Anaphora Hot. Anaphora Cold. Politicians' Rhetoric Sounds Tired and Old

In trying to emulate Churchill, present-day party leaders reduce the rhythmic power of repetition to an irritating tic.

Martin Shovel Tue 21 Apr 2015

The consequences of overestimating our own abilities can be grave.

In 1995, McArthur Wheeler robbed two different Pittsburgh banks on the same April day. He was 5ft 6in tall and weighed 19 stone, and despite his distinctive appearance, surveillance footage of the events revealed he had made no attempt to disguise himself. He was arrested that evening within an hour of the footage of his crimes being broadcast on the 11 o’clock news. When police showed him the incriminating videotape, he couldn’t believe his eyes. It seems he believed the lemon juice he had rubbed into his face before committing his crimes would render him invisible to the cameras.

Wheeler’s delusion is an example of a cognitive bias known as the Dunning-Kruger effect. Social psychologist David Dunning summarises the effect like this: “Incompetent people do not – scratch that – cannot recognise just how incompetent they are.”

The widespread overuse of anaphora by politicians suggests that many of them may have succumbed to the Dunning-Kruger effect too. Anaphora is the repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive sentences, clauses, lines or verses – it’s from the Greek, meaning “carrying back”. Here’s an example from a children’s traditional singing game:

Pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold,
Pease porridge in the pot, nine days old;
Some like it hot, some like it cold,
Some like it in the pot, nine days old.

Discussions of anaphora almost always return to Churchill’s “We shall fight on the beaches” and Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speeches; and rightly so, as both represent the gold standard of anaphora in modern oratory. But, as we shall see, it takes more than a liberal squeeze of lemon juice for ordinary mortals to approach the anaphoric heights of a Winston Churchill or Martin Luther King.

In the hands of a skillful speaker, rhetoric is prose poetry; and word patterns – which rhetoricians call schemes – provide its rhythmic element. The heartbeat of anaphora is repetition. The audience begin to anticipate what is coming next and are drawn into the action. Using anaphora can heighten audience involvement by playing with expectations, and occasionally subverting them.

One of the most effective ways of making sure someone remembers what you say is to keep repeating it until they can’t get it out of their head. Done well, anaphora can stir and intensify an audience’s emotions as the repeated elements build towards an unforgettable climax.

Churchill’s famous speech is very long, but he uses anaphora only once. This makes its poetry and imagery sparkle against the backdrop of the rest of the speech, which is written in a conversational prose style. By contrast, present-day politicians, such as David Cameron and Ed Miliband, have a tendency to blunt anaphora’s impact by sprinkling it incontinently throughout a speech. Looking at a couple of their performances, I lost count of the number of times they used anaphora. In the following extracts, one anaphora segues into the next, without pausing for breath:

An idea rooted in this party’s character and our country’s history.
An idea that built our greatest institutions and got us through our darkest moments.
An idea that is just one simple word.
Together.
Together.
Together we can restore faith in the future.
Together we can build a better future for the working people of Britain.
Together we can rebuild Britain.
Friends, together we can.
(Ed Miliband, 2014 conference speech)

When the world wanted rights, who wrote Magna Carta?
When they wanted representation, who built the first parliament?
When they looked for compassion, who led the abolition of slavery?
When they searched for equality, who gave women the vote?
When their freedom was in peril, who offered blood, toil, tears and sweat?
And today – whose music do they dance to?
Whose universities do they flock to?
Whose football league do they watch?
Whose example of tolerance of people living together from every nation, every religion, young and old, straight and gay?
Whose example do they aspire to?
(David Cameron, 2013 conference speech)

Do these examples of anaphora stick in the memory? Do they take an audience on an emotional journey? I think not. So what is it about Churchill’s anaphora that succeeds in doing both these important things?

“We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender …”

The occasion of Churchill’s speech – its unique historical significance – plays a big part, of course, in its memorability; though that alone could never guarantee its abiding quality. It was delivered in June 1940, during the second world war, to the House of Commons at a pivotal moment when Britain was facing up to the appalling possibility of defeat by Nazi Germany.

Seventy-five years on, the political class in England finds itself waging a very different kind of battle. Nowadays, opinion poll after opinion poll shows that the popularity of political leaders has sunk to an all-time low. The public is disillusioned with them and the system that keeps them in power. In such a climate, Ed Miliband’s decision to project himself as a cross between Churchill and Obama looks unwise. His choice of Old English words – together, root and darkest – evokes Churchill’s “We shall fight on the beaches” anaphora and his equally famous “Finest hour” speech a few weeks later. And Miliband’s together we can anaphora calls to mind the celebrated yes, we can anaphora from Barack Obama’s 2008 election victory speech.

Dressed up in the finery of two oratorical masters, Miliband looks a bit like a small boy in a onesie tiger costume trying to scare off a lion. The result is an unmemorable concatenation of generalities:

An idea...
An idea...
An idea...
Together
Together
Together we can...
Together we can...  
Together we can...  
Friends, together we can.

The abstract Latinate coldness of idea has a chilling effect on the Old English warmth of together; and they end up cancelling each other out in a meaningless act of union. How different from the richness of an anaphora like Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream”.

Meanwhile Cameron makes a futile effort to big up his, and his party’s, faltering image by hitching his wagon to the great sweep of English history. The result is a descent from hyperbole into bathos, from gross exaggeration to trivial anticlimax. When stripped down to its bare bones Cameron’s anaphora fares no better than Miliband’s:

When...  
When...  
When...  
When...  
When...  
Whose...  
Whose...  
Whose example...  
Whose example...

It’s about as inspiring as a grammar lesson on adverbs and possessive pronouns. Somehow, both men manage to neuter anaphora and reduce its rhythmic power to little more than an irritating tic.

At the core of Churchill’s anaphora is a frankness that’s not present in either Miliband’s or Cameron’s. The Battle of France had just resulted in the mass evacuation of more than 300,000 Allied troops from Dunkirk. The war against Nazi Germany was going badly and the invasion of Britain was a real possibility. Churchill’s anaphora acknowledges the threat and responds to it with defiance:

we shall fight...  
we shall fight...  
we shall fight...  
we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be.  
We shall fight...  
we shall fight...  
we shall fight...  
we shall fight...  
we shall never surrender ...

The anaphoric repetition embodies Churchill’s message of resistance and determination. He builds his anaphora around a series of evocative Old English words: beaches, landing grounds, fields, streets, hills, and island. Words his audience would have learned as children; words that conjure up images and sensations; words that make an audience feel as well as think. They stand firm against the Latinate remoteness – and foreboding – of subjugated.

Anaphora should be treated with respect. Used well, and sparingly, its impact on an audience can be profound and long-lasting. Used carelessly, it can leave you wishing you had some lemon juice to wash the egg off your face.