Persuasion

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The term "persuasion" (derived from the Latin *persuāsiō*) is commonly used to denote a form of goal-oriented and audience-targeted use of language. While classical definitions tend to associate it with public speaking, persuasion can be pursued in a variety of social settings, through multiple discursive genres, channels (oral, written, nonverbal) and modalities (auditory, visual, tactile, etc.). Achieving persuasiveness requires the effective use of language and other semiotic resources (sounds, images, objects) with the aim of inducing specific attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in the target audience. While in certain domains of sociocultural life (e.g. courtship, politics, and advertising) persuasion is self-consciously deployed and discussed, the use of language to further an argument, form opinions, and influence behavior can be observed in a wide array of discursive and social settings, ranging from face-to-face interactions to digital platforms, from written scientific discourse to everyday conversation, from mass communication to the architectural organization of urban spaces and museum displays. Because the term is broad in scope and application, any attempt at defining it involves a metapragmatic endeavor (i.e. using language to reflexively discuss how language is used). Linguistic anthropologists and scholars working in related disciplines have contributed to this undertaking by highlighting how understanding what counts as persuasive communication in specific cultural and historical contexts always requires an ethnographic exploration of complex constellations of aesthetic, epistemological, and moral notions. Thus, far from being a clear-cut notion, persuasion is a layered metapragmatic construct, embedded in culturally and historically specific theories of mind, action, and intention, and connected to local ideologies of language and meaning.

In Greek mythology, persuasion was personified as the goddess Peitho – a name related to the verb *peíthein*, meaning "to persuade" and "to inspire trust," and etymologically related to the Latin *fides* ("faith"). Significantly, Peitho was associated both to the realm of erotic seduction (as denoted by her frequent depiction alongside Aphrodite) and to the civic sphere of rhetorical persuasion. In the Greco-Roman tradition, persuasion was the object of rhetoric, understood both as the practice of persuasive argumentation and as the study of the compositional structure of effective public speaking. The former approach, generally called *rhetorica utens* and primarily embraced by Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian, emphasized the technical-performative-prescriptive side of persuasive communication, and dictated the practical imperatives to gain assent by appealing to *ethos, pathos,* and *logos* – terms employed in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to refer to the three main means of persuasion: the character of the speaker, the emotions of the listener, and the reasons of the argument itself. The latter approach, called *rhetorica docens* and generally associated with the Aristotelian school (and with the twentieth-century New Rhetoric of Kenneth Burke and Chaim Perelman),

focused on theoretical-interpretative-descriptive aspects, and aimed at identifying the compositional strategies used to convince a reasonable interlocutor of a given viewpoint. To Aristotle we also owe the distinction, later adopted and expanded by Roman rhetoricians, between the main compositional aspects of persuasive speech-making: invention (*èuresis* or *inventio*), composition (*oikonomìa* or *dispositio*), style (*lexis* or *elocutio*), and delivery (*upokrisis* or *actio*), that is, finding the arguments, arranging them in a pertinent sequence, presenting them in a stylistically effective way, and practicing how to best deliver the speech through gestures, pronunciation, and posture. In the ancient world, there were also different views of the scope of persuasive speech. So, while for Aristotle the use of rhetoric was restricted to the civic realm, for the sophists it applied to any domain of human life. More recently, American literary theorist and writer, Kenneth Burke (1950) has argued that persuasion is a fundamental element of all forms of discourse – a position that puts him in close conversation with the views of the early sophists.

From a moral standpoint, it is also possible to distinguish between positive and negative ideologies of persuasive discourse. Persuasion has been variously criticized for being akin to ideological propaganda and consumer's desires manipulation, or celebrated for being essential to the advancement of democratic ideals and civil rights legislation. Since antiquity, persuasion has been evaluated through different morally infused visions of the relation between language and reality. While Plato – notably in his dialogue *Gorgias* – equated rhetoric with demagoguery and persuasion with flattery aimed at producing mere gratification, Aristotle's focus on the persuasiveness of pertinent argumentation established strong connections between truth and eloquence, situating the study of language's suasory functions, alongside dialectic and logic, within a more general art (*technê*) of discourse.

