

The Ashes of 9/11

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During the six months since 9/11, George W. Bush has succeeded in changing his image and focusing the attention of Americans on his campaign against global terrorism. There has been an overwhelming positive transformation in the public image that Americans have of George Bush. Although polls show support for all political leaders in the post 9/11 period, Bush has received a resounding vote of approval. Recent polls have shown record-breaking satisfaction ratings: "Six months ago, George W. Bush registered the highest presidential job approval rating in Gallup's polling history, at 90%. Since that time, his approval rating has fallen only slightly, to 80%" (Gallup News Service, 21 March 2002). Bush's high popularity ratings are a reflection of the pull that disaster has in drawing public attention away from personal criticism (for example, the controversy surrounding the outcome of the election results) and towards consensus.

Linguists are well aware of the consequences that words (or utterances) have on changing behaviour. We choose words to accomplish things. Speech acts have social consequences such as complaining, making a promise, giving advice,

or, to give an extreme example, declaring war. There are thus political consequences to word choice. In his famous treatise on clear writing entitled "Politics and the English language", George Orwell points out the relationship between thought and language and between language and thought. "It [the English language] becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts". Bush has long been known for his malapropisms and grammatical inaccuracies. The list of *Bushisms* is long. Shock and anger could explain why Bush made so many blunders immediately following the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. The semantic implications of some of his choices were far-reaching although it isn't clear whether he was aware of the consequences of his choices. Bush called the terrorists "folks"; he referred to the campaign as a "crusade"; he was determined to "smoke out the terrorists"; he called for "revenge". What did he accomplish by his choice of words? To paraphrase Orwell, to do the right thing you have to say the right thing. Bush seemed as undisciplined as his language.

Bush's new public image reflected the successful outcomes of the campaign in Afghanistan and was accompanied by a corresponding change in the perception of Bush as a public speaker. According to The New York Times, what tipped the balance in favour of Bush was a major speech delivered in October 2001 before a joint session of Congress. In the review of the speech, The New York Times entitled its article: "The 2,988 words that changed a presidency" (October 7, 2001). Peggy Noonan enthusiastically reviewed another Bush speech, The State of the Union Address, in the editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal (January 31, 2002). Ms. Noonan called Bush's public speaking performance "Plainspoken Eloquence".

The press has not always been so sympathetic to Bush although he has also provided many opportunities for the press to criticise and satirise him (e.g., the pretzel incident). Ironically, as Bush's popularity has mounted, public confidence and trust in the role of the press has declined. Recent polls have shown great disapproval of the media: "Just 43% of Americans approve of the way the news media

have been handling the war, and 54% disapprove.” Gallup pollsters added these details: “Approval ratings for the news media vary somewhat among demographic subgroups, but even the most positive groups show no more than half who approve.” Public disapproval of the media may be due to media coverage (or excessive coverage) of bad news such as the anthrax scare. Likewise, the public may be wary of any questioning of the actions of political leaders in times of crisis. In this way, public disapproval of the media might simply be a “shoot the messenger” effect. Nonetheless, at least for now, polls show that Americans are convinced of Bush’s credibility as an international leader all the while questioning the “watchdog” role of the media.

Message content: Keep it short and simple ■

On March 11, 2002, Bush made a televised speech on the six-month anniversary of 9/11. This speech is another example of “Plainspoken Eloquence”. I would like to take a close look at this speech to identify a few of the distinguishing discourse features. A speech made on such an important and symbolic occasion is necessarily prepared for maximum impact since it is aimed not only at the nation, but also the world. Here are some general statistics for the speech. The speech contains 1,827 words averaging 4.7 letters each. The number of syllables is 2,870 averaging 1.57 syllables per word. There are 26 passive sentences in the speech for a total of 22%. Using the Flesch Reading Ease formula on the speech gives a “fairly easy” rating for readability with 85% of US adults able to understand the speech. These statistics are not surprising for Bush intends his message to be understood by the greatest number of people.

The structural coherence of the speech is transparent. The speech opens much like a newspaper article with the journalistic technique of answering “wh” questions: *Why are we here? What happened? Who is the enemy? What are we doing?* This technique allows Bush to give the “big picture” right from the beginning. The development of the arguments in the speech is also extremely linear and follows the triad—there is a problem; there is a need; there is an opportunity. What follows are extracts from the introduction, development and conclusion of the speech that can illustrate this global coherence.

The Problem: We face an enemy of ruthless ambition, unconstrained by law or morality. The terrorists despise other religions and have defiled their own. And they are determined to expand the scale and scope of their murder. The terror that targeted New York and Washington could next strike any center of civilization. Against such an enemy, there is no immunity, and there can be no neutrality.

The Need: I have set a clear policy in the second stage of the war on terror: America encourages and expects governments everywhere to help remove the terrorist parasites that threaten their own countries and peace of the world. If governments need training, or resources to meet this commitment, America will help.

