Undemocratic discourse: a review of theory and research on political discourse

John Gastil
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

ABSTRACT. This essay begins by suggesting that political discourse analysis should identify the inadequacies of existing discourse relative to an ideal model of democratic deliberation. Modern writings on political discourse are then reviewed, connecting related concepts and theories from a variety of academic disciplines. The review discusses lexicon (vocabulary, technical words, imprecise words, euphemisms and loaded words), grammar (speech acts, implicature, syntax, pronouns and naming conventions), rhetorical strategies (integrative complexity, rituals, metaphors and myths) and conversational tactics (turn-taking and agenda-setting). The conclusion offers suggestions for future theory and research on political discourse.

KEY WORDS: agenda-setting, democracy, implicature, metaphors, myths, political discourse, pronouns, rhetoric

INTRODUCTION

Politics and discourse are inextricably intertwined. Political interaction requires language structures, and linguistic behavior necessarily involves structures of domination and legitimation (Giddens, 1984). In this sense, all discourse is political (Shapiro, 1981); however, there is another, narrower meaning of political discourse. According to this definition, political discourse occurs 'when political actors, in and out of government, communicate about political matters, for political purposes' (Graber, 1981: 196). This parallels Bitzer's (1981: 228) definition of political rhetoric, which includes 'every citizen who deliberates and creates messages about civic affairs'. Civic affairs or politics are defined as those practices that require the engagement of the public and/or government, such as elections, public spending, public and legislative debate about laws and political principles, etc.

Scholarly work on political discourse dates back to (or predates) Aristotle. Philosophers, political theorists and rhetoricians have examined political language in recent centuries (Black, 1965; Delia, 1987; Vickers, 1988). In the last three decades, though, the subject has received a great
deal of attention. Critical writings by political scientists (e.g. Edelman, 1977; Graber, 1976) and linguists (e.g. Kress and Hodge, 1979; Fowler et al., 1979) in the 1970s may have brought about this avalanche of interdisciplinary theory and research.

Most scholarship on political discourse has focused on the media, particularly the reporting of political news (e.g. Geis, 1987; van Dijk, 1985, 1987). The media play a direct or indirect role in shaping almost all political talk, as they have done in the case of American presidential speechmaking (Hart, 1987; Jamieson, 1988). Nevertheless, the 'mass media constitute only one forum for political communication. There are many others, and few of them have been studied in comparable detail' (Boytton, 1991: 131).

Despite this emphasis on the media, a significant body of research has looked at the relatively unmediated talk of politicians and citizens (e.g. Chilton, 1985; Holly, 1989; Richardson, 1985; Wodak, 1989). This literature is continuing to grow in size and geographic breadth, as recent studies have examined political discourse in Western Samoa (Duranti, 1990), Tanzania (Blommaert, 1990), the (former) Soviet Union (Chilton, 1990; Mehan et al., 1990), Mexico (Carbo, 1992; Foley, 1990), India (SathyaMurthy, 1990), France (Argentin et al., 1990; Dorna, 1990), Canada (Pancer et al., 1992), Britain (Wilson, 1991) and America (Boytton, 1991).

This essay aims to stimulate the development of this important branch of discourse analysis by addressing two problems that have stunted its growth. First, the literature on political language comes from a variety of fields, including discourse analysis, conversation analysis, linguistics, linguistic anthropology, political science, psychology, sociology, history, philosophy, rhetoric, communication science and cultural studies. Disciplinary boundaries have resulted in a multitude of synonymous and overlapping theories and concepts. In addition, researchers have used similar or identical terms in different ways, resulting in terminological inconsistency and ambiguity. This review tries to bring these discordant voices together, highlighting important similarities among various approaches to political discourse. Second, this review presents a clear purpose or reason for analyzing political discourse. Political talk plays a vital role in shaping and transforming political reality, and as the interest of the world has recently turned toward democracy, discourse analysts might do well to make explicit the connections between their research and the pursuit of the democratic ideal.

Before beginning, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this review. This review is by no means exhaustive. I have reviewed only the literature available in English, and the bulk of the studies discussed herein were published in the United States (on French analyses, see Seidel, 1985). As a result, the review relies largely on examples and illustrations in American and British political contexts. Moreover, I have selected a limited number of studies on each topic, and I have skirted subjects that received less attention in the available literature. As explained above, I also have chosen to focus on political discourse that does not directly involve the media.

Having made these qualifications, this essay begins by suggesting a model of democratic deliberation as a critical standpoint for analyzing political discourse. Next, writings on political discourse are integrated, reviewed and related to democracy. Finally, the concluding section offers suggestions for future theory and research.

THE PURPOSE OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Two of the most prominent writings on political discourse suggest that the present approach to analysis suffers from implicit political biases. Geis (1987: 21) criticizes those whose observations 'seem to be politically, not linguistically, motivated'. Similarly, Wilson (1990: 15-16) argues that the important question is how people produce political discourse, 'not whether they should have done it or not … We are interested in describing what happened, not in prescribing what should happen.'

Striving for objective description is an admirable goal for any scholar, but it does not provide a purpose or focus for research. Even within the rubric of political discourse, there are an infinite number of phenomena that one could describe. Which are most important? If there is no prescriptive conclusion we can draw from descriptive analysis, why was the description made in the first place? These are essential questions, for theorists inevitably—even if unintentionally or indirectly—take sociopolitical stances. In light of this fact, many have chosen to take an openly critical stance (e.g. Fairclough, 1989; Fowler and Kress, 1979). Despite his introductory comments, even Wilson (1990: 43) chooses to point out that his work on political argumentation has important implications for 'a democratic system'.

Democracy, as Wilson inadvertently suggests, can serve as a guide for political discourse analysis. In an important sense, one who adopts this view does not have to sacrifice the objectivist ethic. One admits only a bias toward democracy and subjects relevant to democratic social change, not a predilection toward particular research methods or findings. Moreover, a critical perspective does not preclude empirical and interpretative orientations; in fact, Bernstein (1978) has argued that a fully adequate political theory needs to include all three elements.

The critical element of such theory can ground itself in modern writings on participatory and deliberative democracy. A number of theorists have tried to describe, in general terms, the character of a fully democratic polity (for a more detailed discussion, see Barber, 1984; J. Cohen, 1989; Fishkin, 1991; Gastil, 1991, in press; Mansbridge, 1983, 1990). Any definition of an ideal democratic group or society (hereafter called a demos) begins with features that are only indirectly or partially related to discourse. Thus, it is important to recognize that a demos must have some
degree of sovereignty, an equal distribution of power in the decisive stage of decision-making and an inclusive membership (Dahl, 1989).

Nevertheless, a careful definition might also identify four discursive characteristics of an ideal demos. First, 'collective choices must be made in a deliberative way'. Members must state their reasons for advancing proposals, supporting them, or criticizing them (J. Cohen, 1989: 22). Second, the members of the demos must have equal opportunities to participate in the deliberative process (Dahl, 1989). Inequalities in rules and resources must be limited so that they do not affect members' chances to contribute to deliberation (J. Cohen, 1989: 23). Third, the ideal demos aims to arrive at a rationally motivated consensus—to find reasons that are persuasive to all who are committed to acting on the results of a free and reasoned assessment of alternatives by equals (J. Cohen, 1989: 23). Truly democratic deliberation must not rule out self-interest, conflicting interests or relatively emotional or intuitive expression (Mansbridge, 1983; Sanders, 1991; Simpson, 1986), but at the same time, it should take seriously the notions of a common good and sound reasoning (Barber, 1984; Bitzer, 1987; J. Cohen, 1989).