Seeking to account for how speaking always entails both affecting and being affected as expression unfolds through relational processes of action and reaction, a variety of contemporary approaches have criticized models of persuasion pivoting on an independent speaking subject, whose language can be examined in isolation. Drawing from insights developed in the fields of the literary theory of the Bakhtin Circle, phenomenology, hermeneutics, semiotics, affect theory, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, the sociology and sociolinguistics of interaction, and poststructuralist rhetoric, this perspective crosscuts different disciplinary and social domains and highlights the role of heteroglossia, intersubjectivity, semiotic chains, intertextuality, sequential organization, affiliative responses, audience design, production formats, and participation frameworks, in the production, circulation, and reception of eloquent communication. The sovereignty of the persuasive speaker thus appears as always fractured and negotiated through open-ended meaning-making processes.

In spite of different views on its scope, range, and connotations, persuasion may be understood from a pragmatic perspective, as an inherently appellative, performative, and poetic form of discourse that presupposes an audience, requires a certain degree of reflexivity, and entails a poetic world-making power. Firstly, as Burke highlights (1950, 44), persuasion entails "the function of language as *addressed,* as direct or roundabout appeal to real or ideal audiences, without or within." By virtue of this appellative prerogative, persuasion plays a fundamental role in the structuring of publics, which,

as Warner (2002) points out, may be understood as spaces of discourse concretely produced through the voluntary uptake and circulation-specific discursive and literary genres capable of persuasively addressing self-organizing collectivities. Secondly, persuasive communication is always doubly "performative," both in a theatrical and in a non-referential sense of the term. On the one hand, regardless of whether it targets an audience or a rehearsing speaker's reflected image in a mirror, persuasion is connected to performance, conceptualized as a form of rehearsed and self-reflexive display of communicative competence (Bauman 1977). On the other hand, persuasion alludes to the performative vision of language developed by speech-act theorists. According to this perspective, besides their referential function of describing the world, words are endowed with illocutionary force, that is, with the capacity, under specific conditions, of "doing things" (i.e. making a promise, firing an employee, christening a ship, etc.). Finally, by virtue of its reflexive focus on formal, structural, and expressive properties of language use, persuasive communication entails a form of poetic (from the Greek *poieō*, "to make/create") projection. Due to the creative energy that stems from its poetic-expressive organization, persuasion is thus endowed with a forcefulness – a world-making capacity – that might transcend the narrow conventional limits of typical performative utterances, such as "I pronounce you man and wife." Persuasive speech can thus be imagined as a semiotic-mediated form of action.

From this poetic standpoint, not only do persuasive practices shape social relations, but cultural theories of persuasion contribute to determine how members of a specific community conceive the language-mediated reproduction and transformation of social relations. Recent ethnographic explorations of persuasive communication, drawing on the growing literature on language ideologies, highlight the co-articulation between specific linguistic repertoires, cultural notions of persuasion, and the local unfolding of democratic processes. Jackson's (2013) account of the different registers and codes that compose the persuasive repertoire of contemporary Malagasy discourse exposes how the tension between different styles of persuasion is connected to contrasting notions of agency and political models. Likewise, Bate (2009) describes the collision between ways of speaking and models of the moral subject in 1940s and 1950s Tamil Nadu, showing how in Tamil emergent democracy, an archaized and literary register came to replace styles of persuasion modeled on ordinary language. Perceived as emblematic of ancient Dravidian civilization, this more refined and literary register became associated with the Tamil (Dravidian) nationalist struggle against the Sanskritic hegemony of the pan-Indian Congress.

A linguistic anthropological approach to persuasion entails exploring the tacit practices and explicit commentaries by which members of a speech community deal with the persuasive function of language, and the methods they use to pursue persuasion as well as to evaluate what counts as persuasive communication. This ethnometapragmatic endeavor is inherently comparative and potentially conducive to forms of cultural critique aimed at problematizing the ethnocentric bias underlying hegemonic Western theories of meaning and language which, far from being universal, are in fact culture-specific (Hill and Irvine 1993; Rosaldo 1982). The use of language to convince others to change opinion is based on cultural and historical specific notions of inner consciousness, personal intentions, and free choice. Societies that prioritize

