



**ANALYSING POLITICAL DISCOURSE**  
Theory and Practice

Paul Chilton

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# Analysing Political Discourse

*Analysing Political Discourse* is a must for anyone interested in the way language is used in the world of politics.

Invoking Aristotle's idea that we are all political animals, able to use language to pursue our own ends, the book uses the theoretical framework of linguistics to explore the ways in which we think and behave politically.

Domestic and global politics come under the linguistic microscope. What do politicians really do in a radio interview? What verbal games do they play in a parliamentary knock-about? Contemporary and high-profile case studies are used, including an examination of the dangerous influence of a politician's words on the defendants in the Stephen Lawrence murder trial.

International in its perspective, *Analysing Political Discourse* also considers the changing landscape of global political language post-September 11, focusing on self-legitimising language and the increasing use of religious imagery in political discourse. Bill Clinton's address persuading his country to go to war in Kosovo is analysed, and speeches by George Bush and Osama bin Laden are examined in relation to each other.

Written in a lively and engaging style, *Analysing Political Discourse* offers a new theoretical perspective on the study of language and politics, and provides an essential introduction to political discourse analysis.

**Paul Chilton** is Professor of Linguistics at the University of East Anglia, where Critical Linguistics was pioneered. His previous publications include *Orwellian Language and the Media* (1988), *Security Metaphors* (1996) and (co-edited with Christina Schäffner) *Politics as Text and Talk* (2002).



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First published 2004  
by Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

**This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004.**

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Chilton, Paul A. (Paul Anthony)

Analysing political discourse : theory and practice / Paul Chilton.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Language and languages – Political aspects. 2. Great Britain – Languages – Political aspects. I. Title.

P119.3.C48 2004  
306.44–dc21

2003011976

ISBN 0-203-56121-X Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-34425-1 (Adobe eReader Format)

ISBN 0–415–31471–2 (hbk)

ISBN 0–415–31472–0 (pbk)

To my father and to the memory of my mother



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# Preface

Remember that politics, colonialism, imperialism and war also originate in the human brain

Vilayanur S. Rmachandran

The analysis of political discourse is scarcely new. The western classical tradition of rhetoric was in its various guises a means of codifying the way public orators used language for persuasive and other purposes. The Greco-Roman tradition regarded humans as both creatures who are defined by the ability to speak and creatures defined by their habit of living together in groups. For writers like Cicero the cultivation of the power of speech was the essence of the citizen's duty. For others it was the essence of deception and distortion. In eighteenth-century Europe, the new scientific minds began to distrust deeply the things language could do. Rhetoric as the study of the forms of verbal persuasion and expression declined. But of course orators, politicians, preachers and hucksters of all sorts continued to use their natural rhetorical talents as before. Rhetorical practice, in the form of public relations and 'spin', fuelled by the media explosion, is now more centre stage than ever.

In the last half of the twentieth century, linguistics took enormous strides, largely through the realisation that language must be seen as an innate part of all human minds. Chomsky's influence is undoubted, as is the impact of the generative model of language with which he is associated. The research questions were essentially scientific. This is not to say that linguists in this tradition have not raised their voices in matters of domestic and foreign politics, both in the United States and Europe, but their research agenda was not directed towards theorising any relationship there might be between the human language faculty and the social nature of humans. The language faculty was largely identified with syntax and viewed as sealed off from other mental capacities.

