РЕЦЕНЗИЯ
BOOK REVIEW

Book review

Review of Ponton, Douglas Mark. 2020. *Understanding Political Persuasion: Linguistic and Rhetorical Analysis.* Vernon Press. Series in Language and Linguistics

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Рецензия

Рецензия на книгу Ponton, Douglas Mark. *Understanding Political Persuasion: Linguistic and Rhetorical Analysis.* Vernon Press. Series in Language and Linguistics (2020)

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1. Introduction

The book under review is a textbook at the crossroads of Rhetoric, Critical Discourse Analysis, Political Discourse Analysis, Historiography and Culture

Studies, by Professor Douglas Mark Ponton, University of Catania, Italy. It spans 227 pages making up 10 chapters and a useful subject index. The overall objective of the book is to synthesize relevant literature in the above-mentioned disciplines and apply the ensuing analytic toolkit to a selection of diachronically influential texts. In so doing, Ponton has recourse to a rigorous analytical protocol that methodologically (1) provides historical, cultural, and political contextual information, (2) offers theoretical considerations, and (3) shares his interpretation, findings, and concluding remarks through a close reading of the selected texts. The present critical review is structured as follows. First, it provides a synopsis of the various parts of the book, with a view to highlighting its major contributions. Second, it opens up theory-informed horizons for a learned discussion of the major stakes raised by the book.

2. Hot Issues to Reckon with: New Challenges & Future Prospects

One of the main merits of this book is that it raises a number of vital issues in current Discourse Analytic theory. In the following part, some of the ensuing stakes will be outlined and discussed as issues posing new challenges and highlighting the need for future research. The hottest issue is that of the rhetorics of social resistance.

3. Rhetorics of Social Resistance

Ott (2011, pp. 334—335) contends that, although in the early years, social movement criticism ''tended to stress the radical, the revolutionary, and the extreme,'' in the ensuing decades, scholars observed that the rhetorical modes and means of effecting social change vary greatly by cultural and historical context. This author insists that symbolic actions that promote and bring about social change need not be drastic and confrontational, nor do they need be especially unified, organized, or even intentional. Consequently, Ott warns against treating the discourses of dissension on a given social issue as a ''movement'' as that would dangerously risk homogenizing a diverse set of voices, viewpoints, and volitions under a single label, motive, and purpose. Ott (2011, p. 335) proposes the notion of rhetorics of social resistance (RSR) to account for the expanding range of practices that once fell comfortably under the umbrella of social movement rhetoric. This author acknowledges the difficulty to define the concept of resistance as it is frequently invoked by critics without careful explication or reflection. Ott, therefore, defines resistance as any discourse, performance, or aesthetic practice, which through its symbolic and/or material enactment, transgresses, subverts, disrupts, and/or rebels against the social codes, customs, and/or conventions that, through their everyday operation, create, sustain, and naturalize the prevailing relations of power in a particular time and place. Whilst acknowledging the diversity of the possible modes of resistance, Ott calls for a mapping of those possibilities along the intersecting axes of agent (individual/collective) and action (coordinated/disjointed).

Ott (2011, pp. 343—344) associates publicity with the strategic rhetorical efforts of a person or group to frame the public's perception of a subject. This author

foregrounds the mediated role of resistive rhetorics in promoting social change. The discourse and actions of individuals or groups pass through the filter of the media (both mainstream and alternative) where they are distorted, altered, and transformed by attendant discourses and commentary. The material effects of transgressive rhetorics are neither simple nor direct; to understand the role of rhetoric in social change, Ott insists on the absolute need to take into consideration the ways in which they are managed, mitigated, and manipulated.

For Ott (2011, pp. 344—345), Rhetoric is defined by its capacity to effect change in the attitudes, values, and beliefs of individuals and the rules, rituals, and norms of collectives. Evaluating rhetoric's consequentiality is an important but challenging enterprise, as it raises questions and concerns about what counts as suitable evidence of rhetoric's influence and effects. Therefore, Ott (2011, pp. 344—345) urges scholars of dissension to explore the full range of rhetorical modalities available to those who would challenge or subvert the prevailing social codes and structures. This requires attention to the mode of expression (e.g., visual, oral, tactile), the medium/context of transmission (e.g., immediate, mediated, virtual), and the means/mechanism of enactment (e.g., symbolicity, embodied performance, built/constructed environment). However, as the technologies of communication continue to converge and change, so, too, will the modes by which resistance is carried out. So, critics need to be vigilant in recognizing and (re)mapping rhetoric's ever-evolving modalities. Mediated and immediate transgressive acts engage and involve audiences differently.

