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## Nookaler Ambitions: A Social-Psychological Analysis of Persuasive Speech

Eric Gladstone\*

\*Grand Valley State University

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Eric Gladstone

## **Abstract**

This study proposes a general model of persuasion based in social-psychology and cognitive information processing theory and is composed of an ideal listener/speaker/environment interaction. Drawing upon research conducted by Lowenthal and Guterman (1950), Erich Hoffer (1952), and Prakanis and Aranson (1992), the model is oriented towards post-911 presidential communications for testing. Presidential rhetoric is organized into seventeen themes, and these themes are analyzed so as to determine what effect, if any, said persuasive trends have on the individual listener. Insight into the characteristics and effects of persuasive communiqués is essential to the development of rational, critical psyches within persuasively-dense environments.

**KEYWORDS:** Cognitive Information Processing Theory, Presidential Communications, Post-911, Presidential Rhetoric

# Nookaler ambitions: a social-psychological analysis of persuasive speech



**Eric Gladstone**  
McNair Scholar

## ABSTRACT

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## Introduction

Does a general framework for analyzing persuasive speech techniques exist? Utilizing this general framework, can either traditional or modern social-psychological theory effectively demonstrate the persuasive techniques of presidential speech? What type of listener is most susceptible to persuasive speech techniques?

The aim of the paper is not to single out George W. Bush for unabashed critique. I do not wish to debate the authenticity of various facts and figures, of motive and reason. Rather, my paper will address presidential speech between September 12, 2001 and April 10, 2006 and apply social-psychological theory to said speech. The analytical framework I am using can be applied to various forms of persuasive speech—including religious leaders, media figures, etc.

The worth of such research is paramount—we live within a nation that has collectively decided to utilize a democratic system of government. As such, we elect leaders, create policy, and engage in hostilities when a given individual persuades us to do so. Thus, persuasion plays a central role in the day-to-day activities of our republic. Democracy requires informed choice. It then becomes essential that the citizen develop, hone, and invest in his or her analytical and critical tools of diagnoses. If social-psychological theory can provide a theoretical impetus for the effectiveness of Presidential persuasive speech, then research such as mine can help to alert and make aware the type of listener most susceptible to the psychological tricks employed. At best, such research helps to create the critical and analytical individual who is able to ask “why and for whom?” in the face of any persuasive speech.

My paper addresses those communications made by President Bush after September 11<sup>th</sup> through both traditional and modern social-psychological lenses. I focus on social-



**Jennifer Stewart, Ph.D.**  
Faculty Mentor

psychological theory developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and cognitive information processing theory developed later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ultimately, my research attempts to categorize the communications made by the president and apply social-psychological theory which demonstrates why such statements are effective to a particular type of listener. In doing this, I will also outline the type of individual most susceptible to presidential persuasive speech and ultimately, create a general framework which may be utilized in analysis of other types of persuasive speech. In its totality, my empirical research depicts an ideal-type relationship composed of the ideal listener and the ideal speaker (Weber, 1949)—both of whom are presumably immersed in an ideal environment.

## Section I

### *The Issues*

#### *Literature Review*

In 1949, *Prophets of Deceit*, a work created by Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman described an ideal-type of social agitator. Dealing specifically with anti-Semitic rhetoric, Max Horkheimer states that the authors sought to understand “ideologies and ideological manifestations... as qualities, as meaningful structural units” (Lowenthal and Guterman 1949, p. xi). Their research led to the identification of thirty thematic trends utilized by a persuasive speaker who wishes to move a given listener to support (Lowenthal & Guterman). They identified the ideal listener as one suffering from general social atrophy and malaise—this atrophy being both temporally and spatially particular. This ideal listener is composed of an unstable emotional substratum which effectively worked to alienate, confuse, and enrage the individual at various psychic levels (Lowenthal & Guterman).

Having identified the type of listener most susceptible to agitating and persuasive speech, the authors then identified the specific themes utilized by the agitating and persuasive speaker. The speaker in question first creates a context for his or her persuasive message through the identification of a problem and proposes a course of corrective action (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). This context was based upon illustrative depictions of a coming Armageddon which in turn entailed the identification of enemy ideologies and forces (Lowenthal & Guterman). Lowenthal and Guterman then crafted rhetorical categorizations which illustrated the communicative trends employed by the agitating and persuasive speaker. In doing so, the authors relied upon traditional psycho-analytic theory to describe the psychic effects such agitating and persuasive speech has on the listener—essentially providing demonstrable evidence as to why the anti-Semitic speech in question was able to persuade many listeners to support a given ideology or perspective. Thus, *Prophets of Deceit* represents a milestone in social-psychological propaganda analysis—in combining macroscopic communications with microscopic psychic effects, Lowenthal and Guterman were able to represent an entire spectrum of persuasive communicative phenomena.

