Winning the Soul by Discourse: The Persuasiveness of Figurative Language in Management Communication

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ABSTRACT
Persuasive communication is critical to the effectiveness of leadership and organisational change. This paper proposes that figurative language plays an important role in the persuasiveness of communication. Figurative language is language that uses figures of speech, such as metaphors and rhetorical questions. Founded on the Aristotelian theory of persuasion this paper conceptualises an ascending order in the persuasiveness of particular figures of speech, that is moderated by the thinking orientation of the listener. Plato once described the creation of the (civilised) world as the victory of persuasion over force. In that tradition, this paper seeks to gain a clearer understanding of persuasion in the management context and to contribute to the advancement of civilised behaviour inside organisations.

Keywords: Persuasion, figurative language, thinking orientation, Aristotle, conceptual.

INTRODUCTION
Persuasion is part of the human condition. It is central to how we relate to each other in a free and equal society and how we make things happen. It determines not just what we think or buy or how we vote, but our allegiances and opinions, and whether good ideas get accepted and taken up with gusto. Persuasion is the currency of civilisation and the hallmark of the free world!

For modern organisations, persuasion is conquering the ‘command and control’ culture – not as a nouveau management trend but out of necessity. Conger (1998) observes that the modern competitive economy requires managers and leaders to focus on merit as never before and to discuss and sell ideas rather than impose them. This persuasion-centred approach to management is relentlessly driven by irresistible forces – evolutionary events such as: 1 generational change in leadership as Babyboomers and Generation X assume control of organisations, 2 growing reliance on cross-functional teams that bring different ranks together to work on critical projects, 3 widespread application of desktop computing that democratises information and empowers communication across (as well as up and down) formal chains of command, and 4 the ever pressing need for talent, creativity and ideas as
crucial ingredients of competitive advantage. On top of this, long-term skill shortages loom as Babyboomers approach retirement and the global economy booms with the rise of China and the services sector. Business needs people as never before and it needs a winning culture to keep and engage them.

Persuasive communication remains critical for organisational success in other ways. Scholars such as Kotter (1995), Kouzes and Posner (1987, 2002), Collins (1996, 2001) and Collins and Porras (2000) all highlight the critical role of strong persuasive communication in creating a shared vision, inspiring your people, galvanising teams and getting the best out of organisations. Harkins (1999) sees what he calls ‘powerful conversations’ as essential for leadership and organisational change, while Rafferty and Griffin (2004) highlight its continuing role in transformations. Whether it is convincing staff to embrace an important change, selling a new vision or strategy, explaining a difficult issue, or galvanising support for an idea, the task is often about persuading people to a line of thinking and taking them with you in order to build real (as opposed to tacit) commitment. “… the central task of leadership is to persuade others to do their jobs well” (Mayo and Jarvis 1992: 7).

So what is at the heart of persuasion and what approach works best?

ARISTOTLE – ACE OF THE AGE

23 centuries ago, the classical philosopher Plato (427-347 BCE) described persuasion as the art of winning the soul by discourse. His illustrious student and friend Aristotle (384-322 BCE), infected with a love of learning, undertook the first scientific study of the persuasive art, documenting three essential pillars: ethos – the perceived character and credibility of the speaker (achieved during a presentation), pathos – the power to arouse emotions in the listener, and logos – logical reasoning and argument. Aristotle also identified varying strategies in each area to enhance the rhetorical technique of the speaker and extolled the virtue of figurative language (i.e. language that involves figures of speech). Since then, numerous studies and authors have affirmed the individual role that credibility,
emotion and logic play in compelling argument (e.g. Chaiken and Trope 1999, Guerin 2003, Levine 2003, Mills 1999, Murphy 2001, O’Keefe 2002, Petty and Cacioppo 1996, Toulmin et al 1984, Wood 2005), although there is no evidence that Aristotle’s integrated theory has been empirically tested. Each ingredient, through a variety of message characteristics that include structure, content and form, achieve their impact in large part through the use of engaging language, with figurative language one of the most engaging forms.

