

Rhetoric in the Editorial Articles of The New York Times

Kunio KAWAKAMI *

With the ever faster development of the means of communications and transportation along with the increase of Japan's importance in the fields of economy, politics and academia, it has become inevitable that the Japanese must work together in cooperation with the peoples of the rest of the world thus making an international contribution with its wealth. This change of circumstances has made it more and more important for Japanese to be able to use the English language as a means of international communication. For this purpose, English for daily conversation only is not sufficient. What is required is a multiplicity of skills enabling us freely to exchange opinions, information and techniques in various fields of knowledge and endeavor. Also necessary is language ability which empowers us to argue and persuade others of the validity of our views and interests especially when there is a potential for conflict. This of course requires fundamental knowledge of English such as correct pronunciation of the English language, proper choice in vocabulary and a practical knowledge of the general rules of grammar. These, however, are still not sufficient. For the complicated situations of international interaction in politics, economy or science and technology, a far more advanced knowledge of the English language and an ability to manipulate it is needed.

How can such knowledge and technique be learned? Perhaps one of the best ways is to learn by example from the famous speeches of prominent politicians, the typical arguments heard in courtrooms, and the editorial articles and columns in the publications of mass communications.

* Faculty of Liberal Arts

1

This author has so far studied rhetoric as the art of effective argument or persuasion through an analysis of the speeches of Sir Winston Churchill and former U.S. president Ronald Reagan. In the present paper, the object of the research is the editorial articles of the New York Times, which is regarded as the leading organ of the American media. And the rhetorical devices used in them and their effectiveness in argument and persuasion will be the target of this survey and analysis.

The materials which have been used for this study are the editorial articles printed in the New York Times dated from the first of May to the end of August, 1993. Through the careful reading and analysis of them, some of the stylistic characteristics of them and various techniques of effective argument and persuasion have been clarified.

Of course, those editorials have not been written by one and the same person, but by a number of editorial writers and each writer has a different inclination in their writing. Moreover, the different nature of the topics they write about will vary greatly from day to day, which will inevitably affects the tone and the style of their writing.

This fact makes it extremely difficult to come to a conclusion about a set of definite rules governing the nature of the rhetorical devices used in all of the editorials.

Another problem is that the space allotted for this paper is very limited. So, as a report on the first part of this three-year project, some typical examples of the articles alone will be discussed. This will hopefully give an outline of the nature of the rhetorical devices used in the editorial articles of the New York Times.

2

AIDS Babies Pay the Price (Example 1)

Each year in New York State some 200 or more newborn babies infected with the AIDS virus leave the hospital without anyone lifting a finger to identify them or care for them. The babies receive no special treatment for their infections until, months or years

later, they develop the first symptoms of their fatal affliction.

How could this happen in a supposedly enlightened community? The answer is not callousness or carelessness. The neglected babies are simply the price knowingly paid for what is perceived as a greater good--protecting the privacy of the mothers and thus enhancing the likelihood that mothers will voluntarily cooperate with the health system, not only in fighting AIDS but in improving overall family health.

No doubt privacy is vital for many AIDS campaigns. But in applying it to newborns, the experts are following their theology over a cliff, dashing the prospects for babies who desperately need help.--
--- (Aug. 13, 1993)

This excerpt is the introductory part of an editorial criticizing the health experts of New York state for their negligence toward newborn babies infected with the AIDS virus because of the overriding concern for the protection of privacy of their mothers.

First of all, the title of the editorial itself draws the attention of the readers. Not only do the words 'Pay' and 'Price' begin with the same consonant [p], but also 'AIDS', 'Babies' and 'Pay' share the same diphthong [ei].

Next, the writer, to make his assertion impressive and effective, uses intensified figurative expressions such as 'without anyone lifting a finger to identify them or care for them' and 'the experts are following their theology over a cliff, dashing the prospects for babies who desperately need help'. In the latter example, dashing and desperately are in alliteration, too.

Alliteration is a rhetorical device which frequently occurs in other places of the article.

"..until they develop the first symptoms of their fatal affliction"

"The answer is not callousness or carelessness."

Both of the two words in the former case are among those which usually have a particular sense of significance and therefore carry a connota-

tion with an emotional charge. Just think of other instances such as in "the first voyage to the new world" or "the last days of his life"

It is obvious that the words "callousness" and "carelessness" have been deliberately selected. They not only begin with the same harsh sound of consonant [k] but end in a rhyme with the identical suffix "-ness".

Another remarkable case of repetition is seen in the recurrence of plosive consonant [p].

"The neglected babies are simply the price knowingly paid for what is perceived as a greater good--protecting the privacy of the mothers..."

It is said that for a punchy speech or writing, the harsh sounds of multiple consonants bs, ks, hard cs, ps and rs are preferably used.

Finally the phrase "greater good" is also in alliteration and is used to suggest the writer's sarcasm against the selfishness of the health experts, who the writer probably perceives as putting utilitarian concerns and individual rights before moral and emotional ones.