*True Believer*, written in 1951 by Eric Hoffer, added to the work of Lowenthal and Guterman. Rather than concentrate on a single persuasive or agitating speaker, on a type of agitating dialogue or a persecuted group, Hoffer identified broader and more applicable themes contained within persuasive speech. Hoffer identified the ideal listener as one who is emotionally apathetic and discontented, similar to the character portrait described by Lowenthal and Guterman. His work then identified thirty seven thematic trends contained

within successful persuasive speech. Just as Lowenthal and Guterman had done, Hoffer identified the successful persuasive and agitating speaker as one who identifies a problem and an enemy, and then proposes a corrective course of action. Making use of the emotional apathy and confusion present in the ideal listener, the persuasive speaker then utilizes various themes which work to motivate the listener into support.

*Age of Propaganda*, (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992), identified persuasive techniques and themes as they are rooted in modern social-psychological theory and in particular, cognitive information processing theory. Pratkanis and Aronson's work dealt with all forms of persuasive techniques utilized by a persuasive individual or organization. Drawing upon experimental social-psychology, Pratkanis and Aronson found evidence which indirectly supported the findings of Lowenthal and Guterman and Hoffer. In a much more generalized sense, *Age of Propaganda* essentially applied experimental testing to the specific themes identified in the two earlier works: the effectiveness of collective action manifested through the identification of common enemies, the need to reduce feelings of guilt and cognitive dissonance that may result from the persecution of enemies, and the necessity of initial contextual framing or pre-persuasion. Moreover, Pratkanis and Aronson identified the ideal listener as the individual in modern society who is inundated with persuasive messages and seeks to conserve psychic energy through the use of uncritical peripheral message analysis—this cognitive miser represents an additional characteristic of the ideal listener.

## Critique and Suggestion

What each work lacked, however, was a specific synthesis—an integration of

both traditional theory and modern theory. This synthesis could then be tested through the targeting of a particular persuasive speaker. The specificity of the themes devised by Lowenthal and Guterman (1949) and Hoffer (1951) could be placed within a more general framework indirectly created by *Age of Propaganda*. This model could then work to analyze not just agitating persuasive speech but other forms of persuasive speech as well. This becomes the strength of my research—its synthesis of previous research and its ability to conform to various target samples.

My research will modify the themes contained in *Prophets of Deceit* and *True Believer*. As a general framework of analysis, I will modify the running schematic contained in *Age of Propaganda* and allocate three main constructs: contextual framing and pre-persuasion, motivation, and guilt and cognitive dissonance reduction. These three constructs are utilized to define and interpret my data (thematic content). Through the use of the three constructs, my research is able to maintain a steady focus as well as provide a theoretical framework upon which further research may be constructed.

Before we address the models I have created for this research, we must first concern ourselves with one last theoretical construct: the ideal audience and listener (Weber, 1949). This theoretical audience is required so as to complete the ideal relationship (Weber) between listener and speaker—thus, the ideal environment. The theoretical audience essentially simplifies the incredibly complex spectrum of individual characteristics so as to allow generalizations to be made.

### **Theoretical Audience and the Ideal Listener**

#### *The Cognitive Miser*

We are a nation and a population immersed in persuasion. Given that an individual watches approximately thirty hours of television per week, he or she is besieged by 38,000 persuasive advertisements each year (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992). The typical American watches over 1,550 hours of television, listens to 1,160 hours of radio and spends 180 hours reading over 94 pounds of newspaper (Pratkanis & Aronson). Our government spends nearly \$400 million on favorable propaganda and employs over 8,000 workers (Pratkanis & Aronson). As an aggregate total, more than half of our conscious, waking moments are spent processing influential information. (Pratkanis & Aronson).

Within the context of such a persuasive bombardment, it becomes essential that a communication appears as distinct and attention getting. Moreover, the communication must adhere to the mantra of KISS: keep it simple, stupid (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992). Successful and persuasive political speech does just that—such rhetoric makes use of expressive, colorful language and presents one-sided debate through puffery and binary explanations. Evidence as to the effectiveness of simple and attention-getting persuasive messages abounds: scantily clad women peddling beer, attractive men and women wearing designer watches.

Ultimately, a persuasive communication must overcome the two main obstacles identified by cognitive information processing theory: firstly, the tendency for an individual, inundated by persuasive communications, to become a cognitive miser. secondly, the persuasive communication must proceed through a processing route defined as periphery as opposed to central.

### **D) Cognitive Misers Defined**

Human beings possess limited information processing capability (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Our finite mental power results in an effort to “conserve our cognitive energy” (Fiske & Taylor). Such conservation results in the processing of information and persuasive techniques in the most efficient manner possible. Unfortunately, such a tactic results in un-invested, often uncritical acceptance of a persuasive communication so long as supporting cognitive devices exist. Cognitive misers do not accept messages mindlessly—rather, this tendency makes an individual more likely to accept a persuasive communication when the said communication is supported by other persuasive mechanisms.