Finally, democratic discourse has a relational component. Members of the demos should discursively acknowledge one another's autonomy and mutuality (Barber, 1984; Gould, 1988). Friendly or neighborly discourse is also essential for maintaining healthy relationships among members of the demos (Barber, 1984; Mansbridge, 1983). In addition, the equal competence of members as representatives of themselves should be affirmed discursively, particularly when previous actions or words have brought a member's competence into question (Dahl, 1989; Gastil, 1991, in press).

Together, these four elements constitute an abstract definition of fully democratic discourse. Strictly speaking, this ideal is unattainable: existing and future politics can strive toward it, but they can never reach it. As a consequence, the ideal provides a long-lasting focus for research. Many political groups will continue to become increasingly democratic, but a fully democratic polity is beyond the horizon of any existing large-scale social system, most assuredly including the United States (Barber, 1984; Cohen and Rogers, 1983; Fishkin, 1991; Lasch, 1990; Mathews, 1988). In this sense, the study of existing political discourse becomes largely the study of undemocratic discourse—hence the title of this review.

An unattainable ideal can provide a useful critical standpoint, because it serves as a standard 'against which one may compare alternative processes and institutions in order to judge their relative merit' (Dahl, 1989: 131). Like Dahl's five criteria for the democratic process, this definition of democratic discourse does not 'completely define what we mean by a good polity or good society'. Nevertheless, to the extent that we value democracy, this ideal can 'help us to arrive at judgments that bear directly on the relative worth or goodness of political arrangements'.

The linguistic components of ideal deliberation have more elaborate equivalents in existing theories of discourse. Reasoned argument, equal participation and consensus parallel the ideal speech situation proposed by Habermas (1973/1975, 1979). Habermas (1979: 186) argues that speakers and listeners regularly presuppose an ideal communicative exchange: discourse is rational and truthful, participants are 'free and equal' and decisions 'meet the unforced agreement of all those involved'. Habermas's ideal speech situation aims at 'rational consensus', an agreement reached solely 'by the force of the better argument' (Giddens, 1985: 130–1).

Grice's (1975) maxims of conversation also resemble these aspects of democratic discourse. Grice suggests that we make general assumptions about discourse, presuming that speakers are cooperative, sincere, relevant, clear and sufficiently informative. These maxims 'describe rational means for conducting co-operative exchanges' (Levinson, 1983: 103). Speakers regularly flout the maxims, but we presume that they do so cooperatively and intentionally, producing implicature. Deception, misinformation and discursive manipulation constitute intentional, uncooperative violations of the maxims.

The relational aspects of democratic discourse also resemble existing discourse theory. The recognition of autonomy is comparable to negative politeness. This form of discourse preserves negative face, which Brown and Levinson (1978: 62) define as 'the want of every “competent adult member” to be unimpeached by others'. More generally, relational discourse is related to face-saving, what Goffman (1967: 12–13) calls 'the traffic rules of social interaction'. We maintain friendly relations with neighbors, even ones we dislike, through face-work, otherwise known as 'tact, savoir faire, diplomacy, or social skill'. Friendliness, or 'making a feel good', is also the third of Lakoff's (1973) rules of politeness.

More recently, Lim and Bowers (1991: 420) have distinguished dimensions of face that parallel three relational features of democratic talk. According to these authors: 'Humans have three distinct face wants: (a) the want to be included, or fellowship face; (b) the want that their abilities be respected, or competence face; and (c) the want not to be imposed on, or autonomy face.' When engaged in discourse, 'people are expected to satisfy each other's face wants... by including the other in their group, respecting the other's abilities, and limiting constraints on the other's freedom of action' (Lim and Bowers, 1991: 420–1).

Clearly, the deliberate model of democracy has conceptual cousins within larger theories of discourse. Not surprisingly, the deliberative model also relates to much of the theory and research on political discourse. Although not framed in such terms, the studies of political talk reviewed below have identified ways in which discourse can facilitate or—more typically—obstruct the democratic process.

Having outlined a purpose or critical standpoint for political discourse analysis, the remainder of this essay reviews relevant theory and research on political talk. These writings have been organized into four broad categories: (1) lexis-complexity, including vocabulary, technical words, imprecise words, euphemisms and loaded words; (2) grammar, including speech acts, implicature, syntax, pronouns and naming conventions; (3) rhetorical strategies, including the use of integrative complexity, rituals, metaphors...
and myths; (4) conversational tactics, including turn-taking and agenda-setting.

Each of these topics is discussed in terms of how, why and to what effect—the three questions suggested by Fairclough (1989), Geis (1987), Kress (1985) and Wilson (1990). In Fairclough’s (1989: 162–6) terms, we seek to identify the social, institutional and situational determinants and effects of discourse, recognizing that both determinants and discourse are mediated by the interpretive schemes and background knowledge of speakers and listeners, respectively. In addition, each section concludes by briefly relating its content to the ideal of deliberative democracy.

LEXICON

Wodak (1989: 141) identifies three features of what she calls jargon. "Jargon", she explains, "is a special language which is based grammatically on the common language, but which contains special features in the lexical, semantic and syntactic areas." Wodak distinguishes three components of jargon: lexicon, syntax and textual strategies of argumentation. These three components are somewhat analogous to the first three sections of this review, as we examine political lexicology, grammar, which includes syntax, and rhetorical strategies.

This first section focuses on five features of political lexicology: general vocabulary, technical words, imprecise words, euphemisms and loaded words. The first of these subcategories includes neologisms, novel phrasing and the elimination of words and phrases. Technical words are old and new words with precise definitions relevant to a particular speech community. Imprecise words are the opposite, being vague to both speakers and hearers. Euphemisms are words with relatively clear definitions but meanings designed to conceal or obfuscate; loaded words do not conceal so much as connotate, imply or associate; they carry both a simple definition and an additional, more subtle meaning.

Vocabulary

Newspeak, the fictional language described by Orwell (1949) in the text and appendix to Nineteen Eighty-four, prominently featured changes in vocabulary, including both additions to and deletions from the English language (on Orwell’s linguistics, see Chilton, 1984; Hodge and Fowler, 1979). As Geis (1987: 2) explains: ‘Orwell believed that thought is dependent on language and, therefore, if a despotic government were to restrict the range of things that are expressible in language, it could restrict the range of things that are thinkable.’ Although Orwell made his argument through a fictional novel, Edelman’s (1964: 120) empirical study of political language and symbols drew upon Orwell’s ideas. He concluded that ‘both the perception of fact and value connotations hinge on the adequacy and character of the available vocabulary’.

It may be difficult to find a pure case of word removal. If only to illustrate the idea, one might argue that in the late 1980s the word liberal began to disappear from the jargon of the Democratic Party in the United States. As the Democrats tried to distance themselves from the political left, they avoided speaking of liberalism and related terms (e.g. progressive, feminism). Perhaps the absence of such terms changed the public’s perception of the Democratic platform, but it also might have inadvertently limited the scope and clarity of their policies.

The generation of new terms is often easier to recognize, and both elites and weaker social groups have introduced new political words and phrases (Huspek and Kendall, 1991; Sathyamurthy, 1990). Orwell understood the importance of this practice, because his fictional architects of Newspeak were careful to control neologisms and lexical borrowing (Chilton, 1984). Nukespeak, a word simultaneously introduced in England and America in the early 1980s (Fawcett, 1985), shows the potential power of creating a new term. Nukespeak (intended to sound like Newspeak) is the vocabulary created by those public and private organizations associated with the production and deployment of nuclear weaponry (Fowler and Marshall, 1985). The political left brought the word into its own vocabulary, providing researchers and critics with a new way to describe and understand the culture of nuclear weapons (Chilton, 1985).

