



What makes a speech great?

Metaphor and contrast

Presenter

There are several rhetorical devices from which great speeches are constructed. Simon Lancaster

Simon Lancaster

So you have the rule of three. A famous example of this is “Friends, Romans, Countrymen”. And this creates an illusion of completeness and finality so if you want an argument to appear cut and dried then you use the rule of three. It makes arguments sound completely final, beyond a doubt.

Presenter

The American President, John F Kennedy, delivering his powerful inaugural address in 1961.

John F Kennedy

“Not a new balance of power but a new world of law where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.”

Simon Lancaster

Another great technique is imagery and the power of metaphor in particular. Metaphor works on two levels. On a basic level it illuminates and abstracts issue. But crucially the second level it works at is its persuasive ability that it can put an audience into a particular frame of mind without them even realising what's going on. If you think about the history of the world since the Second World War you can tell it through metaphor. So the Iron Curtain to the Cold War to the Wind of Change to the Swinging Sixties to the Winter of Discontent to the Iron Lady to the Axis of Evil and the Smoking Gun.

Presenter

The Wind of Change was a phrase coined by the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in a speech given to the South African Parliament in 1960, which signalled the end of Britain's imperial ambitions in Africa.

Harold Macmillan

“The most striking of all the impressions that I have formed since I left London a month ago is of the strength of this African national consciousness. The wind of change is blowing through

this continent and whether we like it or not its growth of national consciousness is a political fact.

Simon Lancaster

By using the metaphor of African nationalism as wind and using a metaphor of nature he was reinforcing the view, or trying to create the view that we couldn't stop it because we all understand that forces of nature are unstoppable. And so by saying the wind of change he was saying it's just going to happen. That was the argument he was making to the British people. There is nothing we can do about this. We must just let African nationalism happen. We must dismantle the Empire.

Harold Macmillan

And this tide of national consciousness, which is now rising in Africa, is a fact of which you and we are ultimately responsible.

Simon Lancaster

It's very interesting that De Gaulle in France who was also faced with the challenge of African nationalism, used a very different metaphor and that's because he believed that African nationalism could be stopped. And he used the metaphor of the insurgents as vermin. And so what do we do with vermin? We exterminate vermin. Another really powerful rhetorical device is the technique of contrast and "To be or not to be" is probably the greatest example of contrast from Shakespeare who was himself a master rhetorician.

"Let us never negotiate out of fear but let us never fear to negotiate."

Presenter

Contrast was a technique, which President John F Kennedy used to great effect.

"And so my fellow Americans ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

Simon Lancaster

Contrast works because it heightens our senses. It makes us feel more alert and we are more used to thinking of things in twos. So when things are presented in twos it makes our ears prick up and we are more likely to listen.