From Soft Power to Hard Talk: the languages of diplomacy

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Synopsis

Language is often considered to be a secondary concern, a mere vehicle for the much more important content being communicated. Yet *what* we say is not entirely independent of *how* we say it, quite on the contrary, language shapes content in many ways, from articulating thought, to imposing lexical choices and syntactic constraints, determining politeness registers, creating ambiguities and flagging affiliation.

The aim of this book is to show how a basic knowledge of linguistics can help diplomats, politicians, journalists and other opinion-shapers to become masters of discourse rather than be mastered by it. This involves both a sensitisation to the nature of language, and the acquisition of a simple but reliable linguistic tool-set consisting of framing devices, ambiguity, connotations, metaphors and more. Linguistic mastery must in turn be supplemented by psychological acuity if communication is to be effective. To this end, essential insights are provided into the role of culture, context and intention in modulating meaning.

The linguistic topics covered are organised under broad headings relevant to diplomatic endeavour: building relationships; securing agreement; constructive ambiguity; understanding the unsaid; persuasion (both through soft means such as suggestion and through harder hitting argumentation); and standing firm.

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Chapter Outline

1.   Action and Context

Two linguistic premises underpin this book. The first is that language can serve as a form of action: when we warn, threaten, promise, suggest, agree, or advise, we are *doing* something, and not merely saying something. Speech Act theory alerts us to the fact that the popular dichotomy which views words as distinct from actions does not reflect the nature of language: not only do words have the power, as we well know, to give rise to actions, but many utterances are a form of action in themselves. When a priest says 'I hereby declare you man and wife', or a judge sentences someone to life imprisonment, or a United Nations Security Council resolution 'recommends', 'warns' or 'provides a final opportunity', these statements all perform legally binding actions. From this perspective, the pen is not a rival to the sword, but as James Tully has observed, the pen can *be* a mighty sword.[1] We shall distinguish between an act *of* saying something, what one does *in* saying it, and what one achieves *by* saying it.

The second premise concerns the importance of context in interpreting meaning. Retrieving the intended meaning of an utterance depends on understanding the context in which it was uttered, where 'context' ranges from knowledge of the speaker's values and beliefs, to the purpose of the utterance, its intended audience, cultural factors, encyclopaedic knowledge and more. Speech acts and context overlap in that we often ask ourselves what somebody was doing in saying something: were they making a promise or a threat? Were they asking a question or scoring a point? Since intended meaning so often resides beyond the surface structure of a sentence or utterance, as in the case of metaphor, ambiguity, implication, politeness and speech acts, context along with an insight into the workings of language, provide essential clues as to what the intended meaning might have been.

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[1] Tully, James ed. (1988) 'The Pen is a Mighty Sword: Quentin Skinner's Analysis of Politics' in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*. Cambridge: CUP.

2.   Building Relationships

The first question we address is how language impacts both on cultural identity and on cross-cultural relations. Language both reflects and reinforces a sense of cultural identity through such means as: conventions of usage (which includes speech acts); conventions of meaning (vocabulary, including jargon, and connotations); narrative conventions (the stock of metaphors and myths that are appealed to); conventions of the unsaid (what cannot be said because it is taboo and what need not be said because it is understood); and conventions of humour. Cultural identity is therefore determined and demonstrated not only by what is said and how it is said, but also by an ingroup's understanding of what remains unsaid. With regard to building relationships across cultures, we explore possible misunderstandings, especially those which are likely to arise from indirect speech acts.

Two further issues to be addressed are politeness and face. We may think of politeness as the icing on the cake – a few handy expressions which, when tagged on to the body of what we have to say, upgrade our courtesy register. But politeness involves much more than the 'sorry', 'please' and 'thank you' we have drilled into us as children. Many expressions of politeness are so integral to language that we do not even recognise them as such. Thus in English, there exist various distancing or softening devices, such as the use of the past tense rather than the present ('were you thinking of going out tonight?', 'did you want some more?'), the use of counterfactuals ('were you to go' or 'if you could go', 'perhaps you might go'), of modals ('would you like to go?'), and of diminutive and tentative expressions (a 'take a moment', 'have a word', 'eat a bite'). These and other examples of the language of politeness, which exists with variations in all languages, illustrate the desire to minimize imposition on one's interlocutor.[2]

Face is sometimes thought of as the rather thin-skinned proclivity of 'others', labelled as 'face-cultures'. But it can also be seen as the *raison d'être* of politeness, in so far as politeness is an expression of our concern for the face of others, where face is defined as   perceived personal integrity. The section on face looks at ways of threatening and safe-guarding face which are integral to everyday discourse.