While the Aristotelian recipe has survived the test of time, we now know so much more about the social psychology of persuasion and how the process works.

**PERSUASION AND ATTITUDES**

Persuasion is fundamentally about changing attitudes, as a precursor to changing behaviour. Attitudes (i.e. summary evaluations that influence a person’s thoughts and actions) are based on beliefs which are perceptions of the world, typically emotional ones. By nature, beliefs are subjective and prone to being biased and wrong (Perloff 2003). Beliefs and attitudes, and the collective values they spawn, are all learned phenomena, acquired either through direct teaching and social conditioning or through experiential discovery. Collectively, they form a set of cognitive shortcuts for how we view the world and make decisions.

Importantly, attitudes fulfil a variety of needs unrelated to message arguments, with the same attitude in different people meeting different needs. Perloff identifies that attitudes can help people to make cognitive sense of the world, obtain rewards or avoid punishment, portray socially acceptable positions, communicate a social identity or self-perception, express core values or beliefs, or defend the ego from confronting internal contradictions or unpleasant emotions. But because a person holds an attitude doesn’t mean their actions are always consistent. People can and do act in ways that are openly inconsistent with an attitude they hold if to do so serves a deeper need.
In essence, attitudes guide and influence behaviour, they don’t direct it.

**INFORMATION PROCESSING**

Behaviour and persuasion are also influenced by how people process information. Petty and Cacioppo (1981, 1984, 1986, 1996) identified that people process information in two ways. Within their Elaboration Likelihood Model, they identified a *central* route and a *peripheral* route. Central information processing – where elaboration (deep thinking) is high – occurs where a listener focuses directly on the message and information provided, consciously weighing-up the arguments and drawing a considered conclusion. In peripheral processing listeners tend to absorb contextual cues and take mental shortcuts rather than analysing the message itself. This occurs where they are not motivated or able to think deeply, do not have sufficient opportunity (Hallahan 2000) or are distracted. Typically it happens when matters are complex or not seen as personally relevant, interesting or important, or where the consequences are perceived as low. It also happens where people do not have a strong ‘need for cognition’ (i.e. an intrinsic need to think through and understand issues).

Chaiken et al (1989) offered a slightly different perspective with their Heuristic-Systematic Model. They argued that people are essentially mental misers who do the minimum necessary to reach a confident conclusion. Information is processed in a deliberate effortful way only to the extent that a heuristic cue (or associated inferential rule) is not available or is insufficient. When a cue is available and sufficient to provide a desired level of confidence, people are unlikely (the authors say) to exert any additional effort to process the message further.

By contrast Dole and Sinatra (1998) see processing occurring on a ‘continuum of engagement’ where the highest end involves deep thinking (i.e. elaboration and reflection), and the lowest end involves no message processing or change on a listener’s underlying knowledge or conceptual understanding. However, even with high engagement, there is no guarantee that conceptual change will occur as this is
ultimately a function of the listener’s existing attitudes (there’s that word again) and knowledge, his or her motivation and the essential characteristics of the message.

Predating all this is Festinger’s (1957) theory that cognitive dissonance can motivate a change of mind where incongruity exists between differing facts, attitudes or behaviours that cause significant psychological discomfort. In effect, internalised incongruity on a matter that a person regards as important motivates change. People in effect persuade themselves.

All these perspectives on processing styles ultimately hinge on a person’s their level of involvement.

IN VolvEMEN T

In a meta-analysis conducted by Johnson and Eagly (1989), the authors confirmed that the approach and tailoring of a message can influence a person’s level of involvement and therefore their susceptibility to persuasion based on the processing strategy used. They also found that with value-relevant involvement – persuading people to change attitudes away from established values proved more difficult the more attentive (cognitively involved) they were, with impression-relevant involvement – subjects whose involvement stemmed from the anticipation of public scrutiny of their positions were more likely to maintain relatively neutral and defensible positions, even in response to especially strong or weak arguments, and finally with outcome-relevant involvement – strong arguments that connected well with listeners’ self-interest (desired outcomes) proved more persuasive than weak arguments, or strong arguments with a poor connection with listeners’ self-interests. In other words, persuasion can be increased by a speaker connecting with listener values, concerns for outward impressions or desired outcomes and, where possible, moderating the level of listener involvement as required.

