

2

Rhetorical Technique and Governance – Aphorisms and Leaders’ Political Persuasion

Kevin Morrell and Robin Burrow

Drawing on a previous paper (Morrell, 2006), this chapter looks at the work aphorisms do in leaders’ speeches. Aphorisms are a highly flexible, powerful rhetorical format that can support claims based on logos, ethos and pathos. We begin by describing the rhetorical formats (techniques) speakers use to create an impact on their audience, then identify ten examples of aphorisms by renowned writers. Insights from Conversation Analysis (CA) (Heritage and Greatbatch, 1986; Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007) help us to analyse these and to derive a framework that allows aphorisms to be mapped on two continua: convergent... divergent; and creative... destructive. We apply this to two famous speeches: Marcus Antonius’ funeral address in *Julius Caesar*, and Churchill’s first speech as prime minister. Rather than treating aphorisms in these speeches as isolated fragments, we emphasise the importance of context and consider two features influencing their impact: setting and sequence.

What are aphorisms?

An aphorism could be defined as ‘a phrase with attitude’. It is a brief, pithy saying or expression that is intended to have an impact on its listener or reader. Aphorisms are self-contained and are crafted in such a way that the boundaries to them are definite and marked (Aronoff and Rees-Miller, 2001). Like proverbs, the wording in an aphorism is set and does not change. Unlike proverbs though, an aphorism could be deployed to make its listener think or react in some way, and yet some idea of familiarity is central to a proverb or a saying (Davis, 1999). As Merrow suggests (2003, p. 288), an aphorism can be a concise summary of a broader body of thought or ideas, and if it is skilfully used, it can have a lasting impact, as something that ‘condenses much that needs to be read, or perhaps unravelled into the threads that connect it to the larger problems it signifies’. Aphorisms come in many forms

and they are widespread across different media. In keeping with the theme of the book, we can categorise them in terms of different kinds of appeal, and they can undergird claims based on logos, ethos or pathos.

For example, some renowned philosophers have deployed aphoristic phrasing alongside complex arguments in politics, ethics and even logic. There are calls to logos in Mill's political and ethical philosophy (Mill, 1985) and in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language (2001). Meanwhile, in seeking to move their audience (listeners or readers) emotionally, and deploying pathos, writers such as Shakespeare and Shaw also draw on aphorism. Concise puzzles and short sayings are also a feature of meditation in Zen Buddhism (Reps, 1991), and reference to Zen 'masters' (sic) character (ethos), discipline or insight are intended to inspire students of Buddhism to concentrate on paradoxes that seem to have no resolution; this has some ancient parallels in the Socratic method of questioning (Morrell, 2004) and contemporary parallels in terms of the perceptions of management 'gurus' (Clark and Greatbatch, 2011; Clark et al., 2012). In this way, aphorisms can guard against or forestall earthly distractions and be a potential route to transcendental insight. Other writers, in texts such as *The Prophet* (Gibran, 1996), combine appeals to logos, ethos and pathos. Gathering these different uses of aphorism together, one can identify a common type of effect among these writers, which is to prompt *aesthetic engagement*: an experience that is somehow outside the cares and concerns of the quotidian (that is, everyday) or the mundane. Such aphorisms can inspire analysis, introspection, or association with things that are somehow transcendental or timeless.

There is another familiar purpose to the use of aphorism, namely a *recipe for action*. The history of this form of aphoristic writing goes back a long way; the earliest records of it seem to stem from Confucius' *Analects*, written in the 5th century BC. The *Analects* can be thought of as a kind of repository of wisdom that offers guidance on how to navigate one's way through the complexities of life and business. They are perhaps the first handbook, written during the birth of bureaucracy and government (Confucius, 1996). Later writers have also used aphorism to summarise and transmit advice and guidance on politics or life in organisations. Examples of such figures (in chronological order) include Kenko, the 14th Century Japanese poet (Kenko, 1998); Machiavelli (1984); La Rochefoucauld (1665/1959); and Gracián, a 17th Century Jesuit priest (Gracián, 1994).

Effects that an aphorism can have may vary over time. Thinking about this in an organisational rather than political setting for a moment, a CEO or Chair might want to use a short phrase to try to encapsulate their strategic vision for the company, or to reflect a state of affairs in terms of market positioning or competition, or to signal the need for a kind of change (Conger, 1991). An example from the work experience of one of the authors was a company's CEO who launched a 'customer first' initiative (at just two words, the shortest possible aphorism). Interventions of this kind could, over time,