3

Keep Cutting at the Pentagon (Example II)

President Clinton's hopes to put the nation on a sound fiscal footing depend heavily on disciplining the defense budget now and for years to come. The Pentagon is now showing more willingness to help. But it will need to do more.

As reported Saturday, the Pentagon is scaling down its unrealistic strategy and no longer planning to fight two big wars at once. And it is considering cancellation of some costly new weapons systems. But it needs to cancel more if it is to avoid putting jumbo mortgage on future revenues.

That can be safely done because the United States already has the most advanced weapons in the world. No rival could conceivably challenge America's technological edge for at least a decade.

Last week Defense Secretary Les Aspin asked the services to find \$20 billion in additional cuts in budget authority for

1994. Otherwise next years budget will exceed his target of \$263 billion in actual spending. But that's a pittance compared to the budget crunch he will face in future years unless he quickly cancels costly weapons programs.

Mr. Aspin will have no one to blame but himself if he doesn't make the necessary cuts now. Having served as chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, the Defence Secretary is aware of the gap between the skyrocketing cost of new weapons and the shrinking funds to pay for them. The affordability gap in fighter and attack aircraft is well documented. So is America's technological edge, suggesting that few new aircraft are needed. The last Bush budget, which the incoming Clinton Administration could only tinker with, includes \$4 billion for development of four new planes.--the F-22, a multi-role fighter, the AX and the F/A-18E/F. To develop and procure all four well into the next century would cost a whopping \$300 billion. That is affordable only if the defense budget resumes rising again in future years. But Why spend all that money when the Air Force and Navy already have the world's finest aircraft?

The bottom-up budget review now nearing completion in the Pentagon will cancel two aircraft programs next year. One is the multirole fighter. The Pentagon will need a new such plane some time in the next century. But not now.

It also needs to reconsider development of a multi-role joint attack fighter that Robert Hale of the Congressional Budget Office compares to "trying to combine a Mack truck with a Toyota Tercel. In the process you are going to get less of a truck."

The Navy's AX is also slated for cancellation. A case can be made for buying an advanced radar-evading attack plane for the Air Force, the F/A-18E/F. But the Pentagon can't afford a second plane to perform the same mission. Nor can it afford to keep the Navy in the business of performing the medium-attack

mission along with the Air Force.

Another obvious candidate for cancellation is the F-22 stealth fighter plane, but the new Pentagon plan call for building fewer of them, not canceling them. Even a "silver bullet" force of as many as 442 F-22's seems excessive, given America's ample air superiority over all potential rivals.

To cut the defense budget down to size, Mr. Aspin must cancel weapons programs that America no longer needs and can no longer afford. Otherwise they will drown Mr. Clinton's deficit reduction plans in red ink. (Jun.14,1993)

In this editorial, thematic phrases and words are repeated throughout the entire article. They have the effect of unifying a rather lengthy body of argument and assertion arranged in several paragraphs. And the chosen phrase or word themselves serve as focal points for the readers.

In this article, the editorial writer deals with the necessity of the reduction of the defense budget. He asserts the financial soundness of the nation heavily depends on fiscal discipline within the defense budget. With such a huge fiscal deficit the government cannot afford to spend for enormous development and procurement of new weapon programs. According to the writer, the Pentagon shows willingness to cooperate in cutting the costs, but it needs to cancel more a task that can be safely done, because, it is reasoned, the United States already has the world's most advanced weapons that no other rival countries could challenge. So Mr. Aspin, the Defense Secretary needs to cancel more of the defense programs to avoid putting a huge mortgage on future generations.

The key phrases or words in this article are; "it will need to (do more cancellation)", "cannot afford (to pay)", "cut", "cancel", "cancellation", "affordable", "affordability", "cost" and "costly weapon". The first phrase with a verb "need" is used five times. The second phrase "cannot afford" together with the words "affordable and affordability" also appears five times. And the word "cancel" including its derivatives "cancellation" and "canceling" are repeated in as many as eight different places.

Another remarkable rhetorical device found in this article is parallel sentence structures in contrasting or on balancing juxtaposition.

"the Defense Secretary is aware of the gap between the sky-rocketing cost of new weapons and the shrinking funds to pay for them." (contrast)

"Mr. Aspin must cancel weapons programs that America no longer needs and can no longer afford. (balance)

It seems amusing that such colloquial words as jumbo, pittance, tinker, bottoms-up, whopping are used in an article on such a serious issue.

Attention should also be paid to the last sentence of the article in a figure;

"Otherwise they will drown Mr. Clinton's deficit reduction plans in red ink."

4

The President's Locks -- Grid and Curly (Example III)

The haircut that tied up two runways the other day at Los Angeles International Airport looks like the stuff of instant legend. President Clinton, whose hair was the problem, will probably be hearing about it for the rest of his term. It also raises the persistent question of how much inconvenience and expense Americans are willing to bear for their President's travels.

It's good for a President to get around the country, and the Secret Service is rightly rigorous in mobilizing local police as he moves about. History teaches us that the men who occupy the White House need special protection.