One of the easiest ways to overcome the obstacles presented by cognitive misers is to present the issue at hand in vivid and colorful terms. President Bush makes ample use of such techniques when, on September 12, 2001 he refers to Iraqis and terrorists as “evil”, “despicable” and representative of the “very worst of human nature”. Their acts represent “unprecedented danger” (George Bush, public presentation, January 29, 2002) and this conflict is one of “good versus evil” wherein “good will prevail” (September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001)

The imagery evoked by the President is cosmic and incredibly large—his illustrations point towards a great battle, not merely of an earthly scale but one of galactic proportions. Such descriptions immediately grab the listener’s attention and compel the listener to perceive this communication and those to come as uncommon and important—as communications distinctly different from those the listener is exposed to each day regarding consumer goods, economics, treaties, and international business. This communication appears urgent and urgency requires no cognitive investment at all.

### Peripheral vs. Central Processing

The cognitive miser utilizes a route of information processing deemed “peripheral” (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) wherein the message is given “little attention and effort” (Pratkanis & Aronson, p. 35). Processing through the peripheral route equates to a rather uncritical, un-analytical interpretation of the persuasive communication. Persuasion depends upon this type of information processing. We may juxtapose the peripheral route to the central route. In the latter, information is confronted with scrutiny and “careful and thoughtful consideration of the true merits of the information presented” (Pratkanis & Aronson 1992, p. 35). Such an analysis is quick to pick out the contradiction, falsities, and missing logic inherent to modern persuasive speech.

Experimentation performed by Petty and Cacioppo (1981) found that the involvement of the message recipient helps to determine the route by which the information is processed. The more direct the listeners involvement, the more likely the message will be processed centrally with great thought. The less likely the participation or involvement, the more likely the message will be processed peripherally. What does such a cognitive phenomenon amount to? It provides to the well-informed persuasive speaker a framework in which he or she should frame a given communication.

President Bush utilizes this theory when he speaks vaguely about somewhere-out-there descriptions of terrorist and fundamentalist activity. Comments such as “Our war on terror is only just beginning...” and “dangerous killers, schooled in the methods of murder...” who are “arming to threaten the peace of the world” (George Bush, public presentation, January 29, 2002) draw the listener’s attention but in no way demand direct action from the listener. At most, the average listener

may only support the President’s policies and actions through subtle action or overt inaction. The term “dangerous killers” describes virtually nothing despite the accompanying imagery while “arming to threaten the peace of the world” sounds rather negative but again, is overly vague. Who is arming to threaten the peace? How is he, she, or some group doing so? How are we defining peace? Are we not also arming to threaten the peace of the world?

Vague and nebulous statements, which ask the listener to respond with a modicum of involvement and investment, rely upon peripheral processing so as to evade critical detection and analysis. Such analysis and detection quickly erodes the poorly constructed walls of linguistic barricades presented by persuasive speech.

Thus, our first section leads us to what we may call the effective dilemma of modern democracy (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992). We value democracy and, consequently, influential statements; yet it is these very influential statements which help to create the cognitive miser who does not critically evaluate those persuasive communications.

### Contextual Setting and Pre-persuasion

Once the cognitive miser’s attention has been oriented towards the speaker, and the preliminary persuasive tactics have effectively channeled the listener’s “cognitive responses concerning communication” (Pratkanis & Aronson 1992, p. 72), the persuasive speaker must move quickly to secure said attention and cognitive faculties. As noted previously, the listener is constantly being inundated by persuasive communications, and his or her attention is fleeting.

Thus, the necessary task becomes one of explanation and definition—in short, the persuasive speaker must first explain and define the problem at hand through the creation of context. In presenting to the

listener a problem that warrants immediate attention, the persuasive speaker must elaborate on why existing procedure and protocol are no longer adequate in the face of this “new problem”. Lastly, and most importantly, the persuasive speaker must then offer a solution, which is couched in vague language and is logically unobtainable. The promise of this solution, and its ultimately nebulous nature, serve to motivate the listener to believe in further solutions.

### Section II

#### *Analytical Methods*

My research is an empirical analysis of the rhetorical content present in presidential persuasive speech. My target sampling material consists of thirty-one televised speeches and three radio addresses. The thirty-four presidential communications occurred between September 12, 2001 and April 10, 2006. Each communication was accessed from the official Presidential speech website at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

**Question 1:** Does a general framework for analyzing persuasive speech techniques exist? This question is addressed through *General Persuasion Framework* (see Model 1).

