

How The Use of Rhetoric Encourages Extreme Bipartisanship
Draft

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Introduction

Argument and disagreement, in the form of who gets resources and whose ideas are right, are a part of most human societies, past and present. It can come in many forms, ranging from slight disagreement over something relatively insignificant, to a full-blown total war (think World War I and II). People, even though knowing that they need to rely on each other, will still argue and fight over almost anything. This is not only a symptom of scarce resources; even in regions rich in resources, people will still find some way to argue about something. Generally, violence is not used, but language plays an important role in arbitrating which side “wins” an argument.

Of late, disagreement, especially in the political arena, has been increasingly hostile and violent. This can be seen in any number of news television shows, the debates on any “hot-button topic,” and so on. This, I believe, is a combination of many factors, but one of the most important factors, I believe, is the use of language. Language did not start the rampant polarization of two sides, but rather encouraged the two sides to become polarized. Rhetoric, and the way people state things (Gill et. al 1997), and the way language makes accommodations for “deviancy” (Lakoff 2004:44) all add up to the way people become increasingly hostile (and thus, polarized) towards the “other” side (The CBC, 2004)

This paper will look at how language encourages not only polarization, but ultimately encourages extreme bipartisanship. It will first examine how language itself is used in various ways, especially in the event of a disagreement. By using a case study (in this case, an online discussion based on a recent letter by Lloyd Axworthy to Condoleeza Rice) to show how people use language itself in order to understand a specific topic, and to put forth their own opinions, we can find out using a real example of how people argue.

The paper will then analyze the online discussion to give us a better understanding of specific tools of language (rhetoric, defending, etc.), as well as some of the unique attributes of using an online forum for a discussion. This online discussion also gives us a look into the extreme bipartisanship that has pervaded any type of discussion. The medium of the discussion is also an important issue, and will be compared to other media used in discussions (from a coffee-house talk to editorials/op-eds, to an aired political debate). The paper will then compare this to real-world political debates and discussions, and what tools two sides (any two sides) in the real world will employ to argue their points.

Because of the disagreements within that discussion, we can use a different case study, in this case, an episode that aired on October 15th, 2004 on the show *Crossfire* to help us understand how arguments really affect us. The

elements from the second case study can be compared against the first case study in order to fully examine how language and politics have become entwined in the violent way the media portrays both sides of an argument (CBC 2004). This portrayal is what partly Deborah Tannen calls the “Argument Culture” (Tannen 1998:3) and what comedian Jon Stewart calls “partisan hackery” (Crossfire 2004). The paper will give an analysis on Jon Stewart’s appearance on the show *Crossfire* is an example of some people re-thinking the current situation and trying to reconcile two opposing sides – with results (Arstechnica 2004:1)

Language and its Uses

Language is a part of everyday life. Most people use it to communicate thoughts, ideas and such. However, language is useless unless there is a specific way to use it under certain circumstances. One must be aware of a number of factors, such as word choice, tone, body language (posture and/or movement), and more. Each of those factors complement the use of language, and, depending on the varying factors, all change the meaning of what a person is saying.

One such form of use is rhetoric. The use of rhetoric has had great effect over many people, and has had many different results throughout time; from Cicero’s speeches in the Roman Forum in favour of the annihilation of Carthage, to Jesus’ Sermon On The Mount, with its use of paradox to get people to re-evaluate their religion, to Hitler’s use of inflammatory language to stir up the

people into an almost religious-like fervour against Jews, Slavs, and other groups of people.

Another form of language use is debate, which is different from rhetoric. Rhetoric tends to be used in the form of one-sided speeches. Debate, however, is two (or more) sides attempting to prove the other wrong, and winning over the other side. For most people, this happens when there is disagreement regarding a certain issue. It is here where the danger of polarization and extreme bipartisanship come into play. Ideas, for most people, are rarely just standalone ideas. They are a part of a person's past, possibly even a conclusion based on the culmination of a series of events. Essentially, ideas are a part of a person (Tannen 16). Criticizing an idea could mean criticizing that person and their history, which could end up becoming interpreted as an insult.