ascriptive belonging over active uptake display forms of persuasion that do not presuppose a liberal model of the subject. For example, Duranti (1994) shows how in Western Samoa, contrary to the Ciceronian notion of the orator that moves and bends the interlocutors' minds to their will, speechmakers operate according to a structure of persuasion based on the hierarchical distribution of agency and responsibility. In a similar vein, Donzelli (2019) problematizes the supposed universality of transitive theories and practices of persuasion based on a sovereign subject speaking to (and unilaterally affecting) passive interlocutors. Her ethnographic account of political speechmaking in upland Indonesia describes how an alternative model of persuasion based on an ethos of fatalistic acquiescence is grammatically constructed through the avoidance of imperative constructions and the pervasive use of desiderative formulas, wish-clauses, and self-deprecating expressions. The cross-cultural and cross-linguistic study of vernacular forms of persuasion constitutes an important avenue for investigating the intersection between specific language ideologies and moral-political conceptions.

In the United States, too, the history of persuasive speech is intertwined with the shifting models of democracy that have marked the political culture and intellectual history of the country. Cmiel (1990) discusses the tension in American post-Revolutionary public discourse between the neoclassical rhetoric associated with the old-school aristocratic gentlemen and the emerging middling styles appreciated by the new democratic audiences. Hill (2000) describes how contemporary US political communication is produced and interpreted through two competing and coexisting metapragmatic frameworks: the discourses of "truth" and of "theatre," the former presupposing an individualized and intentional agent passable of moral scrutiny; the latter based on collaborative forms of stagecraft, in which spin doctors and consultants fabricate politicians' message as a sort of personal brand. Lempert and Silverstein (2012) further scrutinize how American presidential candidates convey their *message* by carefully selecting stylistic features that include a vast array of multimodal components – from clothing to gestures, from gaze to body posture, from grammar to pronunciation. This enquiry presents considerable overlaps with semiotic-oriented studies of brand making and circulation, which regard marketing as a metasemiotic strategy aimed at imbuing brand-tokens with the auratic qualities that make a specific "brand distinctive and desirable" (Nakassis 2012, 628). The semiotic-oriented study of marketing and political media discourse is also valuable in refining the understanding of how digital technologies and social media platforms are rearticulating (both practically and conceptually) classical notions of persuasion.

SEE ALSO: Pragmatics; Language Ideology; Audience (and Audience Design); Performativity vs. Indexicality; Channels of Human Communication; Alignment and Affiliation; Address Terms and Addressivity; Aesthetics; Agency; Attention (and Joint Attention); Audience (and Audience Design); Awareness, Metalinguistic; Goffman, Erving; Language and Creativity: Improvisation; Language and Creativity: Introduction; Language and Creativity: Verbal Art; Language and Power; Language and Politics; Austin, J.L. (John Langshaw); Public-Private (Sphere); Emotion and Affect; Interaction, Face-to-face; Conversation Analysis (CA); Ethnomethodology; Bakhtin, Mikhail; Audience (and Audience Design); Genre; Media as Channel; Mental Opacity;

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Performance, Linguistic and Communicative; Philosophy (of language); Poetics, Poetry, and Ethnopoetics; Recipient-design; Symbolic Interactionism; Transitivity; Vološinov, Valentin; Enregisterment

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ABSTRACT

Persuasion is a form of goal-oriented and audience-targeted use of language. In the Greco-Roman tradition, persuasion was the object of rhetoric, understood both as the practice of persuasive argumentation (*rhetorica utens*) and as the study of the compositional structure of effective public speaking (*rhetorica docens*). In a broader and more contemporary perspective, persuasion can be pursued in a variety of discursive genres and social settings and entails the deployment of language and other semiotic resources to affect the audience, inducing attitudes and behaviors. Persuasion is inherently appellative, performative, and poetic, that is, it presupposes an audience, it requires a certain degree of reflexivity, and it entails some form of poetic projection. Linguistic anthropological research has demonstrated how, far from being a clear-cut notion, persuasion is a complex metapragmatic construct, embedded in culturally and historically specific theories of mind, action, and intention, and connected to local ideologies of language and meaning.

KEYWORDS

metapragmatics; performativity; rhetoric