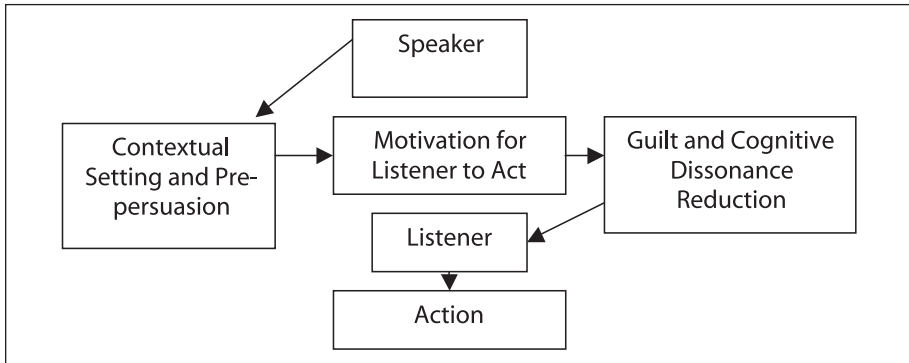
**Question 2:** Utilizing this general framework, can either traditional or modern social-psychological theory effectively demonstrate the persuasive techniques of presidential speech?

This question is addressed through *Target Specific Framework for Presidential Persuasive Speech* (see Model 1.1) which integrates the seventeen persuasive themes I have identified in presidential speech into the previous framework:

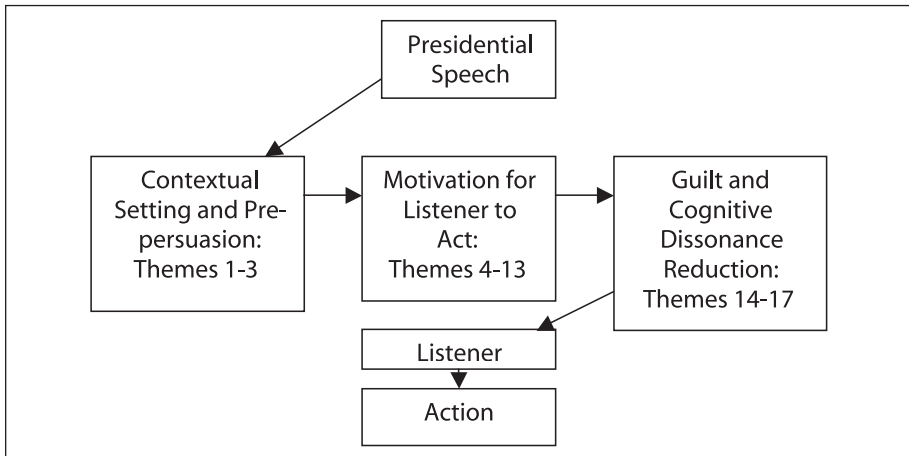
**Question 3:** What type of listener is most susceptible to presidential persuasive speech techniques?

This question is addressed through *Target Specific Persuasive Framework with Ideal-Type Listener* (see Model 1.2).

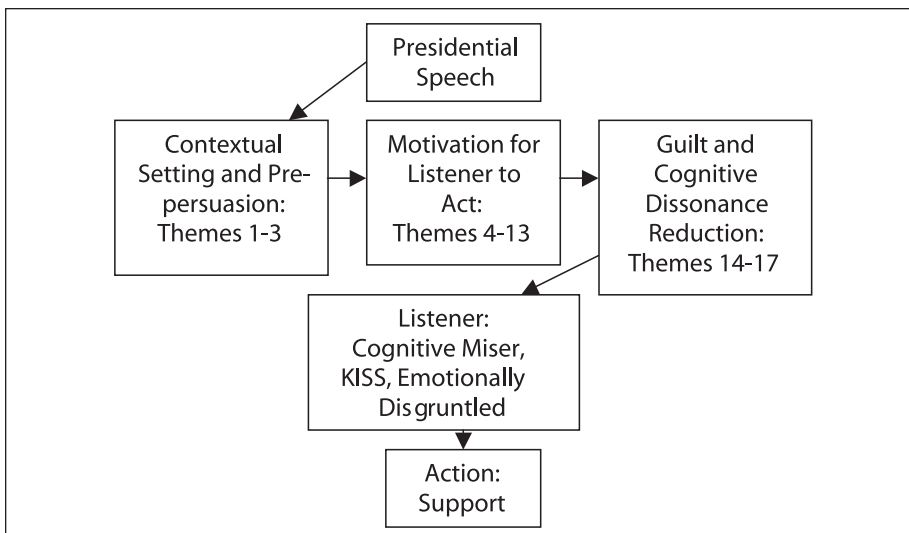
**Model 1: General Persuasion Framework**



**Model 1.1: Target Specific Framework for Presidential Persuasive Speech**



**Model 1.2: Target Specific Persuasive Framework with Ideal-Type Listener**



into the framework of question 2:

### Strengths and Weaknesses of the Models

Regarding model 1, the most obvious strength is the ambiguous nature of the framework. The three stages which are defined can be applied to various forms of persuasive speech contained in activities such as consumer advertising and the promotion of religion. It is the last stage that may require alteration when specific targets are selected. All forms of persuasion require the creation of a contextual back-drop followed by the presentation of motivational factors.

Model 1.1 implements my research specific target and the rhetorical themes I have identified. While researcher bias is a threat when performing qualitative analysis, such threats have been reduced to a modicum through the utilization of direct presidential quotations.