Scholarly interest in the public *uses* of language was another matter, pursued by other scholars, mainly in Europe. The Frankfurt School and proponents of

critical theory (including Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas, Stuart Hall, Bourdieu) were among the most distinguished to link language, politics and culture. Some linguists and scholars in the humanities were aware of this current of thought. In England, socially concerned linguists (Fowler *et al.* 1979; Kress and Hodge 1979 revised as Hodge and Kress 1993; Fowler 1991, 1996) produced Critical Linguistics. They were followed by socially and politically oriented linguists from a variety of backgrounds, networking broadly under the banner of Critical Discourse Analysis (for example, Mey 1985, 2001; Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995a, 1995b; van Dijk 1984, 1987, 1993b, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 2002; Wodak 1989, 1996, 2002; Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Blommaert and Bulcaen 1997; Blommaert and Verschueren 1998, and many others). Scholars in this movement have tended to work not with the generative model of the Chomskian tradition but with the systemic-functional linguistics associated with M. A. K. Halliday (van Dijk and Verschueren are exceptions). This theoretical perspective does not investigate language as a mental phenomenon but as a social phenomenon. Starting from single issues such as racism, or from political categories such as ideology, scholars in this tradition have tended to use linguistics as a tool kit and have not tried to tell us more about the human language instinct. Worthily, they have sought to fight social injustice of various kinds. I do not know if discourse analysts can have any serious impact on the genocides, oppressions and exploitations we are still witnessing.

The generative revolution in linguistics was also a cognitive revolution, one that generated a further cognitive revolution that went off on its own in the 1980s. This group of linguists and philosophers, mainly in North America (Fillmore, Langacker, Lakoff, Mark Johnson, Turner, Fauconnier, and in a slightly different mode Jackendoff, among others) but also increasingly in Europe, deliberately linked the mental capacity of language with the other mental capacities. These linkages have included spatial cognition, for example. More importantly, cognitive linguistics has told us a great deal about the nature of cognitive creativity through research on conceptual metaphor and blending. Once such linkages begin to be studied, social and political cognition comes into the frame, sometimes in a distinctly critical mode (Lakoff 1996 and his Internet papers on the Gulf War, the events of 11 September 2001 and the second Gulf War, and in Europe, Chilton 1996, Dirven 2001). In parallel, cognitive science in general has explored social intelligence, the nature of communication and the evolution of language (among others, Sperber and Wilson 1986; Sperber 2000; Cosmides and Tooby 1989; Leslie 1987; Hurford *et al.* 1998). The cross-fertilisation among these currents of thought now offers the most exciting paradigm for exploring the nature of the human mind in society.

Rhetoric, generative linguistics, critical theory, cognitive linguistics – all these contexts are reflected in the present book, but most of all the last two. The book has come about through a long engagement in the analysis of, and commentary

on language used in the domain of politics and international relations. It has equally come about through research and teaching in linguistics. Behind the book is a question: what does the use of language in contexts we call 'political' tell us about humans in general? The question shows how much we lack anything like a *theory* of language and politics. What I have tried to do in this book is to move the debate towards a *linguistic* and rather more broadly a *cognitive* theory of language and politics, one that will take account of the most probing speculations on semantics, pragmatics, evolution and discourse processing. At bottom there may exist a deep link between the political and the linguistic. I do not pretend to have demonstrated it but several sections of this book have that thought in mind.

The first two chapters seek to explain why we should bother at all with the relationship between language and politics, especially as some non-linguists, even some political scientists, might be tempted to open the book. Chapter 2, in particular, is meant to provoke speculation regarding the evolution and functioning of language in relation to political behaviour. Chapters 3 and 4 separate two complementary dimensions of what people do with language – interact with one another and exchange mental pictures of the world. I hope that the bits of linguistic theory that I introduce will provide techniques that people can and will use in order to make themselves aware of what the talk and text that surrounds us is doing. That is Part I of the book, the theoretical groundwork.

Parts II and III of the book contain practical analyses of actual specimens of political text and talk, using and developing various analytic techniques. Artificial though it may be, the two parts distinguish between internal domestic politics and the international environment. Part II selects three types of political communication in the domestic arena. Chapter 5 takes the case of the institutionalised media genre of the political interview, in its surrounding context of constitutional party politics. Chapter 6 moves to parliamentary discourse, again looking at the fine detail of what political actors are doing in using language. In Chapter 7, I turn to types of domestic discourse that characterise a community's anxieties about the 'others', the 'outsiders', the 'foreigners' that are the counterpart of its own sense of identity. Here I am concerned not primarily with the institutional context of a type of political interaction, but with the continuity over time of certain kinds of political representation.