On one of his visits last week, Mr. Clinton said he hoped the deployment of New York's finest for his protection didn't jeopardize regular police work. Mayor David Dinkins, ever the gracious host, assured him there was no problem. But it does

tie up countless men and women in blue, standing around for hours on end while they wait for the Presidential caravan to pass.

Nonetheless, New York wouldn't be New York if it didn't attract luminaries like the Clintons. It wants them. It needs them. And New Yorkers have long since become accustomed to the annoyance of gridlock, day and night, while a V.I.P. from somewhere else zips around behind a phalanx of noisy motor-cycles.

But what's routine in the streets of New York doesn't work on the runways at LAX. Those paying passengers on flights that were forced to circle overhead while the President had his locks shorn aboard Air Force One are unlikely to be so forgiving as hardened New Yorkers.

And, by the way, someone should tell Mr. Clinton he can get a perfectly good haircut in the Big Apple for a lot less than the \$200 charged by that barber from Beverly Hills.

(May 22, 1993)

Editorial (III) is chosen as an example of particularly colloquial, jovial and jocular kind of writings. As already noted, liking for colloquialism is obvious in the editorials of the New York Times. But the case above might be considered one which has gone a little too far. It is questionable whether its style or tone is proper for an editorial of a quality paper. Nevertheless, some of the interesting techniques of attractive writing already discussed can be seen in this article.

This is one of the two articles written under the title of "White House Follies" and the subtitle for this is "The President's Locks -- Grid and Curly". When Clinton visited the city of Los Angeles, he had his hair cut by a barber from Beverly Hill aboard Air Force One. This forced the tie-up of two runways at the Los Angeles' Air Port and gave lots of annoyance to other passengers. The article criticizes what the editorial writer believes to be the folly of Clinton's unbelievably thoughtless behavior. However, the tone of it is not so much of reprimand as of

ridicule.

The word "locks" is used with two different meanings. One is of course "hair of head" and the other is "interlocked or jammed state". So the title implies Mr. Clinton's improper and scandalous business of locks-shearing resulted in a great annoyance of grid-lock at the air port. This is one of the figures of rhetoric called a "Pun", which is used chiefly for purposes of humor.

Other examples of this type of figure are found in the following lines.

"But it does tie up countless men and women in blue, standing around for hours on end while they wait for the Presidential caravan to pass."

In this sentence, the word "blue" is used with two different meanings. First it refers to the uniform of blue color of the police, thus "men and women in blue" means "policemen and women". Second it implies "sad, depressed" and it is used to suggest the writer's sympathy for the unhappy policemen. And the phrase "on end" also has two meanings; they have to keep standing for hours continuously, and also they have to keep standing upright.

It should also be apparent that the phrase "men and women in blue" is another example of rhetorical devices; this type is called "Metonymy". The term literally means "a change of name (Gr. meta + onoma)". This figure consists in describing a thing by some accompaniment or significant adjunct so as to give more imaginative and more striking impression. "The men who occupy the White House" is another instance meaning "Presidents". These round-about expressions seem to add to the effect of humor and irony in the article.

One more characteristic of the style of the article is regular use of contraction as "It's", "doesn't", "didn't", "wouldn't" and "what's". They are found in breezy type of editorials and would seem to add a conversational feel to them. However, most other editorials of the "New York Times" use contracted forms with less frequency. In the editorial articles in the "Times of London" they are used even far less frequently and

almost never in "The Economist". It seems that they are unacceptable in formal British style.

5

Through examining the examples of the editorials, it has been demonstrated that in editorial writing, there appears to be two main styles. One is the informal with the use of colloquialisms and even slangs. The other is the fairly frequent use of rhetorical devices to enhance the effectiveness and persuasiveness of the writing. Chief among the rhetorical devices is the use of repetition.

It seems that the informal style reflects the general informality of the American life-style. Another reason for using the informal style is likely to be that both editors and the editorial writers want to make their articles as accessible as possible to the general audience. Of what worth are the articles if they fail to reach an audience? They must be easy and interesting in order to be read by the majority of the literate population.

In recent years, the repute of rhetoric has been unjustly low, perhaps because it has been more associated with deceit than with a higher purpose. However, it is undeniable that the clarity and the potency of ideas can be achieved by the right choice of words and their appropriate arrangement. Naturally various devices of rhetoric are used in the editorials of the New York Times, and the most common one is repetition.

Alliteration is particularly popular; so much so, that it was found in more than half of the titles of all the editorials surveyed.

References

- 1) C. Brooks & R.P. Warren: Modern Rhetoric, New York, (1972)
- 2) J.S. Cook: The Elements of Writing and Public Speaking, New York, (1991)
- 3) J.C. Nesfield: Manual of English Grammar and Composition, London, (1948)
- 4) The New York Times: Manual of Style and Usage, New York, (1976)
- 5) R. Flesch & A.H. Lass: A New Guide to Better Writing, New York, (1982)

(Received December 18, 1993)