Model 1.2 introduces the ideal and theoretical audience. It became apparent to the researcher that a proper analysis of presidential persuasive speech required the creation of an ideal-type listener so as to represent a holistic relationship. In being theoretical, my ideal-type audience is a working hypothesis and subject to modification and change.

Lastly, all three models are depicted

as progressing in a linear manner; were these not ideal-types interacting in an ideal-type environment, I would expect the courses of progression to be most non-linear. For instance, a persuasive speaker or institution may skip the last stage (guilt reduction) and utilize only the first two stages.

### Section III

#### *Descriptive Results of Data*

This graph illustrates the seventeen thematic trends I have identified (See model 1.1) as they fit within the three larger general stages of persuasion and as they are in proportion to one another.

The motivational construct possesses a monopoly over the other two constructs merely because the themes contained therein are highly varied and often entirely unrelated. They are employed with and without the aid of other similar themes and most likely, with and without discretion.

Guilt and cognitive dissonance reduction possess the second greatest share of construct habitat. This may be a consequence of the particular aims the target persuasive speaker has—namely, aggression and conflict. Were this study concerned with the persuasive techniques of a laundry detergent company, the author would expect this construct to be the smallest of the three.

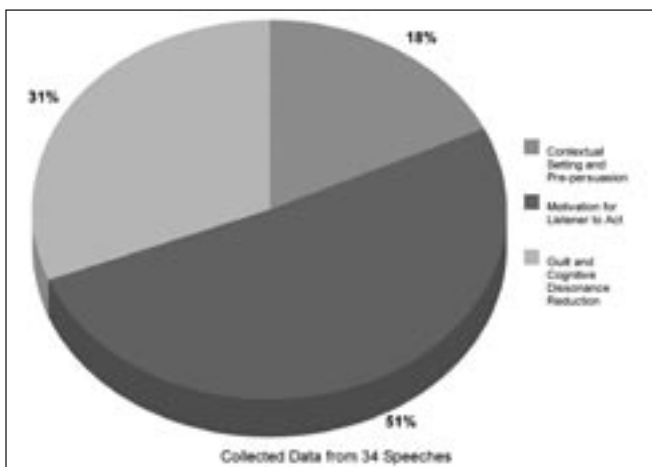
Contextual setting and pre-persuasion occupy a modicum of the graph. The author had begun this endeavor with the expectation that this particular general construct would be highly represented amongst the themes. This discrepancy is possibly due to an improper recognition of contextual setting and pre-persuasion, i.e. the grouping of contextual setting and pre-persuasion characteristics with the motivational construct. Factor analysis could prove quite useful in remedying this discrepancy.

This graph depicts the aggregate frequencies of all seventeen themes as they occurred within all thirty-four speeches. The five most frequent themes are: the call to the hunt, de-humanization of the enemy, rationalization traps and antonyms, self-fulfilling prophecies, and the offering of a solution to the contextual problem presented by the president.

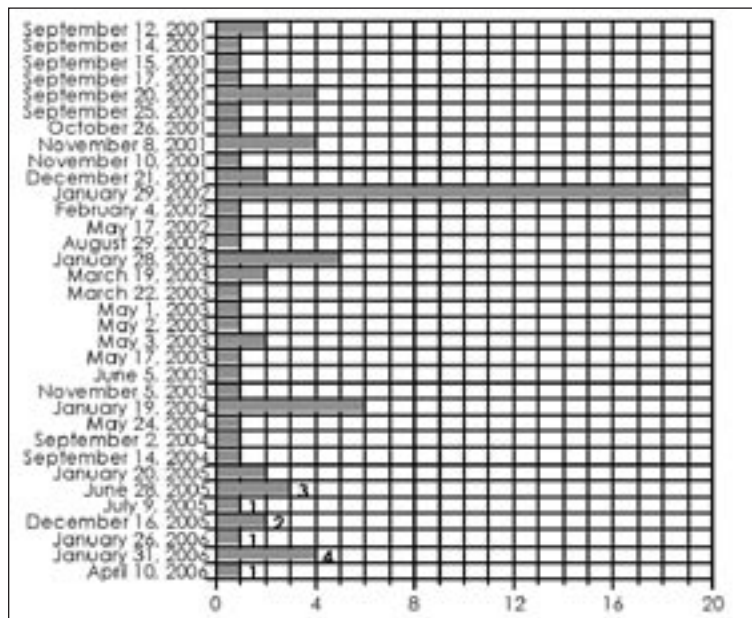
The call-to the hunt (theme seventeen) represents a closing statement made by the president wherein he both invites the listener to support aggressive governmental action and, thus, release certain emotional frustrations and implicitly reassures the listener that the hunt is legitimate and in process. Theme seventeen is both the end of my persuasive model and the foundational offering for further persuasive communications. It may represent the emergence of a new contextual definition wherein the decision to support aggression and conflict has already been made—what remains are the decisions regarding the intensity and frequency of said violence.

