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Figs and kippers: why we need to question the language of politics

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This article aims to connect three topics: Brexit, Boris and the decay of democracy. What connects this trio is talk, talk, talk. Language and politics are tightly and necessarily intertwined. Indeed, as the Greeks thought, language is intertwined with democracy itself. The twenty-first century has brought unprecedented complexity to human ways of communication, and yet the old rhetorical tricks and oratorical stunts, first described and practised in the ancient world, are still capable of turning heads. As we learn more about how human language works in social and political settings, we can see even more clearly a few of the factors that enable lying politicians to acquire power. But we are still far from drawing practical lessons that could be relevant to our current political crisis.

It was around 150 BC, during a session in the Senate House in Rome. Old Cato, aka Cato Censorius, was there, not long back from a diplomatic mission to the Carthaginians in North Africa. He was holding forth about the threat to the homeland that they posed. He had become obsessed by the thought that Carthage was starting to expand again and threatened Rome's security. Africa: he was always going on about it. "And what is more, Carthage has got to be destroyed!" he would say at every opportunity, relevant or not. "Let's crush Carthage!"

The old tropes ought to have been wearing thin, but they never did, never do, and anyway on this particular day he had an extra trick up his toga. Towards the end of his speech, he produced a juicy ripe fig from Carthage: "When do you think this was picked?" he demanded. They were obviously very fresh, everyone agreed. "Quite!" said Cato, "Less than three days ago. That's how close our enemies are to our city walls!"

Or something like that.¹ We don't have the whole speech, and even if we did we couldn't necessarily trust the accuracy of the various sources that have passed this

¹ The sources are: Plutarch, in his biography of Cato in the *Parallel Lives*, written in Greek. Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*; Aurelius Victor in his *De Viris Illustribus*; Florus, in his *Epitome* of Livy. See also the blog: <http://www.ancient-worlds.net/aw/Post/503442>, where the writer thinks Cato was "fibbing." Mary Beard writes: "One of his stunts in the senate was letting a bunch of deliciously ripe Carthaginigan figs drop from his toga. He then explained that they had come from a city only

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story down to us. That is not my point here. What is interesting is that we have the bit we do have, with the particular details it has. Why this bit? Cato was well known as a speaker, a famous general and holder of high public office. Clearly, he also knew how to get himself reported, get himself talked about, and have his words repeated, meme-like, with a few variations. History has remembered him because of his role in Rome's century-long struggle to dominate Carthage and the whole Mediterranean.

But it is not Cato himself who concerns us here but the use of visual props, and the surrounding verbal tricks that Pliny and others claim to be reporting. Whatever Cato said, lesser mortals frequently, and for a multitude of purposes, use rhetoric of this kind.

The visual props prompt attention by engaging sensory perception in addition to the parts of the brain concerned with processing spoken language. The classical rhetoric teachers would have taught Cato and contemporary aspiring politicians, lawyers and writers that devices like the fig-trick were a part of argumentation – a way of presenting supposed concrete evidence for some claim. The way the fig-trick works, in part, is by associative chains. Figs come from Carthage, they have to be brought here to stay fresh. The classical teacher of rhetoric would have categorised this kind of thing under *Logos*, the devices at the disposal of the orator for making persuasive arguments – not necessarily, notice, logically valid ones. Presenting the fig packs a lot of factual knowledge into a focussed object. Of course there has to be verbal steer as well – which is why the orator asks the audience to think about the fig for what it implies. The audience's brain is made to work a bit, unconsciously of course, by the pseudo-question-and-answer structure: “interrogo vos,” were the actual words, according to Pliny. We shouldn't believe that he really knew the actual words – he didn't have a video, probably not even a transcript, just word of mouth. But any Roman writer would have known which rhetorical devices any reasonably skilled speaker would most likely have used. This is not only about the audience being made to draw inferences, which makes it sound as if rhetoric is all about cool reason and logic. As the classical rhetoric experts who would have taught Cato and his political contemporaries knew very well, rhetoric is also about stimulating chains of

three days journey away. This was a wilful underestimate of the distance between Carthage and Rome (just under five days would have been the quickest journey), but it was a powerful symbol of the dangerous proximity, and agricultural wealth, of a potential rival – and intended to provoke suspicion of the old enemy.” *SPQR. A History of Ancient Rome*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2016, p. 212.

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thought, related ideas and associated emotion – those the speaker wants to turn to his or her own ends.

Whatever the historical context, the deployment of language is essential to politics, whether in times of war or times of peace. They are familiar enough, but we often let them influence us. Have a slogan handy. And as we can see from Cato's famous phrase, they work best if they follow a certain phonetic template.

Three-word, three-beat template: "Carthago delenda est," "Get Brexit done," "Take Back Control!" Then repeat it at every opportunity, even when not relevant, being sure to look at the audience and give time for a reaction. In the same vein, engage in pseudo-dialogue with your audience, as Pliny writes up Cato as doing.