Domestic political communication is complicated enough. On the global scale communication is almost inconceivably complex, and I do not attempt to tackle the issues of global communication head on. I have simply analysed texts associated with particular international events. These are events that have threatened the domestic security of millions of people beyond the English-speaking world – as well as within it, most appallingly on the 11 September 2001.

Chapter 7 is a kind of transition, since it attempts to get inside the mind, via the language they use, of those who fear or hate people they perceive as alien

and threatening. The three chapters in Part III of the book develop a particular model for the analysis of discourse, based on spatial conceptualisation. At the same time, we encounter the problem of 'background knowledge' – the fact that in order to 'make sense' human communicators do not just encode information in signals, but actively (though unconsciously) draw on 'background' knowledge of all sorts. In analysing political language behaviour, the problem takes on interesting forms for the analyst. Chapter 8 investigates the means whereby western leaders represent, through language use, the world beyond their borders, and how they justify going to war to their electorates. Going to war is such a serious enterprise that it requires extraordinary communicative efforts, and a variety of presumptions about background knowledge, norms and values. Chapters 9 and 10 address texts that were part of the reaction to 11 September 2001. In many ways, this is hazardous territory; the effects are still with us and the full consequences still unknown. Chapter 9 begins to look at the way the world is represented in an international arena that has acquired a new kind of polarisation. Using the spatial model, it looks on the one hand at a public address by George W. Bush, and on the other it looks at a text issued by Osama bin Laden. The point? In this newly polarised world, we need at least to start to try to understand how different human minds imagine the world and communicate their imaginings. Chapter 10 seeks to open up another area for discourse enquiry – the role of religious conceptualisation. The analysis of religious discourse has been a neglected area of research, as has its overlap with politics. It poses challenges for a cognitive-linguistic approach, as well as for our understanding of contemporary politics more generally.

As will be evident, there is a theoretical agenda underlying the chapters of this book, and I attempt to draw together some of the threads in Part IV, in the hope that other scholars will explore them further. Perhaps there is a case now for pursuing a more coherent theory of language and political behaviour.

A final word. During the course of our explorations we will come across the crucial question of discourse, and discourse analysis, across cultures, across languages and through translation. These encounters pose more intriguing, and politically urgent, challenges for scholars in a world that is both more global and more fragmented.

# Acknowledgements

As always, it behoves an author to express gratitude and love to their family, and I do so most heartily to Tricia, Jonathan, Emily and my wider family. Books do not get written without personal debts to those closest to them. So for once, this should be said first and not least.

This book has evolved over several years, during which time I have benefited from the ideas and writings of many colleagues and contacts. I hope I have not misrepresented their ideas; if I have, the responsibility is mine and I crave their indulgence. Throughout the preparation of this book I have been indebted to an international community of intellectuals. I cannot list them all here, but among those who have been generous with their ideas, their support or both, over a number of years, I would mention, in alphabetical order: the late Pierre Achard, Jan Blommaert, Patricia Chilton, Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Cornelia Ilie, Mikhail Ilyin, George Lakoff, Frank Liedtke, Luisa Martin Rojo, Jacob Mey, Christina Schäffner, Viktor Sergeev, Jef Verschueren, Ruth Wodak, Rüdiger Zimmermann. I would like to express my thanks to Alan Durant for helpful criticisms of an earlier draft of this book, and for the constructive points made by other reviewers. My thanks are due also to Louisa Semlyen and Kate Parker of Routledge for promoting this project, for their practical advice and for seeing it through the publication process.

The book was prepared and written while I was working at three different universities. At Warwick University I was fortunate for a long time to have the intellectual space to lay the groundwork, and I am grateful to former colleagues who made that possible, not least among them Christopher Thompson and the late Donald Charlton. At Aston University, Christina Schäffner, was a supportive critic, as she has been over many years. At the University of East Anglia, I am glad indeed to have found a creative environment for the exploration of an area of thought pioneered by the late Roger Fowler in collaboration with Gunther Kress, Bob Hodge and others in the 1970s. The final stages of writing this book benefited too from stimulating discussions on many matters with my colleagues Bill Downes and Clive Matthews.