Theme sixteen represents an integral component of persuasive speech as identified in *True Believe* (Hoffer, 1951) and *Prophets of Deceit* (Lowenthal and Guterman, 1949). The de-humanization of the enemy precedes theme seventeen in what appears to be a purposeful manner—calling one to hunt fellow human beings may yield an

**Graph 1:** Three General Stages of Persuasion: Percentage of Thematic Content



**Graph 2:** *Aggregate Thematic Content in Sampled Speeches*



unfavorable response but when one's fellow is removed from the general human condition, such a call is entirely acceptable. I would expect these two themes to be mutually inclusive and moreover, to occur throughout all types of persuasive speech that seeks to illicit support for aggressive and violent action against other human beings.

Theme ten, the rationalization trap and the use of categorical antonyms, does not appear as an overt, explicit attempt at garnering support for political actions. Rather, theme ten appears as a basic characteristic of general persuasion. Utilizing such language tricks and ploys is quite plainly a component of all argumentative and persuasive interactions—a child will resort to black and white definitions of a situation when a toy is desired as will a disgruntled consumer speaking with the organization at fault.

The use of the self-fulfilling prophecy (theme five) is done in a manner quite similar to the use of theme ten. While the use of theme five may appear as explicit and quite purposeful, the author believes it to be a natural component

of persuasion and not a theme or trend specific to presidential persuasive speech.

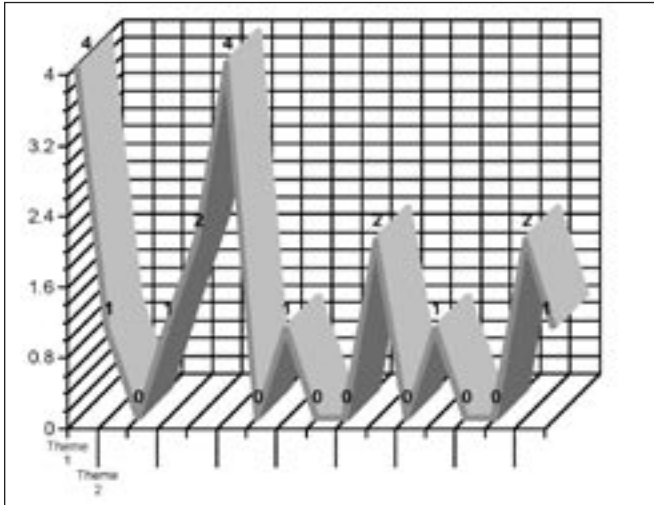
Theme three, the offering of a solution to the contextual problem created by the president, is essential to the effectiveness of the greater persuasive endeavor. The solution must be vague enough to sustain multiple setbacks and injury while simultaneously possessing enough form and function so as to be visible and tangible. This theme is entirely purposeful and very specific to the target of this research.

I have included graph two so as to demonstrate that the themes I have identified are not merely the consequence of common-sense persuasive tactics, which manifest themselves indirectly and without overt control of the speaker. The graph depicts the total amount of thematic content within each of the thirty-four presidential speeches I analyzed. Were the usage of persuasive characteristics purely arbitrary or part and parcel to the use of rhetoric and debate, then one would expect a relatively stable distribution of thematic content across all thirty-four speeches.

However, such a stable distribution of thematic content does not occur. We find quite the opposite: those speeches which draw the largest audiences, which are trusted and most esteemed by the general public, and those speeches which are by their very title a definition of this nation's ambitions and goals, possess far greater thematic frequencies. On January 29, 2002, the first State of the Union Address in the United States after September 11 was delivered by President Bush. This speech contained approximately five times the average amount of rhetorical and thematic content. The 2003 State of the Union Address was delivered on January 28 and contains five thematic themes—roughly two and one half times the amount contained in lesser viewed and esteemed presidential speeches. On January 19, the 2004 State of the Union Address was delivered and this communication contained approximately three times the amount of other lesser viewed Presidential speeches. The average thematic content of all the speeches analyzed, sans the three State of the Union addresses, is approximately one and one half. This is in comparison to the average thematic content of the three States of the Union communications: ten. This discrepancy is not consequence of communicative length—the 2002 State of the Union Address is approximately double the page length (seven vs. three) of the lesser viewed presidential speeches yet contains six and one half times the average thematic content.

Lastly, I have illustrated the thematic content of the 2002 State of the Union Address so as to depict its organization and presumably, its intent. The State of the Union Address is essentially the sole communication made between the president and the populace and done so at great length. This speech sets forth the agenda of the nation and informs the listener of potential

**Graph 3:** *Thematic Content of 2002 State of the Union Speech*



problems and solutions; it defines both country and listener.

As such, we find the 2002 State of the Union Address presenting to the listener a contextual definition of the problems facing the nation and individual (theme one), and a definition of who the listener is and what he or she stands for (theme five). These two themes exist in double the proportion of any other theme contained within the speech. Thus, the 2002 State of the Union Address effectively constructs and defines a certain context which the listener, having already been told what he or she is and stands for, may pursue certain avenues of action.