For some reason people cheer or applaud after such oratorical "clap-traps."² This means the orator has to perform his act well enough (Theresa May was not good at it), which involves getting the timing right, pausing and glancing at the audience at the right moment. Experiment after experiment has shown this predicts automatic audience response, though why the human brain should be so susceptible is not known. There does of course have to be some meaning. It's a good ploy to stoke up fear and anxiety, and we know now from experiments with word lists and brain scans that it is easy to do this with scare words and intensify the effect by evoking spatial and temporal *closeness* of some enemy, danger or disaster – precisely what Cato was doing with his fig stunt. Mere words, words evoking alien threat and spatial proximity seem to stimulate the amygdalae (they look like almonds), the part of the brain linked to the feeling of fear. Trump therefore wants a wall, and the Brexit xenophobes and demagogues want hard borders, to keep out the dangerous Others. Of course, all this is assisted by exaggeration, and if necessary outright falsification. It did not take just three days to transport figs from Carthage to Rome: Mary Beard says it took more like five. The Mexicans are not about to invade the United States. Nor are Muslims about to invade Hungary or Austria. And the EU is not controlling the UK, its economy or its judiciary.

Now fast forward...

² Such things are studied by some psychologists and linguists: see, for example, Max Atkinson, *The Language and Body Language of Politics*, Routledge, 1984. Peter Bull, "What makes a successful politician? The social skills of politics" in A. Weinberg (Ed.), *The Psychology of Politicians*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 61-75.

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It was in 2019, 17 July, in the Excel Centre, London, during the internal “hustings” for leadership of the UK’s Conservative and Unionist Party. Ex-London mayor, Boris de Pfeffel Johnson was waiting his turn to speak in the final round, preparing to hold forth about the supposed threat to his country posed by the supposed control of trade and business by the European Union. This fitted well with the ideological aims of a faction of MPs calling themselves the ERG, and also with Boris de Pfeffel’s personal ambitions to be Leader and Prime Minister. This way, under the British constitution, a new prime minister of the country can be installed *without* a general election – in other words, the country can get a prime minister with wholly different character and wholly different policies without a general election.

I’m not comparing Johnson to Cato, admired down the ages, but the two are both politicians – and politicians, whoever they are, have to talk and they all play the same verbal tricks. Like Cato, Johnson had a catchphrase that littered his speeches: “let’s get Brexit done!” You would think hearers would have become bored, irritated or even angry over such insulting oversimplification. But it is just one of the bag of rhetorical tricks that a political showman has up his sleeve (and there are showwomen too).

At the final leadership hustings Johnson had also prepared his oratorical stunt. He began: “I want you to consider this kipper,” disappearing for a second under his podium to pick up the prepared packed kipper and hold it slightly to the right of and above his head, so that he could glance up at it to direct attention. The audience duly chuckles at the attention-grabber. He goes on: “...which has been presented to me just now by the editor of a national newspaper, who received it from a kipper smoker in the Isle of Man who is utterly furious because, after decades of sending kippers like this through the post, he has had his costs massively increased by [pause] Brussels bureaucrats who have insisted that each kipper must be accompanied by a,” and he disappears again to pick up... “this, a plastic ice pillow.”

The little word “this,” and a quick demonstrative glance from Boris himself, draws the audience’s eyes and attention. Stimulus and response reactions work well through words and visuals: the audience’s laughter, approving, is triggered again. Moreover, Johnson looks up from his notes, and looks straight at the audience to acknowledge. That is the real mark of the oratorical huckster. Theresa May was poor at it. Uncritical audiences like Johnson because he is a good performer. He does not

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leave it at that but teases out the political points, in an equally clever rhetorical fashion: “Pointless, pointless, expensive, environmentally-damaging ‘elf and safety, ladies and gentlemen. And where... when we come out, therefore, we will not only be able to er [speaks faster] take back control of our regulatory framework and [slows speech rate] end this damaging regulatory overkill, but we will also be able to do things to boost Britain’s economy, which leads the world in so many sectors...”

The *accelerando*, the pauses, the *diminuendo*, and the hand waving, carefully timed and synchronised with the relevant words are all part and parcel of the huckster’s stock in trade. I leave readers to observe for themselves the other linguistic minutiae that can work on the hearers. Why the imitated accent (“ ‘elf and safety”), for example? Imitation Cockney and thus low-class “ignorant and stupid”? Or imitation “Johnny foreigner,” or “per’aps ze Frogs”? Such is now the stuff of politics.

The occasion was a travesty of democracy, the idea itself, and the political arrangements supposed to embody it, which have taken centuries to emerge since they were first discussed, well before the rise of Rome and statesmen like Cato. Plato had had serious and completely rational grounds to be cautious about it, as had the eighteenth century Enlightenment thinkers in France and in the United States, and Britain too. We still have not got it.