Research is increasingly foregrounding the importance of affect. To this effect, Ott (2011, pp. 344—345) argues that resistive social rhetorics, which often foreground visceral appeals, are uniquely suited for exploring the emotive dimensions of politics and social change. How, for instance, do televisual images of the non-violent actions of protestors or the violent actions of single issue extremists move us at a bodily level? Moreover, Ott (2011, pp. 344—345) contends that rhetoric is a situated activity, one that is profoundly shaped by the time and place of its enactment. Serious engagements with resistive rhetorics need carefully to consider not only the cultural moment, but also the cultural emplacement of symbolic action. But critics need to investigate the role of spatiality in rhetorics of social resistance as well. How, for instance, do protestors with signs standing on the sidewalk differ from protestors with signs marching down the street? How is an act of resistance altered when it moves from the open, public space of the street to the semi-public space of the church or business to the interior, private space of a home to the networked, virtual space of Facebook? The next direction of research is the interface with technology.

4. Synopsis of the book

Right from the very introductory chapter, the author notices that the question of how political speakers attempt to persuade their listeners has informed much of modern political discourse analysis (Nöth, 1995, p. 339). It was recognized that the

ability to use words to sway an assembly was the politician's chief weapon; and the characteristic form of political debate, in much Greco-Roman oratory, was the genus deliberativum, which required a pro/con debate, on the basis of which decisions were taken. It was imperative, then, for any politician to master what Aristotle called the forms of persuasion (Ponton, 2020, p. 1). Ponton also points out that, though one feature of the pro-con debate is undoubtedly the discussion of various possible responses to real-world situations, the pragmatic purpose of much persuasive rhetoric is not to obtain a specific result but to influence 'the hearts and minds' of hearers, creating a diffuse consensus for the speaker's preferred ideology or belief system (Bermejo-Luque, 2011, p. 73).

In the modern world, Ponton argues, political rhetoric clearly has a role to play in spreading beliefs that, though they may not affect the immediate vote, may make their contribution to an ongoing, mediated, nationwide or even global debate at semi-conscious levels of political ideology. These processes may, clearly, produce concrete results for a political party at the next electoral consultation (Ponton, 2020, p. 2).

Ponton devotes some space to the discussion of the Aristotelian perspective on persuasion: ethos, or the respect engendered by the speaker's character (Aristotle, 1954, p. 91); pathos, the appeal to the emotions (Aristotle, 1954, p. 25) and logos, the rational argument advanced (Charteris-Black, 2005, p. 9). The importance of these three factors is, arguably, as great today as in ancient Greece. Ponton explains that it is necessary for politicians to preserve an untarnished image though such factors are highly culture-specific. The persuasive force of any particular message will clearly be augmented if the speaker has a positive ethos, as was the case with Malcolm X with the black community in Harlem. However, Aristotle regards logos, or reason, as the orator's chief persuasive resource. The argumentation force of a speech mostly consists of the reasons that support the orator's favored solutions, making it persuasive to listeners. Ponton's argument is that Aristotle's categories, then, offer approaches to text analysis that have not been supplanted altogether by more modern methodologies, and the notions of ethos, pathos and logos are central to the concept of persuasive political discourse advanced throughout the book (Ponton, 2020, p. 4).

Ponton is alert to the need to define some key terms which are: evaluation, engagement and alignment. Each represents a component of persuasive political discourse. Evaluation refers to the positive or negative statements advanced by speakers, thereby revealing a system of 'values', which may be aesthetic or axiological, according to the topic: politicians praise some policies, people or aspects of a situation whilst they denigrate others. Engagement describes the way the speaker represents other views than his own. Alignment refers to the attempt to persuade the audience to adopt the speaker's own views. Ponton cites Fairclough (2003, p. 173) to argue that evaluative language has a central role to play in much more persuasive political rhetoric. Ponton uses the Appraisal Framework proposed by

Martin and White (2005) to classify the references in this book (Hunston and Thompson, 2003, p. 142).

The author discusses what he terms 'Tokens' of Affect according to which emotion/affect is viewed as the basis for all our evaluations; references to a speaker's emotional response can be via explicit emotive lexis as in "I am proud of all who have fought on my orders". However, Affect can be "invoked, where the emotion is implicit in a stretch of text with no apparent reference to the emotional sphere (Martin and White 2005, p. 62), as in Churchill's address to the London crowd on VE day saying: "so we came back after long months from the jaws of death, out of the mouth of hell, while all the world wondered". In this example, there is no explicit reference to the emotion, yet the probable rhetorical aim is to move the hearers to a profound sense of relief, mingled with pride at having achieved so much (Ponton, 2020, p. 7). Such references are termed 'tokens' and would be signaled, in this case, as t (token) + Aff: security/satisfaction.