Understanding a person’s thinking orientation and tailoring the message accordingly can also increase persuasion.
THINKING ORIENTATION

In developing his Cognitive–Experiential Self-Theory, Epstein (1994) significantly expanded our understanding of the role that emotion and logic play in peoples’ perceptions of the world. He stretched the Aristotelian boundaries and those of other researchers by identifying that people actually think in two fundamentally different ways – one through an experiential (intuitive emotional) cognitive system and the other through a rational (analytical logical) cognitive system. Behaviour is the product of both systems and the outcome of seeking to jointly satisfy four needs: 1 to maximise pleasure/minimise pain, 2 to maintain a relatively stable and coherent conceptual system, 3 to satisfy a need for relatedness, and 4 to overcome feelings of inferiority and enhance self-esteem.

Epstein argued that the experiential system encodes experiences into exemplars and narratives that form a set of inferential rules differing from those of the rational system. The experiential system is more automatic, effortless and efficient in processing information while the rational system is deliberative, effortful and abstract.

In most situations, the easy automatic processing of the experiential system makes it dominant over the rational system, with emotional arousal and related experience enhancing the appeal. This tendency towards experiential thinking can be suppressed however, where evidence challenges underlying beliefs buried in the experiential system (Stanovich and West 2000). Ultimately, the relative dominance of one system over the other is largely determined by individual differences in thinking style and related situational factors that influence the choice.

These two different cognitive orientations affect how listeners approach and analyse information, the nature and extent of the accumulated inferential rules and shortcuts they develop, and their preferred style of thinking. But all message-related thinking is shaped by the words used and the richness and appeal of the thoughts, images and emotions they evoke. Tailored language drives everything and rich tailored language is the jumbo-jet of persuasion!
FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Hosman (2002) identifies language as one of the most critical elements of a persuasive message. Language characteristics include phonics, syntax, vocabulary, vividness, intensity, power and framing. Language can also involve the figurative use of words to evoke non-literal meaning and conjure-up specific imagery, emotion and conceptual insights.

Aristotle recognised the virtue of language. He emphasised the use of everyday words, presented for freshness with an unfamiliar air or framing, and he saw the merit of concise, easy sentences. Above all, he advocated that language must be appropriate to the situation and the emotional tone being conveyed and have a sense of rhythm. Aristotle also recognised the immense power of figurative language to convey ideas through means such as antithesis (opposing concepts in a single sentence or phrase), analogies (parallel stories), actuality (words that paint a vivid picture) and above all, metaphors and synonyms.

Figurative language is a Trojan horse that uses figures of speech to overwhelm resistance.

Mothersbaugh, Huhmann and Franke (2002) define figures of speech as artful deviations that enhance communication. In general, these deviations involve the non-traditional use or arrangement of words, often incorporating word play or the allegorical substitution of one thing for another. McGuire (2000) highlights that there are over a hundred archetypal forms of figures of speech relevant to persuasion, while Lanham (1991) defines nearly a thousand terms used by rhetorical scholars. In effect, there are a whole herd of wooden horses to deploy for every occasion!

Drawing on classical distinctions (à la Quintilian¹ and Aristotle²), Leech (1969) divides figures of speech into schemes and tropes. Schemes reflect a non-standard style of expression that is excessively regular and orderly, while tropes involve an unexpected meaning (McQuarrie and Mick 1996, Toncar

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¹ Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (35-95) in his Institutio Oratoria
² Aristotle (384-322 BCE) in his treatise: On Rhetoric
and Munch 2003). Typical examples of *schemes* include rhymes, chimes (key words in a phrase beginning with identical sounds or letters), alliterations (repetition of initial consonants or vowel sounds within a phrase) and antitheses (opposing concepts in a sentence or phrase). Typical examples of *tropes* include metaphors, synonyms, rhetorical questions, ellipses, metonyms (substitution of an attribute for the name of a whole concept), irony, puns and paradoxes.