In many arguments, an awareness of the factors in language, and the tools a speaker uses while arguing is needed for one party to steer the argument in favour of themselves. That same awareness is needed for the other party to defend and "counterattack." Many debates tend to be attributed to warfare (Tannen 56) For example, one needs to be aware of tone (whether the tone is calm, sarcastic, nonchalant), body posture (is the hand waving or not?), body movements (are you shrugging?), eye contact (rolling of eyes), and a host of other factors in order to fully convey a message and receive an appropriate

response. Even word choice itself is a factor; since one can say, “I’m a dirty terrorist” in a calm way, and that can still be humour, since the word “dirty” tends to have an absurd meaning within the proper social context, thus, having a special meaning despite it being unmarked (Lakoff 2000).

How Does Language Promote (Bi)Partisanship?

As previously mentioned, the way in which language is used has a significant impact on communicating with other people. Just as people use language to inform, people can also use it to provoke. This is through any number of language tools, facial/body gestures, tone changes, and more. Provocation can be used in many different ways; for some, it may be to encourage thinking, but for others, provocation leads to (sometimes) bitter arguments. How, then, can language be used to provoke partisanship, and to expand that further, bipartisanship?

Partisanship is basically picking sides, but it implies a sense of taking sides without any regard for any of the other sides. Language can help people do this by framing an argument, and using specific, value-laden words that force people into categories (Goffman 1974). For example, the terms “Freedom” and “America” are often used in American political debates as a rallying point for people. People recognize what America is, and they know that America is supposed to fight for freedom. Therefore, if we ask the question, “Do you

support abortion, or do you support life?" This will allow people to take sides, and will often paint the side that hesitates (the people who see the fallacy in the argument) as the enemy.

Bipartisanship is an extension of this phenomenon, and splits groups into two sides. At first, this would be how many debates and discourses operate. Two sides will use language to argue a point. However, when framing a debate in such a way that it unnecessarily divorces the other side, the partisans then become hostile to one another. An example of this would be Bush's 2001 speech after the 9/11 attacks with the quote, "Are you with us or against us?"

Case Study: Online Debate

Ambiguities towards the sentence can arise from any one of these factors even if only one factor is not given or interpreted correctly. By using a case study, we can see how, in a scenario, the use of language, the appearance of misunderstandings, and the preconceptions that cause misunderstandings all play together within an argument. The case study will be based on an online discussion from a popular discussion forum.

The way the online discussion system at Arstechnica (an Internet-based technical news-site) works is that an original poster/post (called OP by some) posts a topic he or she finds interesting, and related to the forum (a place where people discuss somewhat similar topics). Other posters then comment on the

original post, in terms of agreeing with the OP, disagreeing, or just throwing in an additional comment. Each topic in the forum is moderated, so that the topic can be “locked” should the moderator think things have gotten too out of hand (Soapbox 2004:1).

This particular online discussion that I came across, is a comment regarding a letter from former Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy to Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice, is an example of language in action regarding polarization (and possibly a harbinger of extreme bipartisanship), within an online setting (Soapbox 2005:1). The discussion, I believe, is a classic example of how a good political debate starts “going downhill” because of the factors in language use, as previously mentioned.

From the start of the discussion, there seems to be a collective criticism of American foreign and defense policy, in relation to the Missile Defense Program and of course, the war in Iraq. Additionally, many members (that are Canadian) (Axworthy 2005) try to separate Canada from the United States by emphasizing that Canadian politicians are “well educated, and can generally think for themselves” (Soapbox 2005:1). There are also Americans who agree with the general Canadian standpoint as well.

A number of American members, of course, do not enjoy this criticism of American foreign policy,, and counterattack with a harsh (if not unreasonably

one-sided) criticism of Canada's role in defense (Soapbox 2005:1). This quickly devolves into a fight over which side is better: Canada with its social policies, or the United States, which some Americans believe is tired of protecting other countries. Any defense of Canadian foreign policy (and defense spending) quickly shot down by disagreeing posters.

Analysis of Case Study 1

The discussion, as previously mentioned, showcases misunderstanding and the use of language in specific forms. Language use is immediately present, even in the related letter by Axworthy. Many posters have regarded the comments in the letter as a powerful rant against something, and many posters have used similar language in their posts.. While the discussion starts off in a seemingly civil manner, if one looks carefully, there is an air of arrogance among the Canadian members that are discussing the topic, right at the beginning ("Tribus" means location, and while some posters do not list their locations, it is known that some do reside in Canada, based on previous posts by them). This arrogance (also seen by American posters) is nothing new, but as it is with arrogance, people tend to dislike it. In essence, a cycle of antagonizing each side begins right from the start, beginning with the topic itself (and one can assume, the poster's intent).