More generally, the vocabulary of any political speech community will have a different number of linguistic distinctions for phenomena depending on their perceived importance. This is essentially similar to what Fowler and Kress (1979: 211) call overlexicalization, which they define as ‘the provision of a large number of synonymous or near-synonymous terms for communication of some specialized area of expertise’. As Fowler (1985: 65) argues, vocabulary might be seen as a map of the preoccupations of a culture. . . Detailed systems of terms develop for the areas of expertise, the features of habitat, the institutions and relationship, and the values and beliefs of a community.’ For instance, conservatives and moderates often speak of feminism, a term that, for their purposes, describes the women’s movement in one broad stroke. The left, by contrast, has tried to understand the subtle differences between the various feminist ideologies, including bourgeois, liberal, socialist and radical feminism (MacKinnon, 1989).

Technical words

Technical political terms are often neologisms, but after a period of time they can become part of the vernacular. They remain technical, having precise and often complex meanings for a specific language community, but they lose their novelty (e.g. realpolitik). Geis (1987: 25) argues that terms like those in Nukespeak are used for purposes of specificity. Military terms in general, he argues, ‘are complex for essentially the same reasons that contemporary scientific terms are complex—complex subjects require complex language’.
Fowler and Marshall (1985), on the other hand, argue that these words can serve a very different purpose. Using numerous acronyms and technical terms can make arguments inaccessible to those outside the linguistic community and cause bewildered listeners to attribute undue prestige to the speaker. Technical language can have these effects regardless of the speaker's intentions, but speakers sometimes fail to elaborate or clarify terms even when they know that the audience is unable to understand them.

Imprecise words

Imprecision is the opposite of technical specificity. Although it is possible to construct elaborate definitions of words like democracy (e.g. Dahl, 1989) and justice (e.g. Rawls, 1971), speakers typically use these terms without providing or intending a clear meaning. Why would one use such empty words? There are at least three reasons. First, vagueness allows different listeners to infer contradictory meanings, causing them to agree with the speaker for entirely different reasons (Moss, 1985). Second, Wodak (1989: 144) argues that extreme ambiguity can serve as camouflage: 'By using very abstract, undefined or very vague terms ... unpleasant facts are less obvious, ignorance of the speaker is easier to hide and it is easier to deny a statement afterwards.' Finally, Orwell (1956: 359–60, 364) claims that the repetition of meaningless and dead words anesthetizes listeners' brains, making them less critical and more receptive.

Sometimes, though, imprecision is due to struggles over meaning. Commonplace terms in American political discourse, such as conservative, liberal and progressive, have undergone incredible change in the last century (Green, 1987). If a commonly used term is loaded (see below), political actors may seek to define the term as synonymous with whatever policies they wish to advance. Thus, political terms evolve and become ambiguous ‘in the context of an ongoing struggle to shape the language itself to political purposes’ (Green, 1987: 4).

Euphemisms

Euphemisms are not so much ambiguous as misleading. In a supposedly harmless context, the euphemism veils a social delicacy yet is fully understood by both the speaker and listener. Using Geis’s (1987: 24) example, we ‘may find the word poop to be more acceptable for use in polite company than shit’, but no one ‘believes that dog poop smells any better than dog shit’.

In political discourse, though, euphemisms may lead to a very different offay term attributions. ‘Surgical relocation activities’, a phrase allegedly coined by Richard Nixon's lieutenant, Gordon Liddy, sounds quite different from kidnapping (Bolingber, 1982: 130–1). Nukespeak provides us with collateral damage, the preferred term in military jargon for the unintentional loss of human life caused by an offensive strike (Fawcett, 1985: x).

As yet another example, Turkish authorities once advised United Nations officials to stop accusing Turkish troops of looting in Cyprus. The government advised the UN to speak only of property being confiscated, taken for storage or being accounted for, three far less incriminating phrases (Hudson, 1978: 49).

Theorists disagree about how hearers interpret political euphemisms. Geis (1987: 24) argues that people are not ‘fooled’ by the use of all euphemisms, because we cannot assume that native speakers of, say, English ‘don’t know English’. To illustrate his point, however, Geis uses a word people probably do not fully understand. Pacification was a word used during the Vietnam War to signify the forcible removal of villagers and, in many cases, the intentional destruction of their village. Geis notes that in his dictionary the second meaning of this word is ‘to subdue’, a usage that has existed for half a millennium. He concludes that the military’s use of pacification was grammatically correct and hardly misleading.

Although Geis is etymologically and grammatically accurate, he misses the point. Pacification, due to its primary definition, inevitably suggests passive, pacifying or pacific (i.e. peaceful). Many hearers may not know of the secondary meaning, but even if they do, the word still brings the primary meaning with it (see Wilson, 1990). Just as kidnapping, killing and looting are clearer substitutes for the euphemisms listed above, forced removal and destruction are less ambiguous substitutes for pacification.

Loaded words

The differences between euphemisms and loaded words is that the former disguise meanings, whereas loaded words provide additional meanings, including connotations, presuppositions, implications, attributions and associations (Graber, 1976). For example, referring to peace activism as peacemongering carries with it the irrationality and savagery of its closest (and more familiar) lexical relative, warmongering (Fowler and Marshall, 1985: 14–15). Similarly, Israel denotes not only a nation; for many, it is the entire idea of a Promised Land (Graber, 1981: 199). By contrast, Rhodesia connoted colonialism, and the post-Independence government might have created Zimbabwe to bring more positive meanings to the nation’s name.

Geis (1987: 23) doubts the usefulness of this concept, challenging the idea that some political words are loaded while others are not. First, he argues, 'There are cases in which what is at issue are legitimate differences in perceptions of events rather than some misuse of the language.' For instance, a citizen might refer to conservatives as right-wingers, a derogatory term suggesting callousness, paranoia, etc. It is not clear that conservatives is a superior term, because the individual may believe that all the connotations of right-wingers are, more or less, accurate.

Second, Geis (1987: 15) argues that in many cases one cannot avoid using loaded terms:

1. The phrases ‘poverty-stricken’ and ‘economically deprived’ suggest that the poor are poor as a result of what circumstances have done to them—
someone or something has deprived them of economic well-being. The phrase 'economically disadvantaged' suggests that the poor are economically handicapped in one way or another through no fault of their own. The term 'destitute' is rather strong stuff and suggests that some sort of urgency is required to assist the poor. The word 'poor' may seem to be neutral, but it is not because it suggests that one need feel no sense of urgency about the problem of poverty.

The only choice this leaves the speaker, Geis argues, is to self-consciously use the term that approximates one's own theory of poverty.

Geis's qualifications are noteworthy, but one should not take them too far. In the first instance, it is often incumbent upon political speakers to make their arguments more explicit. For example, if one chooses to call the Contras the freedom fighters, as Ronald Reagan often did during the 1980s, one should be willing to present the theory and evidence that justifies the use of such a term. In the second case, Geis may exaggerate the possibility of using relatively neutral words. In his example, it is not at all obvious that poor is loaded; common expressions employing the term include 'there will always be poor' (i.e. there is nothing to be done) and 'we must help the poor' (i.e. the poor deserve help).

Even if a speaker has only loaded words from which to choose, it is important to understand the multitude of listener interpretations and psychological effects that accompany them. First, loaded words can be unifying, serving as reminders of the common language and ideology of speaker and listener (Edelman, 1964). Second, they can calm, inspire or motivate listeners (Edelman, 1964; Graber, 1981). Third, repeated and highly loaded language can have a brainwashing effect (Chomsky, 1988a, 1988b; Wodak, 1989). For instance, Hitler's steady use of severe derogatory terms for Jewish people (and other social and political groups) may have contributed to the degree of acceptance and endorsement his policies received.