McQuarrie and Mick (1996) identified that *schemes* and *tropes* vary with complexity leading to four subtypes: simple *schemes*, complex *schemes*, simple *tropes* and complex *tropes*. **Figure 1** (over the page) provides an explicit illustration of each subtype, reinforcing the basic difference between *schemes* and *tropes*.

![FIGURE 1 – ILLUSTRATION OF SCHEMES AND TROPS AND THEIR SUBTYPES](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category (subtypes)</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Illustration (from advertising text)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple Scheme</td>
<td>Alliteration</td>
<td>Repetition of initial consonants or vowel sounds within a phrase</td>
<td>No one knows the land like a Navajo (Mazda four-wheel drive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex Scheme</td>
<td>Antithesis</td>
<td>Conjoined opposites in a sentence or phrase</td>
<td>We got hot prices on cool stuff (Musicland Stores)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Trope</td>
<td>Rhetorical Question</td>
<td>Nominal question asked purely for effect not intended to be answered</td>
<td>Are you protecting only half your dog from worms? (Interceptor pet medicine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex Trope</td>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>Allegorical substitution of one thing for another where it is not literally applicable</td>
<td>Science you can touch (Jergens skin care)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Importantly, the persuasive use of particular *schemes* and *tropes* and figurative language in general, has not been fully researched or received much attention since classical times. A number of recent small studies have been conducted in therapeutic contexts typically exploring metaphorical language used in clinical situations (e.g. McMullen and Conway 1996, Karp 1996, Cardin 2004), while others have explored figurative language in speeches and literary work (e.g. Williams-Whitney, Mio and Whitney 1992, Kreuz and Roberts 1993, Kreuz et al 1996, Acheson 2004). Figurative language in organisational science has also received attention (e.g. Oswick et al 2002, Putnam and Fairhurst 2001), as it has to a limited extent in areas such as negotiation (e.g. Putnam 2003). More recently though, empirical research in
the business context has tended to focus on exploring the use and impact of particular figures of speech in advertising (e.g. Ahluwalia and BurnKrant 2004, McQuarrie and Mick 2003, Roehm and Sternthal 2001, Toncar and Munch 2003, and van Mulken, van Enschot-van Dijk and Hoeken 2005). Other contemporary scholars have made important theoretical contributions to the field in terms of developing taxonomies to classify the various types of figurative language (e.g. McQuarrie and Mick 1996) and speculating how *tropes* affect perception and persuasion (e.g. McGuire 2000).

McGuire (2000) offered four speculations (but no empirical evidence) about how *tropes* affect perception and persuasion. Firstly, he theorised that *tropes* are eye-catching and make a message more appealing which encourages effective encoding and increases the likelihood of central processing. Next, he suggested that *tropes* could affect how an audience perceives the source, both positively and negatively. Thirdly, he argued that some *tropes* (like metaphors) intensify the encoding process to connect with base values (bundled attitudes) or archetypes at a deeper more visceral level, while others may have the opposite desired effect of decreasing cognitive penetration. Finally, McGuire postulated that the effect of *tropes* may relate to the mood and emotions they evoke in the audience – both positively and negatively – and the congruence they achieve between the emotional state they induce and the essential argument in the message. The latter, it seems, can overwhelm established attitudes and positions with emotion and logic, and the overall credibility of the messenger, or set up cognitive dissonance that does the same over time. McGuire’s work, while offering an interesting theoretical contribution, provides no insights into the persuasiveness of particular forms or categories and is yet to be supported with empirical studies.