The Opportunity: I see a peaceful world beyond the war on terror, and with courage and unity, we are building that world together. Any nation that makes an unequivocal commitment against terror can join this cause. Every nation of goodwill is welcome. And, together, we will face the peril of our moment, and seize the promise of our times.

The public speaking style of Bush is unadorned and direct. There is little opportunity for stuttering; words are short and euphony is assured by the addition of “and” at the beginning of sentences (13 occurrences). 77% of the words that Bush uses in the speech fall within the Brown in-

dex of the 2000 most frequently occurring words in general English.

Speaking plainly is the hallmark of Bush’s style. Being simple, linear, and direct leads to an effective transmission and reception of a message. To return to Orwell, Bush’s speech fits closely within the recommendations given in “Politics and the English Language”.

1. *Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.*
2. *Never use a long word where a short one will do.*
3. *If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.*
4. *Never use the passive where you can use the active.*
5. *Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.*
6. *Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.*

In his speeches, Bush and his speechwriters seem to have followed Orwell’s suggestions. The March 11 speech contains no quotes, foreign words (or difficult-to-pronounce Latinate words). There are few metaphors and adjectives. The active voice is predominant. The result is a style that is informal, non-academic, and close to the register of spoken English. The syntactic pattern of subject-predicate-object is predominant and co-ordination is favoured over subordination. Since meaning is expressed through syntax, the deliberate choice of simple sentences with only a few connectives and little subordination could give an impression of discontinuity were it not for the strong message focus. As The New York Times notes, Bush’s style is carved out of “concrete” rather than “marble”. Unfortunately, Bush’s discourse style is often strong on facts but rather weak on drama. But then again, the general context of 9/11 has provided an overdose of emotion and drama. Here is an example of Bush speaking plainly.

Next week, the schools reopen in Afghanistan. They will be open to all—and many young girls will go to school for the first time in their young lives. Afghanistan has many difficult challenges ahead—and, yet, we've averted mass starvation, begun clearing minefields, rebuilding roads and improving health care. In Kabul, a friendly government is an essential member of the coalition against terror.

Now that the Taliban are gone and al Qaeda has lost its home base for terrorism, we have entered the second stage of the war on terror—a sustained campaign to deny sanctuary to terrorists who would threaten our citizens from anywhere in the world. In Afghanistan, hundreds of trained killers are now dead. Many have been captured. Others are still on the run, hoping to strike again. These terrorist fighters are the most committed, the most dangerous and the least likely to surrender. They are trying to regroup, and we'll stop them. For five months in Afghanistan, our coalition has been patient and relentless. And more patience and more courage will be required.

Message Focus: Repetition is the highest form of eloquence ■

In the March 11th speech, Bush also made frequent use of a discourse strategy in which new information is positioned after what is already known or familiar. At the sentence level, this is called the topic-comment structure. The topic is what the sentence is about. It contains established information made explicit either through the cohesive structure of the text (for example, through repetition) or through clearly identified reference to background information that the listener is supposed to know. New information that is introduced provides the

“comment” on the topic. In Bush's speech the grammatical subject most commonly carries the topic function. What is known comes first; new information is integrated in relation to the old. The primacy of known information helps the listener since he/she always knows what the speech is about. In the case of the post 9/11 public announcements, putting known information first may help reassure listeners and prepare them for any surprising or bad news contained in the new information.

An example of a discourse topic that frequently occurs in the March 11 speech is the lexical item “terrorist”. The word in various forms appears frequently (37 times) and can be considered as the macro-topic or theme of the speech. Repetition of this word serves to nail down the message focus. Given its status as known information, listeners do not even need to have a definition or explanation of what terrorism means—its meaning is implicitly shared. Terror and terrorist have already been “defined” in the context of scenes of the falling towers and ground zero which have become hard-wired into the nation's collective consciousness through the images shown in a permanent loop on TV screens. Another discourse topic used in the speech is “we” (27 occurrences). Again, there is no need to specify the identities behind the pronoun “we”. Bush is reaffirming his often-quoted warning that those who are not with us are against us.

We face an enemy of ruthless ambition, unconstrained by law or morality. The terrorists despise other religions and have defiled their own. And they are determined to expand the scale and scope of their murder. The terror that targeted New York and Washington could next strike any center of civilization. Against such an enemy, there is no immunity, and there can be no neutrality.

Cognitively it is easier to understand new information when it is preceded by what is known. The new information that follows known information may even be implicitly taken as a consequence or conclusion.

These facts cannot be denied, and must be confronted. In preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction, there is no margin for error, and no chance to learn from mistakes. Our coalition must act deliberately, but inaction is not an option. Men with no respect for life must never be allowed to control the ultimate instruments of death.

Terror as macro-topic ■

While Bush has made terrorism the topic of this commemorative speech, terrorism in itself has become the macro-topic for all of American society. During the last six months, everything has been related to and integrated into the prism of the terror (or horror) of 9/11.