#### Section IV

##### *Rhetorical Content and Analysis*

This paper, for the sake of brevity, will discuss only three of the seventeen thematic patterns I identified throughout the course of my research. For more detailed thematic information, please see the work in its entirety as published in the Michigan Sociological Review, Volume 18. Themes two, ten, and fourteen belong to the contextual, motivational, and cognitive dissonance reduction stages of the general model,

respectively. The reader is advised to refer to models 1.1 and 1.2 contained in Section II so as to properly visualize the location of each theme as it pertains to the most general persuasive speech framework (model 1). As illustrated in model 1, section III also includes brief introductions concerning the progressive stages of general persuasive speech.

#### **Theme 2: Denounce Existing Order and Protocol**

##### *Data*

The president, after capturing the attention of the cognitive miser through vivid depictions of hell on earth, must move to demonstrate to the listener why current managerial and administrative tools are no longer adequate in the face of an emergent “axis of evil” (George Bush, public presentation, January 29, 2002). The perceived failure of the United Nations has made it “clear that the future of freedom and peace depend on the actions of America” (George Bush, public presentation, January 29, 2002). The considerate and rational pace of international investigation, procedure, and punishment are an inadequate response to “...the carnage of September the 11” (George Bush,

public presentation, January 19, 2004). The president states that “it is not enough to serve our enemies with legal papers” (George Bush, public presentation, January 19, 2004). Not only is the United Nations an ineffective and inadequate group, but it menaces the security of the United States with its demands for deliberate and thoughtful action: “...America will never seek a permission slip to defend the security of our country” (George Bush, public presentation, January 20, 2004).

#### **Analysis**

The discrediting of existing institutions and protocol serves to reinforce the president’s statements that this threat is of a new variety and type. The “hunger for faith” (Hoffer 1951, p. 139) and need for security present in the listener is multiplied by the stated ineffectualness and even danger posed by the existing order of things. In initially separating the listener from the rest of the global community, the President is also creating both in-groups and out-groups. Such a process effectively furthers the listeners’ sense of isolation and dependency and channels these feelings towards the President who promptly offers a solution.

#### **Theme 10**

##### *Rationalization Traps and Antonyms*

##### *Data*

President Bush often presents possible perspectives in a binary manner: “This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.” (George Bush, public presentation, September 20, 2001). As an American, the listener “...will bring freedom to others...” (George Bush, public presentation, March 19, 2003), and knows “... that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation.” (George Bush, public presentation, January 28, 2003). The president states that the listener

does not accept the "...existence of permanent tyranny because..." and he or she does "...not accept the possibility of permanent slavery." (George Bush, public presentation, January 20, 2005). If the listener accepts that the "...right to life cannot be granted or denied by government..." (George Bush, public presentation, November 5, 2003), he or she is compelled to support conflict against Iraq, Iran, terrorism, and North Korea. Supporting the actions of the President prove that "America is a strong nation, and honorable in the use of our strength." (George Bush, public presentation, January 28, 2003).

### Analysis

The president's language utilizes a lack of modality to present an agenda which is based on the use of antonyms. In making "little use of modal verbs, such as *could*, *would*, *might*, etc., which tend to nuance one's statements and provide for the possibility that one might be mistaken..." (Tanja and Collet 2005, p. 17), the president implies that he possesses an absolute Truth. This lack of modality creates an effect of "categoriality" (Butt, Lukin & Matthiessen, 2004).

After implying to the listener that he possesses an absolute Truth, grounded in sound deliberation, the president utilizes antonyms to present two possible avenues of action, which the listener and his or her nation must take—one presented as virtuous, positive, and beneficiary and the other presented as the exact opposite. The listener may be part of the in-group or part of the out-group, right or wrong, for justice or cruelty, protective of the innocent or apathetic towards the guilty, on the side of good or on the side of evil.

The lack of modality and the utilization of grammatical antonyms create a rationalization trap, which is the effective culmination of the tactic. Part

of reducing cognitive dissonance—the separation between ideal-self and actual-self—the rationalization trap is activated when the listener is presented with two antonymous adjectives wherein he or she must decide which adjective they esteem and which adjective is to be avoided. In depicting the listener and his or her support for the current conflict as pertaining to a love of freedom, the president gives the listener a categorical choice: do I support freedom or do I hate freedom like the enemy? Am I pro-life or anti-life? The use of words that have categorically limited antonyms guides the listener down a path of agreement by default.