The way language is used, from the way I see it, is not only a response to the letter, but also a reflection of the medium itself. The Internet allows for voluntary anonymity among people in a community. A person can say as much or as little as they want. This anonymity, however, also encourages the use of language so that the wording becomes stronger. It is theoretically acceptable to use antagonism and such tactics to start a debate on the Internet (there are limits, though, and if one goes too far, it then becomes "trolling.") This is not to say that these tactics should be avoided at all costs (in fact, they are good for spurring people on, and are a fact of any debate in any case).

Because of the antagonizing of each other, both sides (and the letter) begin mocking each other. One side is saying how Canada is neglecting military spending (and thus, saying how the "Vladivostok Pioneer Scouts" could take over Canada), while the other is saying how the United States is purposely encouraging criticism and strikes against themselves through violent and what some people believe to be imperialistic responses (Soapbox 2005:1)

While no real harsh language was used by both sides, nor was there any real violent reaction by either side (due to the fact that there were moderators for all topics), this discussion shows that two sides (and only two sides) exist: one believes in 'A', the other believes in 'B' (thus, Group A and Group B). Both 'A' and 'B' are never independent, as both come from previous experiences, varying

social mores, family, and so on. Deborah Tannen emphasizes the current political scenario as being similar in respect to the two-sided, uncompromising political discourse (Tannen 97). Neither side (whether the side believes that Canada is right or the side that believes the United States is right) is willing to compromise an inch.

Debate Within Other Forms of Media

Online discussions, while unique in that they are relatively anonymous, are of course not the only place where heated debates and discussions happen. In print media, conversations, television, and other media, some fairly 'scathing' language is used by both sides, even going towards *ad-hominem* attacks on the other party (CBC 2004). Even political documentaries, which once only had a limited audience, are now becoming more and more popular. *Fahrenheit 911*, *The Corporation* and others hugely popular in North America (IMDB 2004).

Like the online discussion, similar topics are also being discussed within the media. However, one may question, how much of the debating is actually debate, and how much is for entertainment value? For example, Bill O'Reilly of the *O'Reilly Factor* purposely uses harsh language not as an arguing point (saying "shut up" to people is not the best way to spur on a debate) but what I believe to be an entertainment tool (CBC 2004). Documentaries are changing as well, especially ones like *Fahrenheit 911*, which I believe is closer to an editorial than a

true documentary. Instead of having a civil debate, an 'extreme' debate would bring in more ratings. Such tactics often rile people up in arms and make them even more stubborn about their stances on certain issues, and make reconciliation and compromise even more distant.

Can We Take It Anymore?

With the notion of extreme bipartisanship becoming more and more widespread, within many different forms of media, some people are beginning to become fed up with the trend. People such as comedian Jon Stewart, and writer/professor Deborah Tannen, are vocal about the issue. Some would even extrapolate that a great many people do not agree with the bipartisan stance anymore. A small number of comments within the previously mentioned online discussion show this (Soapbox 2005:1).

For instance, in an October airing of the CNN show *Crossfire* (a debate show with bipartisan arguments), Stewart comes on and refuses to fall into expectations of him being a comedian (which would involve laughing at both sides), but instead begins to criticize the show (and other similar shows) itself. Stewart claimed that such shows – with a further implication that such tactics – are “hurting America” (CNN, Arstechnica, 2004). Stewart essentially emphasizes the use of language within shows such as *Crossfire* is detrimental to the United

States (he does not define what part of the United States). Deborah Tannen, in *The Argument Culture*, claims the same thing throughout her book.

Conclusion

Language use is often a key element in any debate. However, language, when used in specific ways, allows people to turn to partisan tactics in their debating; the whole debate process becomes a different story. No longer are people really trying to persuade people to think and join one side, but rather, 'camps' are forming around any debate with two issues. Almost all media follow this pattern, although dissenters will form and start criticizing the process. Is this all bleak and hopeless? Is bipartisanship a fundamental element in human behaviour? That could be a question that one day may allow us to fully steer away from a bipartisan method of debate.

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