McQuarrie and Mick (2003) conducted an experimental study to see if the impact of figures of speech held up under conditions of incidental, rather than direct exposure to advertising. The experiment used both verbal and visual rhymes (*schemes*) and metaphors (*tropes*) as independent variables. The results showed that figures of speech improved participants’ attitude towards an advertisement and related recall. The study also found that *tropes* were more effective (i.e. had higher levels of positive attitude and recall) than *schemes*, with visual figures more effective than verbal counterparts.
Another recent empirical study conducted by Toncar and Munch (2003) in advertising found that complex *tropes* influence ‘persuasion’ without enduring memory effects, while simple *tropes* are more memorable but without an apparent ‘persuasive’ effect. This study used specific *tropes* from McQuarrie and Mick’s (1996) typology as independent variables (i.e. an ellipsis, hyperbole, metaphor and paradox), with attribute belief and importance, and claim recall and cognitive reactions as dependent variables. Half the sample viewed an advertisement with explicit (literal) claims and half with equivalent claims structured as *tropes*. In comparison with literal alternatives, the experiments found that: ① complex *tropes* increased the believability of advertisement claims and the perceived importance of features in those claims, while simple *tropes* did not, ② complex *tropes* elicited more emotion-oriented responses but less cognitive (thought-oriented) responses, and ③ simple *tropes* were remembered better than complex *tropes*.

Other researchers have similarly studied particular figures of speech in advertising such as analogies (Roehm and Sternthal 2001), metaphors (McQuarrie and Phillips 2005), puns (van Mulken, van Enschot-van Dijk and Hoeken 2005) and rhetorical questions (Ahluwalia and BurnKrant 2004). Roehm and Sternthal used semantic differential scale-items to measure comprehension and persuasion in relation to brand evaluations – i.e. like/dislike, useful/not useful, good/bad, high/low quality, practical/impractical, worth owning/ not worth owning, impressive/unimpressive, valuable/not valuable and advanced/not advanced. McQuarrie and Phillips used ‘yes/no’ responses and reaction times to implication statements about an advertised brand to assess the indirect persuasion of metaphors, while van Enscho-t-van Dijk and Hoeken asked participants to rate varying slogans in terms of being ‘badly/well chosen’ and ‘not pleasing/pleasing’ to assess their appreciation levels. Ahluwalia and BurnKrant used recall and message quality perceptions as measures of message persuasion. All studies used students to assess experimental stimuli against controls, while a further study into metonymy (Musson and Tietze 2004) used participant observation of university faculty members. None of these studies have examined the possible influence of moderating variables (such as thinking orientation) or provided insights into the comparative persuasiveness of particular forms or categories of figures of speech in the context of management communications.
SO WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN?

Persuasion is part of the human condition and increasingly important as a management art. Aristotle prescribed a simple recipe centred on credibility, emotion and logic. We now know that persuasion is about changing the attitudes that guide behaviour and doing so means understanding the underlying needs those attitudes serve. In processing information, people also use different strategies in different situations depending on their level of interest and involvement, and the heuristic cues they detect. While cognitive dissonance can motivate a change of position, in general, persuasion depends largely on the thinking orientation of the listener, the quality and richness of the language used and how well it suits the situation, and the extent to which the speaker can demonstrate credibility, arouse emotion and present compelling logic, as Aristotle espoused.

Figurative language makes communication interesting and engaging; it carries subtle meaning, draws thoughtful connections between concepts, evokes emotions and cuts through complexity in a way that literal language can’t. Figures of speech amuse, elucidate and charm an audience while offering powerful insights. Even in this paper, phrases like ‘persuasion is the currency of civilisation’, ‘Aristotle – Ace of the Age’, ‘winning the soul by discourse’, ‘mental misers’, ‘jumbo-jet of persuasion’, ‘conjure-up specific imagery’, ‘figurative language is a Trojan horse’ – or rhetorical questions like ‘what does all this mean’ – are all examples of figurative language at work. We use them, all of us, in everyday conversation to explain a point, impart rich meaning, evoke particular images and emotions, and elicit impact. We use them (to lesser or greater effect) in communicating with others because they work; they improve our language and our ability to achieve a meeting of the minds (i.e. to persuade). Despite this and their long history across time, there is no mother-load of research (a trope) that explains how they work, which forms or combinations are more effective or how best to combine them in management communication. All this, remains for future researchers, as does the golden opportunity (yet another trope) to empirically test Aristotle’s theory that persuasion is the integrated function of credibility, emotion and logic.
CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE AND PERSUASION