Ponton stresses the idea that the interpretation of tokens is more useful if they are not seen as isolated fragments of meaning but rather viewed as threads in a verbal/textual tapestry; as part of an overall rhetorical design that may include allusions, jokes, body language gesture, and so on. Ponton moves, then, to the evaluation of Churchill's address to VE crowd by underscoring explicit Affect, together with their tokens. On the other hand, the semantic field covered by Judgement propositions deals with speakers' assessment of human behavior, which can be positive or negative. Ponton proposes a framework for analyzing Judgment in English based on Martin and White (2005, p. 53), where a basic distinction is made between evaluations relating to 'social esteem' and 'social sanction', which grade judgments according to the perceived gravity of the behavior in question. Conversely, evaluations of objects or naturally occurring phenomena are dealt with under the system of Appreciation. Martin and White (2005, p. 56) outline five basic categories, again with positive and negative polarities, organized as reaction (impact), reaction (quality), composition (balance), composition (complexity) and valuation.

As for Graduation, lexis can be graded according to its perceived level of intensity, via a process of selection from a range of options: low, median, or high. Martin and Rose (2003, p. 38) say that there seem to be more resources in English for 'turning up' the 'volume' than for turning it down. As regards Engagement, the Appraisal Framework's work on engagement is inspired by Bakhtin/Volosinov's work in this field (White, 2003, p. 259). Texts respond to other texts; they anticipate possible objections, answer points made by other speakers, dispute conclusions or propositions, and so on (Ponton, 2020, p. 11).

Finally, for Alignment, it refers to the way a speaker attempts to bring his audience 'into line' with his own views. Ponton takes it for granted that the attempt to achieve alignment is a component of most, if not all, persuasive political rhetoric. In other words, speakers use their rhetorical and other gifts in an effort to bring their listeners around to their way of thinking. Ponton stresses the fact that the application of the appraisal tools to the construction of rhetorical alignment is not the only or

the best way to approach political discourse; indeed, there are other methods for exploring such questions that will be covered in other chapters of the book and it is a personal choice to use one method over another (Ponton, 2020, p. 15).

It transpires from the above synopsis that Chapter One tackles a very important topic which is mainly political persuasion and its various mechanisms. Politicians all over the world resort to persuasion in order to achieve their goals. Thus, political persuasion has become an undeniable truth that needs understanding and clarification. Modern political discourse analysis focuses on how political speakers tend to persuade their listeners. This chapter tries to elucidate the power of spoken words relying on Aristotle's notions and the Greek Context of Ancient Greek polis, where oratory played a crucial role in the political life. However, with modern parliamentary democracies, this notion has become less important as debates are considered as responses to a real-world situation. Thus, the major purpose is not to achieve goals but to influence the listeners' hearts and minds of a specific ideology or a certain belief. Though today's parliamentary democracies do not focus on the power of rhetoric, ethos, pathos and logos will always be deciphered in persuasive political discourses, as speakers tend to use different strategies in an effort to influence their listeners' way of thinking.

5. Review of single chapter

One of the chapters, Chapter Six, is now reviewed in detail as a sample of the book as a whole:

In an approach mixing ethno-history and rhetoric, Chapter Six involves two religious leaders of the African American community in the 1960s, namely Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK henceforth) and Malcolm X. They were contemporary of one another and they adopted a type of discourse tinted with obvious political and ideological connotations. Yet, they maintained diametrically opposed stances as to social integration. In this respect, MLK downplayed discrimination and called for an accommodative attitude, whereas X wanted separation from white society.

In this comparative inquiry, Ponton makes a non-random selection of passages from his speakers' respective statements based on his rhetorical assumptions. The latter hold that the in-group/out-group interplay reflects two distinct persuasive strategies. It was unsurprisingly aloofness in the case of X, and rapprochement in that of MLK. Nonetheless, Ponton asserts that these strategies were successful; because both of them relied on the ideological symbiosis between each speaker and his specific audience. Besides, both strategies, too, according to Ponton, included (1) argumentation, (2) evaluative language, (3) and affect as rhetorical techniques of persuasion for such a type of politico-religious discourse, so as to convey either X's virulent invective or MLK's conciliatory message.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, then, Ponton's book is a very useful textbook for students of Politics, Culture Studies, Critical Discourse Analysis, Media Studies, Historiography

and Pragmatics. Its merit is its reader-friendliness as it synthesizes serious theoretical issues in a simple style without claiming to substitute the major contributions. Rather, researchers interested in further deeper theoretical studies will be motivated to take the book as a springboard, an appetizer for more demanding specialized investigations. As for laymen, the book is of paramount utility as it demonstrates through its practical analyses how to make good use of the synthesized theories. All in all, it is a valuable contribution to knowledge and I would strongly recommend it.

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