Finally, loaded words can frame an issue. In the United States, there is currently debate over terms such as fetus, unborn child, product of conception or baby (Bolinger, 1981: 138), because the different word or phrase one uses suggests the appropriateness of different laws regarding abortion. Another example is the name of the Ten Percent Society, a national organization in the United States representing the interests of gays, lesbians and bisexuals. Those hearing this name might infer that homosexuals constitute at least 10 percent of the United States population. At the very least, it might cause the hearer to wonder—to stop assuming that homosexuals are a minuscule minority.

Democracy and political lexica

There are many ways in which political lexica relate to the process of democratic deliberation. First, within a given language, there may exist a number of different political lexica, each corresponding to a different speech community. Huspek and Kendall (1991: 1) believe that there typi-
make it ‘more difficult for the recipient of orders to become aware of the power relations’ that permit such an utterance (Pateman, 1975: 51). Our hypothetical mayor might receive a markedly different reaction from subordinates if she shouted: ‘I order you to cut back expenses!’

**Implicature**

Implicature is a more subtle form of political discourse. Holly (1989: 119) explains that, in general, ‘a hearer assumes that the speaker violated neither a general, nor several more specific principles of cooperation’. When the speaker flouts one of these maxims, the hearer infers that ‘the intended meaning must deviate from the literal version, because otherwise the speaker would have violated these principles and thus not have cooperated’. Consequently, the hearer derives an implicature from the speaker’s discourse.

Holly (1989: 123) identifies two varieties of political implicature. The *running-board technique* carries an implied meaning that ‘rides on the running-board; the interesting part of the meaning ... gets to its destination, but it isn’t allowed to sit in the car’. As an example, Holly (1989: 124) provides an excerpt from a speech Ronald Reagan gave to a gathering of children in Germany in 1985: ‘We remembered Ludwig Erhard’s secret; how he blazed Germany’s path with freedom by creating opportunity and lowering tax rates, to reward every man and woman who dared to dream...’. The phrase ‘lowering tax rates’ seems out of place, like a digression or distracting footnote. Nevertheless, if the listener presumes that the speaker intended the comment to be meaningful, one can interpret it as an argument for the soundness of his preferred economic policies, a centerpiece of which is reducing capital gains taxes. Thus, the listener might infer that Reaganomics is the path to freedom and prosperity, even though Reagan himself never made such a direct claim.

The second type of implicature Holly (1989: 127) identifies is the *phantom meaning technique*. This is similar to the running-board technique, except that the basic meaningful component is mere pretense, i.e. not intended at all. At least, it seems nonsensical without the hidden version. As an example, Holly points to a German politician calling a rival ‘the biggest instigator since Goebbels’, an infamous Nazi figure. The speaker could deny that he meant to compare the two, claiming that it was simply an accurate temporal note. ‘But the only plausible reason why he should choose Goebbels... is his intention to compare both.’ Otherwise, mentioning the name of Goebbels, rather than a date, would be unnecessary. The only reasonable understanding of *since Goebbels* is ‘as big or almost as big an instigator as Goebbels’, and the harmless temporal version turns out to be a mere ‘phantom meaning’ (Holly, 1989: 126–7).

Rhetorical questions are another common form of implicature. Richardson (1985: 30) provides an example from a speech by Margaret Thatcher: ‘If in the 1930s nuclear weapons had been invented and the allies had been faced by Nazi SS20s and Backfire Bombers, would it then have been morally right to have handed to Hitler total control of the most terrible weapons which man has ever made?’ This rhetorical question, Richardson (1985: 31) explains, ‘is redundant and therefore violates the Quantity maxim’, causing hearers to look for an implicature. According to the maxims, speakers do not state things already known by listeners, so the listener presumes that Thatcher’s rhetorical question is making a point. In the context of the statement, the point appears to be that the British unilateralists are mistaken in advocating unilateral disarmament in the 1980s, just as they would have been in the 1930s.

Using implicature, however, risks misunderstanding. Listeners do not uniformly interpret implicatures (Wilson, 1990). Implicature also requires greater cognitive effort on the part of listeners, possibly distracting them to the point that they forget or misunderstand an argument. Some listeners will infer the intended meaning; others will take other meanings, and some may miss the implicature altogether, thinking the surface structure meaning is adequate. For example, the listener may misunderstand Reagan’s 1985 comments as a direct attack on the German government and its fiscal policy. Alternately, Reagan’s reference to taxes might be interpreted as an intrinsically meaningful attempt at historical accuracy, a spoken footnote.

In light of these difficulties, why would political speakers choose to use implicature instead of speaking directly? Wilson (1990, 1991), Holly (1989) and Richardson (1985) argue that implicature is an invaluable tool for making relatively tenuous arguments and placing the world within a preferred ideological frame. First, arguments made through implicature may appeal to the listener at a relatively unconscious level. Second, they often cause the listener to become actively involved in the discourse, creating meanings the speaker intends the listener to accept. Third, if challenged, speakers may deny intending the implication, escaping legal and extra-legal sanction by placing the responsibility upon the listener. Moreover, Holly (1989: 124) argues, the potential misunderstandings will be mitigated in the long run, as ‘repetition and variation of forms will compensate for the occasional failure’.

Lest one make the inference that implicatures only appear in spontaneous statements and prepared speeches, it is useful to explore the role of implicature in political questions and answers. It is a truism of politics that clear questions do not always receive clear answers. Righteous evasion or frustrating ambiguity often follow straightforward political questions. Nevertheless, the questions themselves often invite cumbersome or seemingly evasive answers (Hargie et al., 1987; Jucker, 1986). As Wilson (1990: 132–3) argues, one must ask if

...the question can or cannot be answered by a simple response. Where a simple answer would be misleading, or imply support for propositions which the hearer may actually oppose, then it is unacceptable to expect the hearer to comply with some naive, preconceived notion of a certain answer type, when the real problem is with the question itself.

For instance, a yes/no question can place the answerer in a trap. Imagine that one citizen asks another: ‘Do you hope to improve upon your per-
formance at the last committee meeting, which you botched?” A simple yes or no makes the respondent appear a self-confessed incompetent.

Answers to questions provide another special case of implicature, because answers, unlike the statements discussed above, draw their implicature from the content of an immediately preceding question posed by a different speaker. In the case of yes/no questions, Bowers et al. (1977) identify four types of response, three of which involve implicature. Explanation is a straightforward form of answer, but propositional implicature, relational implicature and transparent questions are all forms of implicature. For example, if one speaker asks: ‘Did you vote for Mumbly?’ a response involving relational implicature might be: ‘Mumbly couldn’t be trusted with a penny.’ The listener, finding the answer as a violation of Grice’s Relevance maxim, infers that the speaker would not vote for an unreliable candidate and, accordingly, did not vote for Mumbly.

The opportunity for deceit is obvious. As Bowers et al. (1977: 238) explain: ‘We habitually process pragmatically responses that do not fulfill demands semantically because we assume good faith in the respondent.’ Devious answers, then, are those ‘messages designed by the respondent to mislead the demander without making the respondent subject to the negative sanctions attached to lying’. And as with other forms of implicature, the respondent using one of the three implicative modes of reply ‘may mislead his or her demander without being held accountable for lying, since the demander, not the respondent, is responsible for inferences’.

As with all implicature, answers can lead to unintended inferences. Wilson (1990), for example, makes a valid inference from a British government statement that the respondent did not intend. The government official was asked if the British government had accused the United States government of hypocrisy, since it bombed Libya in response to its terrorism, yet continues to arm the Contras, who are known to have used terrorist tactics. The official replied that the ‘analogy was invalid, because the Contras do not seek to advance their cause by terrorist acts in third countries’ (Wilson, 1990: 26; emphasis added by Wilson). At no time does the official clarify this reference to third country terrorism, leaving the implication that the Contras have committed terrorist acts in their own country, Nicaragua. Since allegations of Contra terrorism focus on their activities in Nicaragua (e.g. Kornbluh, 1988), ‘the presupposition that the Contras are terrorists [remains] intact’ (Wilson, 1990: 31). In sum, the effects of implicature—whether through statements, questions or answers—depend upon the listener’s interpretation.