Various parts of the book adapt short extracts from some of my previous publications, including in particular the following:

Chapter 3 uses about one page from Chilton and Schäffner, 'Discourse and Politics' in T. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse as Social Interaction*, Sage, 1997.

Chapter 3 also uses about a page from Chilton and Schäffner, 'Introduction: themes and principles in the analysis of political discourse' in P. A. Chilton and C. Schäffner (eds) *Politics as Text and Talk*, Benjamins, 2002.

Chapter 9 uses some paragraphs from my article, 'Do something! Conceptualising responses to the attacks of 11 September 2001', *Journal of Language and Politics*, 1 (1): 181–95, 2002, published by Benjamins.

I am grateful to all the publishers and editors involved.

Permissions have been granted for the use of certain other published texts and documents. The author and publisher of the present book wish to thank the following for permission to use copyright material in this book:

Mouton de Gruyter for two diagrams and some text from my chapter 'Deixis and distance: President Clinton's justification of intervention in Kosovo' in *At War with Words*, edited by Mirjana N. Dedaic and Daniel N. Nelson, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, 2003.

BBC *Today* programme for permission to transcribe and reproduce of the interview by John Humphrys of Margaret Beckett, MP, June 2001.

BBC News Online for the text 'bin Laden's Warning' originating from BBC News South Asia, 7 October 2001.

Her Majesty's Stationery Office for the licence to use extracts from the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Command Paper, 4262, Appendix 10, Sequence 11, 3 December 1994, 23:25:28 to 23:28 (<http://www.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/sli-ap10.htm>).

The publishers apologise for any errors or omissions in the above list and would be grateful to be notified of corrections for incorporation in any future reprintings.

**Part I**

**Political animals as  
articulate mammals**





# 1 Politics and language

How can politics be defined? It is not the business of this book to answer this question definitively. We shall, however, say that politics varies according to one's situation and purposes – a political answer in itself. But if one considers the definitions, implicit and explicit, found both in the traditional study of politics and in discourse studies of politics, there are two broad strands. On the one hand, politics is viewed as a struggle for power, between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it. Some states are conspicuously based on struggles for power; whether democracies are essentially so constituted is disputable. On the other hand, politics is viewed as cooperation, as the practices and institutions that a society has for resolving clashes of interest over money, influence, liberty, and the like. Again, whether democracies are intrinsically so constituted is disputed.

Cross-cutting these two orientations is another distinction, this time between 'micro' and 'macro'. At the micro level there are conflicts of interest, struggles for dominance and efforts at co-operation between individuals, between genders, and between social groups of various kinds. As Jones *et al.* (1994: 5) put it,

[a]t the micro level we use a variety of techniques to get our own way: persuasion, rational argument, irrational strategies, threats, entreaties, bribes, manipulation – anything we think will work.

Let us assume that there is a spectrum of social interactions that people will at one time or another, or in one frame of mind or another, think of as 'political'. At the macro extreme, there are the political institutions of the state, which in one of the views of politics alluded to above serve to resolve conflicts of interests, and which in the other view serve to assert the power of a dominant individual (a tyrant) or group (say, the capital-owning bourgeoisie, as in the traditional marxist perspective).<sup>1</sup> Such state institutions in a democracy are enshrined in constitutions, in civil and criminal legal codes, and (as in the case of Britain) in precedent practice. Associated with these state institutions, are

parties and professional politicians, with more or less stable practices; other social formations – interest groups, social movements – may play upon the same stage.