Both politeness and face share in common three defining factors: (1) acknowledging the other party (nothing is more upsetting than being ignored and denied a voice); (2) minimizing imposition on the other party; and (3) maximizing the feel-good of the other party. The building of relationships depends on sensitive and dexterous handling of politeness and face, and this in turn benefits from a clearer understanding of the issues involved and linguistic resources available.

3. Securing Agreement

Disagreement is an important concern of diplomacy, despite the fact that diplomacy prototypically involves the use of peaceful means in order to manage relationships between parties. This is because diplomacy is centrally concerned with avoiding, alleviating or settling disputes. The aim of this chapter is threefold: first to explore

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[2] Watts, Richard J. *Politeness.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

ways of disagreeing without being disagreeable, second, to recognise linguistic manifestations of inclusion and divisiveness, and third, to explore ways of reframing an argument in order to secure agreement.

Tempting though it might be to create a table of escalating expressions of disagreement, from rhetorical questions at the bottom end ('do you really believe that..'), through gross generalizations ('you always…', 'everybody says…', 'nobody believes…'), to name-calling and abuse at the other, as we saw with regard to speech acts, there is not always an isomorphic relationship between utterance and intention. Thus a phrase that ostensibly expresses acquiescence ('indeed') may actually be used to convey ironical condemnation.

A tendency towards divisiveness is thought to be a universal human attribute: we divide people into 'us' versus 'them' categories and aggrandise the ingroup at the expense of the outgroup on the basis of apparently trivial criteria. Linguistic correlates extend from the use of pronouns ('one of *us*', '*you* people'), to the choice of connotations ('terrorist' vs 'freedom fighter') and metaphors (we are 'guarding ourselves against' and 'fighting' the 'sickness' of the system), and the larger narratives we subscribe to ('valiant hero' or 'persecuted people'). It has been claimed that 'We can't change the structure of the political brain, which reflects millions of years of evolution. But we can change the way we appeal to it.'[3] Since the human brain is inclined to reason emotionally, it is important to recognise the value of emotional appeals, such as those founded on narratives and allegiance rather than on bullet-points of dispassionate facts. Above all it is important to recognise that conflicts and incompatibilities of outlooks, values and allegiances need not necessarily be eradicated – after all, they often co-exist within the individual – so much as *accommodated*. Where accommodation is not enough, strategies for conciliation are explored, from appeals to the individual, to common denominators between groups and shared values and objectives which include all groups.

This chapter ends with a discussion of various framing and reframing devices. The way in which we frame an issue largely determines how that issue will be understood and acted upon.[4] We start by considering assertion, and its various often overlooked linguistic markers ('the fact/truth is', 'the world as it is / in the real world', 'peace requires responsibility, peace entails sacrifice'). We then look at pre-emptive arguments, appeals to authority and to emotions, and shared aspirations, and conclude with the importance of imagination to reframing.

4.   Constructive Ambiguity

This chapter addresses the place of ambiguity in language - the types of ambiguity that exist, why ambiguity exists at all, and how it can be capitalised upon for diplomatic objectives.

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[3] Drew Westen, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), p xv.

[4] See George Lakoff, Don Hazen and Howard Dean, *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate (The Essential Guide for Progressives),* (Green Chelsea Publishing Company, 2004).

Is ambiguity a design flaw which prevents effective communication, or is it the price one has to pay for other highly advantageous properties of language, such as flexibility? By and large ambiguity has an unjustifiably bad name. It is not ambiguity itself which is remiss, but the use and abuse it is subjected to. An analysis of various types of ambiguity is provided, from the broad ambiguity found in indeterminacy to the more narrow either-or syntactic variant. Special attention is given to the type of ambiguity which is most often found in treaties: scope ambiguity.

Ambiguity is highly context dependent, both in its realisation and in its resolution. It is therefore difficult to find cases of totally intractable ambiguity which cannot be disambiguated given contextual information. It is also difficult to find cases of ambiguity which do not have a preferred reading. The diplomatic notion of 'good faith interpretation' assumes a default or consensual context of interpretation. Disambiguation may not be the desirable objective in all cases of ambiguity, however. The very notion of 'constructive ambiguity' is predicated on the belief that ambiguity can have beneficial spin offs. In diplomacy, these may range from buying room for manoeuvre, to securing more time for negotiation, to inviting a spirit of collaboration among rival parties.[5]

5. Understanding the Unsaid

What is the unsaid? Far from being an empty, open-ended silence, the 'unsaid' refers to a silence framed by language and culture: it may be a suggestion, innuendo or implication, that is to say, a meaning that the speaker brings to the communication over and above what he says overtly. But in analysing the workings of the unsaid, we are as concerned with what the hearer brings to the communication, in terms of inference, presuppositions, prejudices and assumptions, as we are with what has been implicitly communicated. The 'unsaid' may be defined as a meaningful silence which is both created and constrained by what is said. It is not therefore a random silence, or one that can be interpreted open-endedly, but its meaning is, significantly, deniable. This is because meaning is articulated by the listener rather than the speaker.