Syntax

Under this subheading reside a variety of syntactic strategies distinct from implicature and the other grammatical devices discussed in this section. The following discussion of syntax addresses complexity, generics, sequencing, the passive tense, the deletion of the subject, nominalization, negation and agency.

A common feature of political jargon is complex sentence structure. Fowler (1985: 72) insists that ‘complex syntax is a property of the discourse of knowledge and authority’. One might expect relatively powerful political individuals and groups to use syntactic complexity as a weapon against the less powerful. Such complexity, particularly when disorganized, might befuddle the hearer, resulting in prestige attributions, and ‘vulnerability to irrational appeals’ (Pateman, 1975: 51–2).

The members of WAUDAG (1990: 195), an interdisciplinary discourse analysis group at the University of Washington, identify a number of clause and sentence structures characteristic of George Bush’s 1989 Inaugural Speech, including his propensity to speak in general terms. Generic or quasi-generic sentences, such as ‘Good will beget good will’, are ‘so vague as to forestall any objection’. Similarly, Bush frequently uses this and thing with often humorous ambiguity or superfluity, such as in the sentence: ‘I’m putting out my hand to you Mr Majority Leader, for this is the thing, this is the age of the offered hand.’ Such general and vague language may appear the opposite of complexity, but its effects are not necessarily so different: like syntactic complexity, generic language could easily confuse or mislead the listener.

Speakers can also use syntax to shift the listener’s attention and responsibility attributions through sequencing, the passive tense, deletion of subject and nominalization (Fowler, 1985; Fowler and Kress, 1979; Orwell, 1956; WAUDAG, 1990). The following five sentences illustrate these techniques, each of which distances the speaker from the hearer and reduces the speaker’s apparent responsibility in the matter:

1. I will penalize you if you do not observe these regulations.
2. If you do not observe these regulations, I will penalize you.
3. If you do not observe these regulations, you will be penalized by me.
4. If you do not observe these regulations, you will be penalized.
5. Failure of observance of these regulations will result in penalties.

Sentence (1) is a straightforward statement, telling the listener what the speaker will do if the listener does not follow regulations. In (2) the sequence of subject and object are reversed. In (3) the active verb is replaced by the passive. In (4) the passive allows the subject to disappear altogether, and in (5) the sentence is nominalized, transforming the verbs into a noun phrase (failure of observance) and a noun (penalties).

Kress and Hodge (1979: 150) discuss a variety of other syntactic strategies under the heading of negation. ‘A large part of the resources of language’, they argue, ‘are designed to allow people not only to say what they mean but to mean the opposite as well, without ruffling the smooth surface of life or discourse.’ For instance, speakers often utter sentences that include a structure such as ‘It is true that . . . .’ . . . . Other words and phrases—yet, however, nevertheless, at the same time—can play the same role, allowing the speaker to utter statements that may make either subtle distinctions or outright contradictions.

In addition, Atkinson (1984) has identified two syntactic forms that serve as claptrops, readily cuing applause and approbation from an audience. In
live speech, audiences regularly applaud following climactic contrastive pairs (e.g. 'Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country') and three-part lists (e.g. 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'). These syntactic forms appear regularly in printed and televised sound bites because of the favorable responses they tend to elicit.

Finally, Samoan political speakers often take advantage of a syntactic device unavailable in English and many other languages. Samoan distinguishes active agents from other subjects (Duranti, 1990: 651–5). Agents are the subjects of transitive clauses and marked by the preposition e, whereas non-agents are the subjects of intransitive clauses, without any preposition. In Samoan political discourse, marking a person or group as an agent typically coincides with an implicit or explicit assignment of responsibility. This attribution can constitute an act of praise and positive recognition of authority or an act of condemnation for events that should not have occurred.

**Pronouns**

Like the syntactic devices discussed above, pronoun selection need not be conscious. Demographics make certain usages more probable than others in general; pronounal choice, in this case, simply reflects 'certain social facts about the speaker' (Wilson, 1990: 47). Differences in context can also affect the use of pronouns. For instance, first person references may be more prevalent in written versus spoken discourse (Chafe, 1982), as Lwatiama (cited in Wilson, 1990) found in the case of two prominent Tanzanian officials.

Even if it is difficult to separate a speaker's intentions from these sociolinguistic and contextual factors, there is always the potential for pragmatic usage when a sentence allows the speaker to choose among a number of possible pronouns (Fairclough, 1989; Fowler and Kress, 1979; Wilson, 1990). Politicians and citizens might manipulate their pronouns for at least four reasons. First, people can use pronouns 'in developing and indicating their ideological position on specific issues' (Wilson, 1990: 46). Citizens, for instance, might speak of the government as us or it, depending upon their view of the public's role in governance.

Second, 'the choice of pronoun indicates how close/distant the speaker is to the topic under discussion, or to the participants involved in the discussion' (Wilson, 1990: 62). This function is similar, but it has a slightly different significance. Here, speakers can judiciously distribute pronouns, such as we and they, to suggest their membership or identification with different groups, such as organizations, ethnic groups or parties.

In addition, many languages provide a choice between a familiar pronoun and a formal, polite pronoun. For instance, Spanish has two words for the English pronoun you. One might call a close friend or peer tu and speak to a parent or official as Ud. Brown and Gilman (1960) argue that non-reciprocal usage (e.g. I say Ud. to you, but you say tu to me) implies social distance and an unequal power relationship, with the dominant speaker using the informal pronoun. Conversely, a reciprocal usage implies relative equality and solidarity. Thus, the exchange of pronouns can shape or confirm the power dynamics and intimacy of a relationship.

Third, using we to include listeners can involve them in the speaker's argument, possibly making them more receptive. In this way, we might disguise absurdities or weak arguments, because the listener would not want us to appear foolish (Pateman, 1975). Similarly, we can include the speaker, the hearer and some other entity, such as the state. If the speaker's claims regard all three, then the hearer's implied relationship to both speaker and subject matter might 'weaken in some sense the individual's hold on independent thought' (Moss, 1985: 46).

Finally, pronoun choice can affect attributions of responsibility. Wilson (1990: 48) provides the hypothetical example of a president trying to explain an unpopular interest rate increase. The speaker begins the announcement with (1) and can complete the statement with (2), (3) or (4):

(1) Due to the rising balance of payment deficit ... 
(2) it has been found necessary to increase interest rates. 
(3) I have found it necessary to increase interest rates. 
(4) we have found it necessary to increase interest rates.

**It, I and we distribute responsibility differently, and one might suspect that the president would use (2) or (4), avoiding full personal responsibility for the unpopular raising of interest rates. By contrast, a speaker might repeatedly use I when discussing popular policies, even though, in the strictest sense, such policies are usually developed and implemented by large numbers of citizens and public officials.

**Naming conventions**

Naming conventions might also affect the attribution of responsibility. Wilson (1990: 78) discusses how political actors sometimes refer to themselves through offices and positions, rather than by using their personal names. Wilson's main example is from a statement by Norman Tebbit in the House of Commons on 17 November 1986:

[...] it was not the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster [hereafter CODL] who made the complaint but the Chairman of the Conservative Party. What is interesting about this choice and use of definite description is that Norman Tebbit ... was, at that time, both the CODL and the Chairman of the Conservative Party.