But what I want to do in this brief article is make a few points about political language at this time of historic political crisis for the UK. It is a crisis of democracy that has also hit other parts of Europe, in sometimes similar, sometimes different ways. I also want to make some points about the close relationship between democracy and human language, or rather the *use* of human language. For democracy is not just about suffrage and institutions. As the ancient Greeks thought, it is about rational debate, evidence, and argument – though they knew also about the risks of rousing political emotions. I was recently interviewed by a young student journalist who was interested in these matters, and in particular in Boris Johnson’s uses of language. I will spend the rest of the article outlining some of the issues that seemed to have been of special concern to him and his potential readers.³

³ See <https://uk.reuters.com/article/britain-eu-leader-johnson-language/boris-johnsons-magniloquent-tongue-reaps-political-gold-linguists-say-idUKL8N24N4KY>

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What is it about Johnson's way of speaking that seems unique – why do people think his way of speaking is different to other politicians? As we have seen already, I don't think he is unique. In many respects his way of speaking, his verbal sleight of hand, and, yes, his lying, is only too typical of very many politicians.

There is one very noticeable feature that Boris de Pfeffel Johnson shares with his fellow several of his faction that seek to govern: his Etonian accent. This is something that phoneticians can describe precisely, but there is more to it than the vowels, the intonation patterns, the words and the phraseology. Statistically, features such as these correlate with gender, social class and a specific educational institution, and not simply with regional origin as other accents do (though social class is involved in them also). In any language community, there is variation at all levels of language structure – it is a field studied by sociolinguistics. In the language community of the UK, accent really matters: people grow up learning to spontaneously recognise origin and subtle signs of status by the noises fellow-citizens make with their vocal chords. So what is the advantage for Boris? At least two things. One is that accents are group markers – they enable recognition of fellow members of a local tribe, much as animals have differences in their local group cries and calls. Despite exceptions, it is a reasonable generalisation to suppose (and would be testable) that Etonians flock together, recognising one another's common values and goals.

One may indeed wonder at the effect on others of Johnson's way of speaking. Why aren't people derisive or put off by what is often said to be his unique manner of speaking? Though it is not quite the case that he is unique in this respect, it is nonetheless an intriguing question. There are, of course, people who find his class accent not just ridiculous but offensive. It's not the speech sounds per se of course, it's the whole *habitus*, the set of dispositions, posture, gesture, dress, etc. With fellow upper-class rich Tories, and probably many among them of lower social standing, it probably plays in his favour, of course – for example in Conservative Party internal leadership contests. But why does Johnson's upper-class accent not play against him with others, for example fellow Brexiters from the poor working class of the North of England or the Midlands or the South West?

A possible explanation has to do with the showmanship, already commented on above, with British popular culture, and with the nature of contemporary politics itself. British entertainment culture can still gravitate towards the Bertie Wooster stereotype. This is especially so among an older generation who on the subject of

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Brexit show strong statistical bias in favour. Johnson, Rees-Mogg, and others, conform to an entertainment stereotype who also evokes an element of respect among certain social and generational groups. Another – related – English stereotype is the bumbling amateur, a cousin of Fintan O’Toole’s failed hero of British national folklore... and the bumbling amateur image goes down well with anti-expert populism. This is also the generation that responds to mythologised and popularised versions of historically significant events that are unashamedly exploited by conservative Brexiters. An egregious example is taken up approvingly by *The Daily Telegraph* of 30 September 2018 in its reporting of the Conservative 2018 party conference. Jeremy Hunt, then foreign Secretary, “has warned the EU that it will stir Britain’s ‘Dunkirk spirit’ if it tries to force a bad Brexit deal on Prime Minister Theresa May.” His devices for triggering populist patriotism included also saying that people would “fight back,” and that “we” would “[not be] prepared to be pushed around...”⁴

The point is not so much that such stereotypes are attractive to some people but that it is entertainment, not real, and that politics too is increasingly related to as entertainment and spectacle. O’Toole explains Johnson’s cavalier attitude to truth-conditions in what might be considered serious contexts, and probably once were so considered, as being due to a misplaced satirical and ironic intention. Johnson himself is an “act.” His journalistic lies about EU regulations over the decades (teabags, coffins, straight bananas) are not intended as truth statements but as ironic, satirical cartoon exaggerations. Or rather, ethical responsibility for them can be passed off with such claims. Media managers know that the hustings draw audiences and boost ratings. It scarcely needs mentioning that the same is, a fortiori, true of Trump’s America. Bad behaviour does not matter, so long as it is spectacular, causes excitement. More importantly, neither factual errors nor deliberate lies matter in the domain of the fictional, in which spectacle (literally, something to be watched rather than engaged with) belongs.