This is especially true for those younger generations that had only learned about the horror of World War II through history books and newsreels. A Gallup poll done on March 11, 2002 asked the following question: “Do you think that Americans have permanently changed the way they live as a result of Sept. 11?” 55% said “yes”. Six months earlier, on the very night of Sept 11 a smaller percentage, 49%, had answered in the affirmative. The key word in the question is “permanently”.

History has shown that Americans tend not to dwell on the past. It might even be said that Americans have a short-term memory. In a press conference given with Tony Blair on April 6, 2002, Bush was asked whether his foreign policy decisions were in coherence with those his father had taken as president. After a short pause, Bush replied, “I don't remember that far back”. The implication of this answer that some might even find facetious is that decisions taken in the context of the current situation are what matters most. This answer (whether accurate or not) was a way for Bush also to declare his independence and reinforce his stature as the nation's policy maker. The negative side to

such an insistence on the “here and now” is a lessening of the importance of a long-term strategic vision and the possibility of repeating the errors of the past. This action orientation was seen in Bush’s advice to Americans after the attacks. He told them to go about business as usual. Looking at the recent performance of the American economy, Americans seem to have followed Bush’s advice. It is thus a definite challenge to try to predict “how” the permanent change that Americans perceive after 9/11 might be translated into changes in behaviour, attitudes, and values.

Message Tone: We are all Americans now ■

In my opinion, the most permanent change in the post 9/11 period may be a reflection of what “American-ness” means in relation to the rest of the world. Americans have long been naively convinced that their nation is loved. Why else would the term *American Dream* have been created? Why else would the entertainment culture be so easily exportable? Americans have thus been criticized abroad for their superiority complex and excessive hubris. Abroad, the “Ugly American” tourist has become a stereotype. Now, Americans at home have the beginning of an awareness that some people hate Americans and the American way of life. This realization could be summarized in the question a little boy asked during a made-for-TV drama on the attacks: “Mommy, Why are they all trying to kill us?” The fall of the towers served as the catalyst for this change in perception. This psychological shock may have both positive and negative consequences. American could become more interested in trying to understand why there is such a love/hate relationship. On the other hand, Americans may revert to isolationism and a disinterest in world affairs.

Bush and his speechwriters have attempted to address this issue indirectly in the March 11 speech. Throughout the speech, there is reference to the shared experience of victimization by terrorism.

Many nations and many families have lived in the shadows of terrorism for decades—enduring years of mindless and merciless killing. September the 11th was not the beginning of global terror; but it was the beginning of the world’s concerted response. History will know that day not only as a day of tragedy, but as a day of decision—when the civilized world was stirred to anger and to action. And the terrorists will remember September 11th as the day their reckoning began. A mighty coalition of civilized nations is now defending our common security.

The insistence on the shared and collective experience in the March 11 speech is what may be considered as the message tone. The spirit of the speech is one of determined action (frequent use of the future tense using the auxiliary “will”) to unite under a common cause. The conclusion to the speech is especially evocative of this tone.

And, together, we will face the peril of our moment, and seize the promise of our times. May God bless our coalition.

The last line of the speech has been quoted in the press as a sound bite and has served as the title for the speech. It is a direct reference to “God Bless America” which is frequently added at the end of speeches and which has an echo in the singing of “God Bless America”, the Irving Berlin song that has become the nation’s new “anthem”. This closing fuses semantically the coalition of nations against global terror with America. Rallying in times of crisis is common. Americans rally around a concrete symbol: the flag. The world needs a different symbol. The last words of Bush’s speech give the tone for a new symbol of “united-ness” at a global level—a coalition united under a just cause.

Conclusion ■

On the surface, Americans have followed Bush’s advice and have gone back to business as usual. Besides some limitations on freedom of movement, everyday life is much like it was in the pre 9/11 period. Under these surface appearances lies the deeper structure of the implicit behavioral changes that will only come out in the months and years ahead. It would be pretentious to try to predict the themes that Bush will develop six months from now in the anniversary speech. The March 11 speech has been effective in focusing attention on the problem, developing a coherent explanation of the action taken, and encouraging a combined resolve in a common cause. What the speech does not do is provide closure. Bush’s speeches and press conferences have shown that he has left the door open for future action against nations designated as “evil”—a word with strong semantic overtones. The public appearances of Bush have shown that he was able to rise to the occasion when speaking out against the threat of global terrorism. Nothing succeeds like success. In the context of the post 9/11 period, success in the campaign in Afghanistan may have produced a “halo” effect reinforcing Bush’s overall credibility in all areas. Bush’s convincing performance as a public speaker and as spokesperson for the nation has erased from memory the many false starts and Bushisms. However, the plainspoken rhetoric of Bush has created a situation where words have become acts and saying is doing. In the coming months, speeches and press conferences will take on greater importance as each word is analysed in terms of its intention. Within the United States, the results in the upcoming congressional elections will be another test to determine whether Americans are still behind Bush’s well-defined message focus. In the meantime, the ashes of 9/11 are still smoldering.

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