By referring to positions instead of oneself, a speaker can effectively 'manipulate the hearer's identifications by directing attention ... towards some generic role or conceptual category' (Wilson, 1990: 77). American presidents have used this strategy to focus praise toward themselves, as
individuals, and deflect criticism toward the institutional role of the president (Zernicke, 1990).

More commonplace naming conventions can be used for other purposes. Fowler and Kress (1979) remind us that we may address or refer to individuals by using various parts of their names and titles. If we address a mayor named Mary Margaret Dodson, we might say Ms Mayor, Madam Mayor, Mayor Dodson, Ms Dodson, Ms M. Dodson, Ms Mary Margaret Dodson, Mary Dodson or something as simple as Mary or Mary Margaret. If the mayor had a PhD or MD the number of combinations becomes even greater.

'These different combinations', argue Fowler and Kress (1979: 200), 'signify different assessments by the speaker/writer of his or her relationship with the person referred to or spoken to, and of the formality or intimacy of the situation.' Thus, we might expect differential usage of these naming conventions to reflect differences in perceived or desired power. To some extent, names will be negotiated between speakers. For instance, a citizen might try to address our hypothetical mayor with a more deferential naming convention, such as Madam Mayor. In an attempt to disguise or lessen the power difference, the mayor may choose to address the citizen as Mr Simpson and ask to be called Mary. In some cases, the citizen might accept this practice, but the citizen might also choose to continue implicit negotiations, perhaps shifting to Mayor Dodson or Ms Dodson.

Democracy and political grammar

These different grammatical devices raise important issues with regard to democratic deliberation. The problem with existing uses of speech acts is their unequal distribution. Deliberation requires that no speaker have an inordinate, unaccountable form of authority. In small parliamentary groups, for instance, the authority to recognize speakers could be distributed, rotated or, if held by a single person, subject to transfer.

Implication, syntax, pronouns and naming conventions all have implications for accountability. By cloaking intended meanings and inferences, speakers often present arguments without making them explicit. This makes debate and reasoned deliberation more difficult, requiring listeners to develop high levels of skill at critical listening and cross-examination. While such skills are always desirable, to the extent that many listeners lack them, these grammatical devices often manipulate and deceive other members of the demos.

Pronouns and naming conventions too can bolster or weaken the relationships among members of a demos. They offer opportunities for recognizing mutuality or intimacy, and they often serve as means for showing courtesy or politeness. At the same time, speakers can use them to exclude or insult others, and it is probably the case that political actors typically use these tools to build intragroup relationships (e.g. within a political party or nation) while simultaneously undermining intergroup relations (e.g. across sociopolitical boundaries).

This is perhaps the broadest heading of all, as it contains an infinite number of rhetorical or textual strategies of argumentation. Rhetorical strategies draw upon both lexicon and grammar, but they transcend the level of phrasing and sentence structure. As defined herein, a rhetorical strategy is simply a style or form of argument. The following discussion addresses four of the strategies discussed in the literature on political discourse: integrative complexity, rituals, metaphors and myths (for a broader discussion of argumentation, see Perelman, 1982; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; Toulmin, 1958).

Integrative complexity

Political psychologists have paid particular attention to the integrative complexity of political discourse. Integratively complex discourse is characterized by a recognition that more than one point of view on an issue can be valid and that the different perspectives can be integrated or related to one another in some manner' (Pancer et al., 1992: 32). A series of studies over the last fifteen years (e.g. Suedfeld and Rank, 1976; Suedfeld et al., 1977; Pancer et al., 1992) have produced a number of provocative generalizations about the integrative complexity of political talk: policy-makers are generally more complex than their opposition; election-year speeches are more complex than those given after elections; and complexity decreases as countries get closer to war. In addition, ideology, personality and government structure (e.g. the degree of a political official's accountability) typically affect the degree of integrative complexity in a speaker's discourse.

Although writing in different terms, Glendon (1991: x) may have recently identified a concrete and generalized example of integrative simplicity, what she calls rights talk. People across the globe speak in terms of rights, but American rights talk is set apart ... by its starkness and simplicity, its prodigality in bestowing the rights label, its legalistic character, its exaggerated absoluteness, its hyperindividualism, its insularity, and its silence with respect to personal, civic, and collective responsibilities. The cost of this rights talk is unrealistic expectations, an unwillingness to compromise and an ignorance of common ground. It rejects the idea of obligation, even to the most downtrodden members of society. Finally, it contributes to the notion that reasons can be replaced with mere assertion (Glendon, 1991: 15).

Rituals

Political speakers are also prone to produce ritualistic discourse (for a more detailed discussion of communication rituals, see Goffman, 1981). Ritualistic political discourse can have the effect of 'providing instant commonality' between the speaker and the community of listeners. For
instance, the presidential inauguration, if performed according to discursive ritual, effectively associates the president with past inaugurals—some of the community's most salient previous common experiences (Denton and Woodward, 1990). In his 1989 Inaugural, George Bush makes this ritual connection explicit, reminding the audience that 'the Bible on which I placed my hand is the Bible on which he [Washington] placed his ... Washington remains the father of our country, and he would ... be gladened by this day' (WAUDAG, 1990).

Metaphors

In a somewhat similar manner, political metaphors can cause the listener to make unconscious assumptions. If the metaphor is used repeatedly, the listener may inadvertently begin to assume and act as if the two phenomena under comparison are, in fact, closely related. For instance, 'Simply labeling a problem a “crisis” often mobilizes support' (Denton and Woodward, 1990: 33). The use of vivid metaphor can also 'create benchmarks that shape popular judgments of the success or failure of specific programs' (Edelman, 1977: 36).

For example, cold war conservatives often compared the Soviet Union to pre-World War II Germany, arguing that Europe and the United States must 'avoid another Munich' by confronting the enemy, rejecting reconciliation and appeasement. The Reagan administration (i.e. the Allies) justified its weapons build-up as a necessary response to the aggression of the Soviet Union (i.e. the Nazis et al.). Even if one rejected this form of analogic reasoning, the comparison might come to appear natural and obvious. Moreover, one might then use it as a benchmark, making Reagan's policies appear prudent so long as nothing as bad as a global war came to pass. Had the prevailing political discourse used a different historical metaphor, say World War I, such policies would have appeared irrational, fatalistic and potentially dangerous, being analogous to the infamous German Schlieffenplan.

The clearest danger with overused or overextended metaphors is their distortion of reality. Howe (1988: 99) illustrates this problem in the case of sport and war metaphors, both of which are used with striking regularity in American politics:

Although such metaphors do correspond in some ways to reality, they ignore or disguise one inescapable fact about contemporary America: The political process and, more especially, passing legislation proceed through compromise and consensus. ... The destructive irony is that metaphors from sports and war can delude their users into believing that negotiation and compromise are forbidden by the rules of conflict.

The use of metaphors shares the same liability as implicature: the listener may derive different meanings than those intended by the speaker. A classic example is a mixed metaphor reportedly concocted by a former Brazilian president: At a formal presentation, he is said to have proudly announced: 'When I came to office, we were on the brink of disaster. Since that time, we have taken a great leap forward.' The audience agreed, but the meaning they drew from the metaphor was far from the one intended by the speaker. The danger of misinterpretation is almost always present with metaphor. Ultimately, speakers must make a trade-off between their ability to control the interpretation of relatively dead metaphors (e.g. Achilles' heel: Orwell, 1956) and their desire to create a vivid image or clear cognitive association.