What is strikingly absent from conventional studies of politics is attention to the fact that the micro-level behaviours mentioned above are actually kinds of linguistic action – that is, discourse. Equally, the macro-level institutions are types of discourse with specific characteristics – for example, parliamentary debates, broadcast interviews. And constitutions and laws are also discourse – written discourse, or text, of a highly specific type. This omission is all the more striking as students of politics often make statements like the following:

Politics involves *reconciling differences* through discussion and persuasion. Communication is therefore central to politics.

(Hague *et al.* 1998: 3–4)

And Hague *et al.* cite Miller (1991: 390), who says that the political process typically involves persuasion and bargaining. This line of reasoning leads to the need to explain how use of language can produce the effects of authority, legitimacy, consensus, and so forth that are recognised as being intrinsic to politics. What is the role of force? What is the role of language? As Hague *et al.* (1998: 14) point out, decisions, reached (as they must be, by definition) through communication, i.e. persuasion and bargaining, become *authoritative* – a process that involves force or the threat of force. However, as they also point out, ‘politics scarcely exists if decisions are reached solely by violence but force, or its threat, is central to the execution of collective decisions’. If the verbal business of political authority is characterised by the ultimate sanction of force (fines, imprisonments, withholding of privileges and benefits, for example), it needs to be also pointed out that such force can itself only be operationalised by means of communicative acts, usually going down links in a chain of command. However politics is defined, there is a linguistic, discursive and communicative dimension, generally only partially acknowledged, if at all, by practitioners and theorists.

## **Politics and language: what’s the connection?**

### *Political animals and articulate mammals*

Embedded in the tradition of western political thought there is in fact a view that language and politics are intimately linked at a fundamental level. It is not generally pointed out that when Aristotle gives his celebrated definition of humans as creatures whose nature is to live in a *polis*, in almost the same breath he speaks of the unique human capacity for speech:

But obviously man is a political animal [*politikon zoon*], in a sense in which a bee is not, or any other gregarious animal. Nature, as we say, does nothing without some purpose; and she has endowed man alone among the animals with the power of speech.

But what does Aristotle mean by ‘speech’? Aristotle’s next sentence distinguishes ‘speech’ from ‘voice’. The latter is possessed by all animals, he says, and serves to communicate feelings of pleasure and pain. The uniquely human ‘speech’ is different. Aristotle sees it in teleological terms, or what might in some branches of today’s linguistics be called functional terms:

Speech, on the other hand, serves to indicate what is useful and what is harmful, and so also what is just and what is unjust. For the real difference between man and other animals is that humans alone have perception of good and evil, just and unjust, etc.

(*The Politics*, 1253a7, translated by T. A. Sinclair 1992)<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the ability of individuals to have a sense of the just and the unjust might logically mean that there could be as many opinions as there are individuals. Such a state of affairs would probably not correspond to what one understands as the political. Not surprisingly, therefore, Aristotle’s final point in this significant section, is that ‘[i]t is the sharing of a common view in *these* matters [i.e. what is useful and harmful, just and unjust, etc.] that makes a household and a state’.

What we can hold onto from this is the following. It is *shared* perceptions of values that defines political associations. And the human endowment for language has the function of ‘indicating’ – i.e., signifying, communicating – what is deemed, according to such shared perceptions, to be advantageous or not, by implication to the group, and what is deemed right and wrong within that group. Almost imperceptibly, Aristotle states that the just and the unjust is related to what is (deemed) useful and harmful, in the common view of the group. In addition, while Aristotle places the state above the household, we may note that the domestic and the public are defined in similar terms. This is important because it suggests that it is not only the public institutions of the state that depend on shared value perceptions and shared ‘speech’, but also other social groupings, not least what Aristotle’s society understood as the ‘household’, which included, in subordinate positions, slaves and women.

Aristotle does not pursue in detail the connection between the linguistic and political make-up of humans, but the implications have a fundamental importance. In linguistics it is now widely accepted that the human capacity for speech is genetically based, though activated in human social relations. What is controversial is how the genetic base itself evolved. Did it evolve as part of social intelligence?