The observation that people do not always mean what they say, or that there might be more to what they say than first meets the eye, is a cause of considerable concern. How can we trust interlocutors if we cannot take them at their word? What hidden resources of language caused the French, Russians and Chinese to expend so much time and expertise trying to unearth the 'secret triggers' for war buried in the wording of UN Security Council resolution 1441concerning on Iraq?

The unsaid may serve both to divide and to draw together. Thus the dynamic of deniability, for instance, tends to apply across the table, between players with different interests, with the aim of false-footing and distancing the interlocutor. Among same-side players, however, those with shared interests, values and beliefs, the unsaid has the power to affirm solidarity. A mutual understanding of what is not said, because it need not be,

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[5] For further discussion and examples, see Kurbalija and Slavik (eds.) 2001 *Language and Diplomacy*. Malta: Diplo Foundation, especially the chapters by Drazen Pehar, Norman Scott, and Raymond Cohen.

constitutes a large part of what is meant by the defining linguistic component in cultural identity.

Finally, the unsaid goes beyond language to include gestures, body language and signalling. The burden of deniability is reversed in the case of body-language, which involves unwitting 'tells' of our limbic brain such as blushes, dilated pupils and unconscious gestures. In the case of political signalling, the range of issues spans from animal displays of force at one end, such as saber rattling or so-called 'gunboat diplomacy', through deniability, to concerns for face at the other.

6. Persuasion through Suggestion

We start with a reminder of the Classical forms of persuasion: ethos, logos and pathos and then tackle the topic through a binary division of what might be called 'soft' and 'hard' persuasion. This chapter concentrates on the powers of suggestion found in connotations, the emotional appeal of metaphors, the musical resources of language, and the power of credibility and charisma. The next chapter looks at the hard persuasion of typecasting, logic and argumentation.

We start by introducing the linguistic distinction between connotation and denotation. Whereas denotation maps between a word and the world (or more exactly, our mental constructs of that world), connotation maps between a word and other words in the language. The term 'soft power', for instance, can be defined by pointing to a particular example of what the term denotes, such as the cultural influence of Hollywood, the brand value of a country, or the moral attraction of the Nobel Peace prize. It can also be defined by comparison and contrast with other terms in the same semantic field: hard power, sticky power, smart power etc… Since the meaning of words is rarely identical across languages, we need to recognize insurmountable differences in connotations, especially where abstract terms are concerned. The word 'soft' is untranslatable into many languages in the context of power, because its connotations are so strongly associated with a lack of virility. Translations tend to be most reliable where meaning is rich in denotations and poor in connotation (scientific texts), rather than rich in connotations (eg poetry and diplomacy).

In discussing the language of suggestion, we go further and analyse the way in which connotations may act as stories in a capsule. 'Stories in a capsule' refers to the power of connotations, metaphors, analogies and myths to pack a whole world view into a few words. This is evident in paired terms such as: terrorist and freedom fighter; apartheid wall and security fence; honour killing and misogynist murder; ethnic cleansing and genocide. The referent of each of these signifiers is the same, but the moral, ideological and narrative framework associated with them is substantially different. Speakers reveal much about their own beliefs through the terms they use, and where these speakers are politicians and policy makers, they do not merely reflect their own views, but often shape the views of others through the use of such connotations. The ability of connotations to bring a story to mind through suggestion, rather than spelling it out in its entirety, is part of their power.

Metaphors and analogies similarly pack a story into an image, as the following metaphor-based definition suggests: 'every metaphor is the tip of a conceptual model'. Whether we 'wage war' on drug addicts, or 'protect victims' of addiction, significantly influences our perception of drug users, and of how they should be treated. If we think of Afghanistan as 'another Vietnam' and 'the graveyard of empires', our perception will likewise be influenced by the model we have in mind, or maybe just by the judgment it elicits in us, given that we do not often spell out metaphors and analogies in all their details and entailments.