Myths

Political speakers also regularly invoke myths to bolster their discourse (e.g. McGuire, 1977). Geis (1987) develops a parsimonious notion of the role of myth in political discourse by synthesizing and distilling the work of Edelman (1964, 1971, 1977, 1988). According to Geis (1987: 28–30), a myth is a simple and non-falsifiable causal theory that justifies actions or assertions and is somewhat widely held by the discursive community. The flaws in myths 'are rather evident when stated baldly. For that reason, the indirect evocation of a mythic theme will be more effective than its explicit evocation ... [Myths] are normally evoked without supporting argument because they are taken to be axiomatic.' In addition, they are not always consciously employed by the speaker: speakers who believe in myths might appeal to them without having any malicious intention to deceive the listener.

An example of a prominent American myth is United We Stand. Geis (1987: 26) defines this myth proposition as: 'The belief that a group—a nation, a state, a party—can achieve victory over its enemies if it will only work, sacrifice, and obey its leaders.' One might invoke this myth by declaring: 'This nation has survived a Depression, won two world wars, and silenced the sirens of communism. Now we must prepare ourselves for our newest challenge ...'. Whatever the challenge may be, if the listeners believe in the United We Stand myth, the speaker may manage to persuade them of their ability without even presenting a coherent argument.

If the United States is a representative example, the world is awash in political myths. From Edelman's work, Geis (1987: 26–38, 30, 34) draws out three themes: United We Stand, The Conspiratorial Enemy and The Valiant Leader. Geis also identifies Man [sic] is a Rational Animal, The Noble Revolutionary, America the Peaceful and the contradictory pair of The Poor are Victims and The Lazy Poor. Denton and Woodward's (1990: 36) discussion of American political myths adds The American Dream, Us against Them, American Democracy and Capitalism for All, and others.

The greatest power of mythic discourse is its ability to make weak arguments appear strong. Since myths are impossible to disprove and already have public support, 'the net result is that they are remarkably invulnerable to intellectual assault, with counterexamples usually being shrugged off as somehow irrelevant or inconsequential' (Geis, 1987: 29). Edelman (1977: 3) eloquently explains:
From the beginnings of recorded history to the present day, governments have won the support of large numbers of their citizens for policies that were based upon delusions: beliefs in witches, in nonexistent internal and external enemies, or in the efficacy of laws to regulate private power, cope with destitution, guarantee civil rights, or rehabilitate criminals that have often had the opposite effect from their intended ones. Large numbers of people continue for long periods of time to cling to myths, to justify it in formulas that are repeated in their cultures, and to reject falsifying information when prevailing myths justify their interests, roles, and past actions, or assuage their fears.

Other functions of myths include 'providing a common experience' for the members of the linguistic community; shared myths can bolster loyalty and group cohesion (Lasswell, 1949). Myths can also induce a number of emotional responses, such as comfort and reassurance (Moss, 1985). The political utility of such effects is apparent. As Geis (1987: 37) laments: 'Politicians find mythic language irresistible and can be expected to indulge in it until the people cease responding to the resultant rhetoric.'

American presidents have repeatedly relied upon mythic discourse. Reagan used mythical and anecdotal rhetoric with great effect (Lewis, 1987), unifying his listeners and leading them to accept the empirical assumptions and values embedded within them. By using myth in lieu of theories and evidence, Reagan not only won over listeners but also muted or deflected potential criticism of his policies. One should not presume, however, that the mere invocation of myth ensures success. Carter tried to frame his foreign policy within the myth of the American mission, but his mythic discourse failed to make his policies successful (Kraig, 1989).

**Democracy and political rhetoric**

Simplistic, ritualistic, metaphorical and mythic discourse share the same democratic and undemocratic potential. It is certainly true that each can forge genuine consensus and bring the members of the demos together, causing them to recognize the degree to which they share common values, views and histories. At the same time, these rhetorical strategies can intoxicate or mystify the demos. They exaggerate the simplicity of political situations and obscure real and important differences in citizens' perspectives and interests. Based upon the studies cited herein, it appears that these strategies are more often foe than friend to the democratic process. As with lexical ambiguity, one would not want to begin a quixotic struggle to purge our discourse of all myths and the like. Nevertheless, those seeking to democratize political discourse should be heartened by neither the prevalence of these forms of argument nor the willingness of listeners to accept them.

**CONVERSATIONAL TACTICS**

The preceding analyses of political discourse primarily examine the utterances of isolated speakers, but most political talk takes place in small or large groups where speakers engage in conversation and debate. This final section briefly discusses two of the many important features of interactive political discourse, turn-taking and agenda-setting (for an extended discussion, see Graber, 1976: chs 8 and 9).

**Turn-taking**

In a more general discussion of discourse, van Dijk (1989: 21) identifies the typical type of conversational relations between speakers with different levels of power. He writes:

The less powerful people are, the less they have access to various forms of text or talk. Ultimately, the powerless have literally 'nothing to say'. Nobody to talk to, or must remain silent when more powerful people are speaking. ... For most formal, public, or printed discourse types ... the less powerful are usually only recipients.

In essence, van Dijk argues that elites dominate conversations, making it difficult for less powerful citizens to raise questions and articulate their interests and opinions.

Carbo's (1992) analysis of Mexican parliamentary discourse provides support for this view, but she also reveals the issue's complexity. Her study focuses on interruptions during parliamentary debates. Interruptions are particularly interesting in the Mexican parliament, because they are forbidden according to official rules of procedure. Carbo shows how the regularity of interruptions paradoxically reveals both the effectiveness and the vulnerability of the dominant parliamentary party.

From one perspective, interruptions can be seen as signs of heated, open debate. The authorities' acceptance of them might lead observers to infer a level of political tolerance and maturity. Thus, 'interruptions and other sorts of apparently uncontrolled polemical operations may serve as signals of the existence of a "real"—and fruitful—debate among participants', giving the ruling party the political legitimacy it requires (Carbo, 1992: 37).

At the same time, interruptions can be viewed as successful attempts by opposition groups to resist the authorities' manipulation of speaking turns during parliamentary sessions. 'If people are not given equal opportunities to speak, "they will strive to get them, or ... they will infringe on the rights of those who are favored by power"' (Carbo, 1992: 41). Thus, interruptions can be signs of effective resistance, but the tolerance of them may itself constitute a political tactic on the part of parliamentary elites.

**Agenda-setting**

It is important to be able to acquire speaking turns, but, to be effective, political speakers must also have some ability to set the agenda. Once
again, van Dijk (1989: 22) suggests the typical relations between subordinates and elites in conversation:

[Elites] are not only active speakers in most situations, but they may take the initiative in verbal encounters or public discourses, set the ‘tone’ or style of text or talk, determine its topics, and decide who will be participant or recipient of their discourses... [They] have relative power... in deciding about the discourse genres... and determine topics, style, or presentation of discourse... They may set the agendas of public discussion, influence topical relevance, and manage the amount and type of information, especially who is being publicly portrayed and in what way.

This generalization aptly describes the findings of two studies on US Senate hearings. In their analysis of the Watergate Hearings, Molotch and Boden (1985: 273) identify three faces of conversational power. First, one can have the power to prevail in a given language-game, such as a certain style of debate on a particular topic. Second, one can have the power to determine the content of such a debate, setting the agenda or issues for discussion. Finally, one can have the power to set the rules of the game, the grounds of the interactions through which agendas are set and outcomes determined... the linguistic premises upon which the legitimacy of accounts will be judged.

The first two forms of power may be more familiar, but the third is equally important. In the Watergate Hearings, for instance, demanding ‘just the facts’ from witnesses leaves them with no choice but to provide simplistic testimony. Their attempts to tell the ‘whole story’ can be blocked by the charge of evasion, since such testimony violates the rules established by the committee (Molotch and Boden, 1985: 285).