Johnson has several speech personae, as all politicians do – as in fact we all do, except that here the term “personae” is significant. The speaking styles of Johnson are flagrantly the masks of the actor. Who is the “real Boris”? The one who acts the part he needs to get what he wants. In the public arena he exploits at least the following masks: the rousing orator, the affable conversationalist, and the bumbling

⁴ Commented upon at length by Fintan O’Toole, *Brexit: Heroic Failure*, Head of Zeus (Apollo Books), 2018.

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amateur. He knows what works an audience is to make them laugh, and that this also masks lack of policy, unwillingness to commit, half-truths, untruths and ignorance of facts. They are simply irrelevant in showmanship – and in the Oxford Union, the elite debating club where he learned his oratorical skills along with his political cronies.

It is worth asking a little more about the acquiring of oratorical skills in the long tradition of Europe. Cato, and *his* friends and admirers, were taught both by observation of examples and by instruction that involved the listing of linguistic patterns, methods of prompting emotions, inculcating ideas, stirring emotions by words and by tone of voice. It is unlikely Johnson, or other modern politicians, learn and practise lists – though there are certainly media consultants and some pedagogues who know what works and are capable of supplying instruction and conscious practice. As Simon Kuper has pointed out, he no doubt learned his audience-captivating skills in his Eton debating society and maybe also something from the Greek and Latin treatises on rhetoric that he would have encountered both at school and in his Oxford tutorials (he studied “Greats,” Greek and Latin literature and philosophy).⁵ But my guess is that he honed his public act in the Oxford Union. Performing in debating societies is a training that teaches you how to persuade an audience, whatever the cause, whether you believe in it or not – in short to bullshit just for the hell of it. It is still somehow in that long classical tradition. But we should not forget that the Greek rhetoricians were also philosophers, who saw rhetoric, logic and participatory democracy (narrowly based as it was) as tightly connected, and also distinguished clearly between rhetoric as a technique for persuading the gullible, and rhetoric as the effort to persuade people of what the speaker honestly thought was right and good for the *polis*. In the classical period similar ideas were prevalent in Rome: rhetoric was part of civic virtue. In this regard, Johnson is in practice a classic sophist.

You may ask whether there is not some more up-to-date academic or technical framework that can describe Johnson’s particular way of speaking. What, if anything, can linguistics tell us? Strictly speaking, linguistics is a scientific discipline concerned with the unique and complex communication system that has evolved in the human brain and been developed and deployed in human cultures. These things can be, and are scientifically described by academic linguists. Some academic linguists *have*

⁵ Kuper, Simon. “How Oxford university shaped Brexit – and Britain’s next prime minister”. *Financial Times*, 18 Sept 2019.

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looked in detail at how human language operates in particular domains and instances. Johnson's way of speaking is not so unique that it needs special study apart from the domain of politics and political actors. However, as I have suggested already, there are features of Johnson's speech that can be described technically, not just in Johnson but in any speaker they occur in, usually in a political context. I mentioned some of these above, e.g. the sociolinguistic features, and the classic oratorical ploys. We do have tools provided by the technical fields of semantics, pragmatics and syntax – which one way and another all have to do with *meaning* and how it comes about in human minds and brains. But I want to stress that you do not need these tools to critically examine the language of politicians in the real world – anyone can stop themselves getting carried away by oratory and say “hey, hang on a minute, what *exactly* do you mean by that?”

Communication, and so language, are at the heart of democracy. In the agora and the forum communication was already complex enough – highly sophisticated (as well as often sophistical) in form, argumentation, and evidence, carried through human networks of rumour, gossip, and political faction. In Boris Johnson's day innovations in both the means and the social structures of human communication had acquired complexity at an exponential rate in the preceding three decades. We don't yet know what this has done to human society, and democracy – if you think of democracy as a complicated system of people talking to one another, as individuals, as groups, as social networks, over different time scales, over different media, sometimes interacting, sometimes not, sometimes hearing one another, sometimes not – and on top of it all still as vulnerable as ever, for some reason, to the dirty tricks of the demagogue.

I shall leave it at that, in the hope that the questioning, the observations and the discussions might continue beyond these pages. Just one final point. The Cato-Johnson comparison with which I started, as well as a number of other claims and arguments, are in the end themselves just uses of language.

Author Biography

Paul Chilton is an emeritus Professor of Linguistics at Lancaster University, and a visiting fellow in the Centre for Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick. He has also been Professor of Linguistics at Aston University and the University of East Anglia. He was educated at Cheadle Hulme School and read Modern Languages at Magdalen College, Oxford. His research concerns the structure of human language. He also writes on the language of politics and is currently completing a book, *Brexit-speak: Language and the Disruption of Democracy*, for Cambridge University Press.