In summary, most of the research into the use of figurative language in business has focused on the advertising industry. These studies have categorised figures of speech based on complexity and deviation, as well as exploring their impact in terms of recall, attitude toward the advertisement, attribute belief and importance, likeability, good versus bad evaluations, impressiveness, implication statements, message quality perceptions, whether they were well chosen or pleasing, and the like (e.g. McGuire, 2000, McQuarrie and Mick, 2003, Toncar and Munch, 2003). There have been relatively few rigorous studies of figurative language and none of those reviewed – have uncovered equivalent research in the management area. Moreover, of those that have been conducted, the most relevant have occurred in the advertising field but these consistently harbour two shortcomings: no clear insights into the persuasiveness of particular forms or categories, and no consideration of possible moderating variables such as thinking orientation.

The model of figurative language and persuasion proposed at Figure 2 differs from prior research in five distinct ways. First, it is proposed that the use of figurative language is also integral to persuasion in management communications involving for example, organisational change or transformation. Second, the model focuses on the persuasiveness of figures of speech based on the Aristotelian concept of ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion) and logos (logic), rather than other effectiveness criteria. Third, incorporated into the model is one figure of speech from each of McQuarrie and Mick’s (1996) four categories of simple and complex schemes and tropes, and involves antithesis and alliteration (schemes commonly used in persuasive writing). Fourth, the model

![Figure 2 – Conceptual Model](image-url)
suggests that there is an ascending order in persuasiveness from simple schemes, to complex schemes, to simple tropes, to complex tropes, and finally, the model includes the impact of thinking orientation as a possible moderator of persuasion. The following hypotheses are therefore proposed:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):**

Figurative language is more persuasive than literal language in management communication.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):**

Tropes are more persuasive than schemes in management communication.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):**

Complex schemes are more persuasive than simple schemes in management communication.

**Hypothesis 4 (H4):**

Complex tropes are more persuasive than simple tropes in management communication.

**Hypothesis 5 (H5):**

There is an ascending order in the persuasiveness of schemes and tropes in management communication in line with their ascending complexity – i.e. from simple schemes, to complex schemes, to simple tropes, to complex tropes.

**Hypothesis 6 (H6):**

The thinking orientation of the listener (i.e. experiential versus rational) will moderate the persuasiveness of management communication.

An empirical test of the proposed model will provide findings about the usefulness of figurative language and its potential value as a management tool. It may also offer insights and implications for perceived leadership style, change management and corporate communications and add to the body of knowledge generally about thinking orientation and the unique role of figurative language in persuasion. With more empirical evidence and understanding in this area, senior managers and leaders will be better able to adapt their communication style, based on the persuasiveness of particular schemes and tropes and a better understanding of thinking orientation, to inspire, excite and persuade their employees to their way of thinking. Aristotle would be proud!
CONCLUSION

Plato once described the creation of the (civilised) world as the victory of persuasion over force. He viewed persuasion as the deep philosophical pursuit of truth and justice through cogent, rational argument, and was dismissive of mere ‘technique’. His student and friend, Aristotle, offered a simple recipe to achieve both which until now has not been empirically assessed as an integrated concept. The opportunity now exists to empirically investigate whether figurative language makes management communication more persuasive.

In seeking to gain a clearer understanding in this area, empirically testing the proposed model will address the current lack of published research on persuasion in the management field and provide additional guidance about the persuasiveness of figurative language and its particular forms and categories. With any luck, the results will also aid the advance of civilising behaviour inside organisations and contribute further to the conquest of the command and control culture.

Conquest of the command and control culture? … Ah yes; now that’s an alliteration!

And a metaphor!
REFERENCES