Boynton’s (1991) analysis of United States Senate subcommittee hearings on the 1987 Clean Air Act highlights another form of power exercised by committee members during hearings. By selecting the witnesses who testify, the committee decides who has access to the public record, and by manipulating the order of witnesses, committee members can give testimony more or less scrutiny and prominence in the hearings. In sum, both of these studies show the role of agenda-setting in shaping political conversation.

**Democracy and political conversation**

Turn-taking and agenda-setting directly correspond to the notion of equal and adequate opportunities to participate discursively in the democratic process. The unequal distribution in turns and inegalitarian systems for governing the length and sequence of turns can both result in an inequality of opportunities. As for agenda-setting, democratic theorists have conceived of it as one of the forms of discourse (Barber, 1984; Gastil, 1991, in press) to which the equal opportunity criterion applies. By this definition, an inequality of opportunities to set the agenda is inherently undemocratic.

**Conclusion**

This review has shown that there exists a broad base of theory and research on political discourse, including investigations of lexic, grammar, rhetorical strategies and conversational tactics. Moreover, I have argued that these are important forms of political discourse, because they have significant implications for the democratic process. These forms of discourse can bolster or obstruct reasoned discourse, equalize or skew discursive opportunities, and move the members of the political community toward or away from informed agreements, and strengthen or weaken relationships among citizens.

To conclude, I would like to make a few suggestions for future theory and research. First, prior to designing and conducting research, authors should look beyond their own fields for theoretical, methodological and empirical insight. Most of the writings reviewed herein built themselves upon the knowledge of only one or two disciplines. This is unfortunate, because there are a variety of scholarly traditions concerned with political discourse. Even the literature in English is far deeper than this brief review; those who read the sources I have cited will find equally important writings cited therein. In sum, future research will have sturdier foundations if it draws upon the full variety of materials one can find in academia's many lumberyards.

Future research could also become more integrated by grounding itself in an overarching theory. Structuration theory may provide such a framework (I. Cohen, 1989; Giddens, 1984). The connection between discourse and politics is clear in the structuration model. As Giddens (1984: 31) writes: ‘Structures of signification always have to be grasped in connection with domination and legitimation.’ Some studies of political discourse have framed their work in terms of structuration (e.g. Duranti, 1990; Molotch and Boden, 1985), and many more have suggested causal models that are virtually identical in form if not in name (e.g. Fairclough, 1989; Foley, 1990). If researchers consistently used this or a similar framework, the loss in conceptual diversity might be more than offset by the ease with which we could compare and synthesize our theories and findings.

Researchers might also continue to unravel the causes or explanations of political discourse. Description may be a necessary first step, but the field should eventually move to more complex, causal theories. For instance, it is necessary to distinguish intentional implicature from that which is the product of creative hearers (and critics). Researchers interested in this question could interview former speechwriters, who might know the extent to which well-crafted turns of phrase were intended.

Moving from causes to effects, Graber’s (1976: 241) criticism remains valid today: ‘Speech effects have often been claimed but rarely proven.’ Psycholinguistic experiments could aid investigators who seek to assess the impact of political discourse upon listeners (Graber, 1976). Experiments might reveal the frequency and sizes of psychological effects and the variables that moderate them (e.g. Argentin et al., 1990; Dorna, 1990). Mea-
suring effects, particularly those that are relatively unconscious, might prove difficult, but developing sound observational methods and designs will prove worthwhile because of the complex information that they might provide. This form of research could not replace ethnographic or qualitative studies, but it could prove a useful complement. Moreover, those relying upon case studies could organize them into more coherent programs of research, sometimes making them analogous to field experiments (Graber, 1976).

More generally, research on political discourse needs to examine the political language of citizens, relatively minor or local public officials and small political groups, such as community organizations and cooperatives. Focusing solely upon elites gives the mistaken impression that the everyday speech of citizens is inconsequential.

Relatedly, research needs to look not just at the spoken discourse, but at the interpretation. Recall that in Fairclough's (1989) model, listeners use interpretive schemes and background knowledge to process the political discourse they read and hear. Some researchers have explicitly examined this process (e.g., Foley, 1990), but many studies infer interpretation solely from the spoken or written discourse and its setting.

Whether studying elites or citizens, researchers should take into account the non-verbal components of discourse. Non-verbal channels are obviously important in political speech (Argentin et al., 1990; Graber, 1976, 1981; Mansbridge, 1983; Seidel, 1985), but they have received scant attention. Almost all discourse—be it written or spoken—contains both verbal and non-verbal elements. Moreover, one can rarely just combine verbal and non-verbal analyses, because they usually interact with one another. Thus, focusing exclusively on verbal discourse can result in not just incomplete, but altogether inaccurate observations (Burgoon et al., 1989).

Finally, political discourse analysts can underscore and increase the relevance of their investigations by framing them in terms of democracy. We have much to learn about the democratic process and the means by which a small group or society moves toward democracy, but it is certain that discourse plays a vital role in creating and maintaining democratic norms and institutions. Accordingly, both academia and society would benefit from a systematic analysis of the origins, forms and effects of democratic and undemocratic political discourse.

John Gastil is a doctoral candidate in communication arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His main interests are democratic discourse, small group behavior and critical theories of politics and society. Some of his previous writings appear in Sex Roles, Political Psychology, the Journal of Applied Social Psychology and Small Group Research. He is currently writing a book on small group democracy. Address: Department of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Vilas

GASTIL: Undemocratic discourse 495

Communication Hall, 6th floor, 821 University Avenue, Madison WI 53706, USA.

NOTES

I would like to thank Robert Kraig and Teun van Dijk for their assistance in the revision of this manuscript.

1. The ambiguity in political is no more a hindrance than the problems presented by educational, media, institutional or literary—terms used to delineate other branches of discourse analysis. This definition provides enough focus to make a review essay reasonable in length, but it does not begin to resolve the complex definitional issues regarding political discourse (see Shapiro, 1981).

2. As a convenience, I interchange terms such as speaking and writing. I always intend to refer to both spoken and written discourse, unless otherwise noted.

3. I recognize that proposed ideals of discourse have been criticized (e.g., Sanders, 1991; Simpson, 1986). As Foucault argues, “All particular conceptions of ‘justice’, or ‘truth’, or ‘equality’ ... privilege certain groups and suppress or ignore others” (Whalen and Cheney, 1991: 471). I readily admit the fallibility of the ideal proposed herein, but I believe that such a stance is useful for critique. Moreover, its current form does not clearly privilege a particular speech community, as it requires the inclusion and equal participation of all concerned persons. In particular, the ideal leaves room for emotional, personalized and other typically marginalized forms of speech.

4. Even for the purpose of analysis, these three categories of political language are not always easy to separate, and there is an inevitable degree of overlap across sections. For instance, this section focuses upon isolated words and phrases, but pronouns are discussed later, under the rubric of grammar.

5. In the event that all available words are loaded, speakers can at least refrain from applying the words with a double standard. Herman and Chomsky (1988) identify a number of ways in which politicians and the media use essentially different definitions for words and phrases depending upon their ideological estimation of the persons, groups or nations they describe. A political assassin’s victim, for instance, might appear a martyr in one country, but not in another (see also Chomsky, 1988a, 1988b, 1989).

6. Laboratory experiments on the cognitive effects of rhetorical questions have produced conflicting findings (e.g., Burnkrant and Howard, 1984; Munch and Swasy, 1988; Petty et al., 1981).

7. The studies herein focus on face-to-face conversation, but one can also conceptualize political conversation on larger social scales. Political systems invariably involve two-way communication, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees. The apparent weakness of the conversational analogy may reflect the inadequacies of existing systems more than the inherent differences between small- and large-scale democracies (e.g., Mansbridge, 1983; Mathews, 1988).

REFERENCES