### Theme 14

*Precision Weapons: Lasers, GPS, and Flux Capacitors*

#### Data

The president often refers to the highly sophisticated nature of American weaponry: "With new tactics and precision weapons, we can achieve military objectives without directing violence against civilians." (George Bush, public presentation, May 2, 2003). Our involvement in Iraq has "...proved that in this first phase that expensive precision weapons not only defeat the enemy, but spare innocent lives" (George Bush, public presentation, February 4, 2002). Our technology, the president implies, is enemy specific and highly particular about its targets: "Operation Iraqi Freedom was carried out with a combination of precision and speed and boldness the enemy did not expect, and the world had not seen before...we sent planes and missiles that could destroy an enemy division, or strike a single bunker" (George Bush, public presentation, May 1, 2003). The President pleads with his audience to understand "the care...the humanity that goes into" our bombing raids in Iraq and Afghanistan. The President also states that "at least two-thirds of the bombs used by coalition

forces in Iraq were precision-guided by lasers or global-positioning satellites, compared with just 13 percent of the bombs we used in the 1991 Gulf War." (George Bush, public presentation, May 17, 2003).

### Analysis

The references to laser-guided bombs which can effectively distinguish between enemy and innocent play upon modern society's fascination with technology and our belief that said technology is an end-all-be-all. The use of technological catch-words—terminology invented for the purpose of conflict—dazzles the individual listener with notions of space-based lasers guiding million dollar bombs onto the heads of guilty men and women. The deaths of uninvolved individuals are deemed "collateral damage".

The president also implies that warfare itself has become cleaner, more sterile. The constant mentioning of precision weapons helps to combat historical atrocities such as the fire-bombing of Dresden, Germany in WWII where un-technical bombs guided without the aid of lasers and satellites killed hundreds of thousands of civilians. This war is clean, purposeful, and selective. The listener, despite supporting conflict which inevitably brings suffering and death, is reassured that technology has in fact saved the day and protected the innocent.

### Concluding Remarks

Let us begin by addressing the initial questions of this paper.

Does a general persuasive framework exist? Yes, while the framework must be adapted and modified to the target in question, the essential qualities of Model 1 should remain the same. As stated previously, the avenues of progression may change significantly from those depicted in Model 1 but ultimately, the author believes that the

three basic constructs of the model would become manifest.

Can this general framework be applied to the speech of President Bush and does it help to analyze said communications? Yes, the model has proved quite effective in guiding the analysis of presidential speech. The three general persuasive constructs established in Model 1 were implemented in Model 1.1 and demonstrated both reliability and validity. A factor analysis would prove beneficial so as to garner a better interpretation of the divides between the three general constructs depicted in Model 1.

What type of listener is most susceptible to presidential persuasive speech? Model 1.2 integrated the ideal-listener into the existing ideal-interaction. The ideal-listener is a hybrid consequence of both traditional emotional frustrations and immersion in modern society which is message dense and persuasively rich. It would be expected that my ideal-listener is equally susceptible to the persuasive techniques of car manufacturers or detergent commercials.

Throughout this research, I continually found myself struggling to view the interactions and relationships contained in Models 1, 1.1, and 1.2 as illustrative of a persuasive process—in particular, a politically persuasive process. However, it has become apparent that the processes depicted throughout this paper represent a relationship other than that of citizen and politic. The relationships I have established are those of producer and consumer, of production and commodity,

of commodity and consumption.

In documenting and analyzing presidential political rhetoric and persuasion, I became witness to the creation of a mythology of sorts. This emergent mythology has its own gods and goddesses, its own history, present, and future—it differs from previous political mythologies only in content.

It is a mythology based on consumption. The consumer/citizen is given an opportunity to entertain himself or herself through the consumption of a commodity—this commodity being political involvement, the witnessing of far-away adventures, and sadomasochistic enjoyment of domination, power, and death. In exchange for these goods and services, the governing body in question receives apathetic support.

At its essence, this political mythology presents itself as a purchasable good—designed not for persuasion, motivation, nor enlightenment. Rather, it is designed with the sole intention of being consumed and thus destroyed, leaving the listener in question longing for more consumption and, in the process, either directly or indirectly supporting the producers of the mythology.

Viewed in this light, several notions emerge. Firstly, that we may expect Samuel Huntington's impending clash of civilizations (1996) will in fact take place. Not as the result of differing cultural ideals or beliefs, but rather, to fuel the consumptive hungers of the Western individual. More and more, this political mythology will diverge

from reality and from the human experience—much like a vast simulacra (Baudrillard, 1981), the realm of human experience and emotion will be incorporated into political mythology and used to satiate the consumer citizen who desires televised violence, conflict, and domination.

As the individual continues to be mounted by his or her own social construct, the need to witness destruction and purge anger, confusion, and hatred will increase. With this increase will come the desire for consumption of goods, of politic, of one's fellow, and of one's self.

As Erich Fromm once noted in *On Disobedience* (1981) There are so many things in contemporary society that I dislike that it is difficult to decide with which particular complaint to begin...the first dislike...is the fact that everything and almost everybody is *for sale*. Not only commodities and services, but ideas, arts, books, persons, convictions, a feeling, a smile -- they all have been transferred into commodities. And so is the whole of man, with all his facilities and potentialities." (p. 54)

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