipedia notes of West's non-subliminal piece, "The song was originally entitled 'I Poke Her Face' but was changed to make it more acceptable for radio." Gaga is much subtler and more enigmatic than West, who is in-your-face, figuratively and literally. No doubt Gaga's ability to appeal to, to seduce, multiple audiences with multiple layers of meaning using multiple figures of speech has contributed to her stunning success.

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- 133 Basler, *A Touchstone for Greatness*, p. 80.
- 134 Kirkham, *English Grammar*, p. 223. The one example Kirkham cites is from Psalm 80, which has an extended metaphor of a growing vine: "Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it. Thou preparedst room before it, and didst cause it to take deep root, and it filled the land. The hills were covered with the shadow of it, and the boughs thereof were like the goodly cedars. She sent out her boughs unto the sea, and her branches unto the river." In my edition, Kirkham says this is the "60th" psalm, but that must be a typo.
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