Another form of soft persuasion comes through the use of musical language. Refrains, alliteration, tricolon (as in 'I came, I saw, I conquered') and chiasmus (as in 'work to live, don't live to work), are just some of the musical resources of language which orators use to great effect. Barack Obama's oratorical style offers many illustrations of this level of persuasion, as did Martin Luther Ling's and Winston Churchill's.

Finally, this chapter considers the role of credibility in persuasion, with its combination of authority, expertise and transparency. In a visual age, credibility is also often predicated on image management. We conclude with some speculations about charisma and the 'likeability' factor, with reference, once again, to the role of the media in creating, propagating and destroying these important but enigmatic qualities.

7. Persuasion through Argument

The ancient Greek rhetorical notion of 'logos' refers both to choice of words and to argumentation, which is the art of persuasion through reasoned argument. We start by looking at word meaning: why definitions change; what are the limits of change; how we can communicate effectively if meaning is unreliable; and who has the right to determine meaning. Can a government for instance change the definition of key terms in order to suit its needs, such as what constitutes a 'material breach' of disarmament obligations, or who belongs to the category 'terrorist'? Finally, we ask how terms such as 'genocide' or 'refugee' or 'sovereignty' are assigned to the right referent? Turned on its head, this question asks: how do we determine the membership of semantic categories?

In order to address these questions, we look at the distinction between discrete Aristotelian categories and flexible Prototype ones. Although many people would like meaning to be more fixed, Aristotelian categories are often too categorical. They do not reflect the nature of language or of the human mind. We assign new members to categories by a process of analogy, not by means of a checklist of predetermined features. As a result, category membership is negotiable, and speakers often nudge the definition of words to suit their own ends. The fact that negotiation begins with word meaning is very relevant to diplomacy. Whereas the dictum 'might is right' all too often holds true, where language is concerned, word meaning is (in principle) open to scrutiny, correction and negotiation by all and sundry.

This chapter goes on to look at logical fallacies: not only how to identify and expose them, but also how to capitalise upon them. It is no accident that the many types of fallacies identified by the ancient Greeks turn up as devices in modern propaganda and political spin. American 'attack-ads', TV advertisements run during election campaigns offer valuable illustrations of this form of appeal to the masses.

It is with the subtler workings of persuasion that the chapter ends, namely with an analysis of the manipulation of inference. Covert persuasion frames facts and argument in such a way as to invite the audience to reach their own conclusions, ones which coincide with the intentions of the persuader. This section explores how we submit ourselves unwittingly to this type of manipulation, and what we can do to either resist it or practise it, as needs be.

8. Standing Firm

This chapter considers the various linguistic resources we can draw on when the situation demands a firm stand. In Hard Talk interviews, for instance, where the dynamics of discourse are potentially aggressive, it is useful to be equipped with formulaic sentences which allow for courteous dissent and reframing. To this end, we identify both the linguistic markers of leading questions ('so, don't you think', 'wouldn't you say'), and how to deal with them. We also consider, among other things, the embedded Wh-questions (who, what, when, where, why), in yes/no questions, the force of 'well' as a pre-disagreement preface, and the force of 'but' as opposed to 'and' when redirecting the conversation. We conclude the discussion on Hard talk with a reflection of the dynamics involved in a fist of iron clad in a kid glove, and the conflicting demands of diktat and dialogue.

'Active Listening' is a necessary correlate to persuasive talking, and this section surveys some of the techniques involved in hearing both what is being said, what remains unsaid but implied, and what has been omitted, whether purposefully or accidentally. In order to elicit the information one requires, one has to tune in subtly to everything that is communicated, through language, silence and body language.

Finally, this chapter looks at humour: how it works, what purposes it serves, and when and why it backfires. It may provide a welcome relief from tension in a 'friendly but firm' exchange, but it may be equally detract from authority, or prove divisive. We consider the linguistic workings of irony, satire and self-deprecation, before considering the psychological dimension and the all-important question of political acumen. The discussion concludes with an analysis of political correctness as in some ways the antithesis of humour, and its promotion as a safe option.

9. Negotiation

This concluding chapter draws together the lessons learnt in the preceding chapters by applying them to a case study: the multilateral negotiations on setting up the United Nations Disaster Relief Organisation. Since film footage exists of corridor diplomacy, back room discussions and plenary sessions in the United Nations, we have exceptional

access to material which is rarely available to outsiders. In our analysis, we summarise the linguistic tools, the psychological acuity and the political acumen which comes together in the process of negotiation.