This might be the Aristotelian view, for language would have evolved to perform social functions – social functions that would in fact correspond to what we understand as ‘political’. Or did it evolve by a random mutation, providing neural structures that led to the duality and generative characteristics of human language? In this view the language *instinct* would not be intrinsically bound up with the political instinct.<sup>3</sup> However, two things need to be noticed in this regard. First, this view does not entail that the social and/or political behaviour (as in Aristotle’s political animal) is not itself genetically based. And second, even if the language instinct is itself politics neutral, so to speak, one has to assume that the cultural and culturally transmitted characteristics of human language observably serve (though of course not exclusively) the needs of the political.

What is clear is that political activity does not exist without the use of language. It is true, as noted earlier, that other behaviours are involved and, in particular, physical coercion. But the doing of politics is predominantly constituted in language. Conversely, it is also arguably the case that the need for language (or for the cultural elaboration of the language instinct) arose from socialisation of humans involving the formation of coalitions, the signalling of group boundaries, and all that these developments imply, including the emergence of what is called reciprocal altruism. This is not of course to say that language arises *exclusively* out of these motives or functions.

### *Just semantics*

What about the political animals themselves, especially the expert ones? Does language matter to politicians? At the level of use of language, at the level, say, of wording and phrasing, political actors themselves are equivocal. Here are two examples.

In 1999 the UK Labour government was introducing legislation to reform the House of Lords. Interviewed on BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme, a government spokesperson, when asked about the future composition of the second chamber, said that it would be ‘properly representative’. The interviewer observed that she had not said ‘properly democratic’, to which the spokesperson replied dismissively: ‘we’re talking about semantics now’. British politicians habitually use the word *semantics* to dismiss criticism or to avoid making politically sensitive specifications. In this instance, it was of interest to know whether ‘properly representative’ meant that members of the reformed chamber would be appointed by government to represent sectors of the population or whether the members would be democratically elected by the population. In the linguistic sense of the term, the *semantics* is actually politically crucial, because ‘representative’ may mean ‘claimed or believed to be representative by the drafters of the new constitution’ and not ‘representative’ in the sense of ‘representative by popular

election'. Somehow, one aspect of the semantics of the term *semantics* in English makes it possible to take it for granted that people think seeking the clarification of meaning is a bad thing. We need not explore here what it is in popular English culture that can be invoked by politicians when it comes to the discussion of ideas. The point is that the interviewer's concern to clarify meaning had sufficient political significance for the politician to fend it off, and to do so by implicitly challenging the very validity of inquiry into the speaker's meaning.

Views may vary depending on political ideology. An example that illustrates the extremes is the following. In 1999, at a UK parliamentary Select Committee on Public Administration a Labour MP was questioning a certain Sir David Gore-Booth, a former British High Commissioner in India and ambassador to Saudi Arabia, about, among other things, his use of the phrases 'company wives' and 'one of yours' (i.e. 'one of your employees'). While ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Sir David had used this expression in a letter to the chief executive of British Aerospace, on the subject of a complaint made by an Aerospace employee against British consular staff, a complaint that had led to the employee's being asked to resign. The Parliamentary Ombudsman had enquired into and criticised various cases of undiplomatic language. At one end of the spectrum of attitudes towards language were two women Labour MPs (Helen Jones and Lynda Clarke) and the Labour chairman Rhodri Morgan, who regarded the expression 'company wives' as 'insulting' and 'incredibly disrespectful'. At the other extreme was Sir David himself, who retorted that the offending phrase was no worse than 'FO wives' ('Foreign Office wives') and was merely 'convenient shorthand'. For the Labour members, the phrasing mattered, presumably because it embodied social values which they did not share and which had manifestly contributed to the bad relations between the Foreign Office and a British company overseas. For Sir David (Eton educated, of an older generation, and probably old Conservative in outlook), the concentration on 'language' was 'bizarre'. He also observed that he was 'not a particularly politically correct person'.<sup>4</sup>

This minor example tells us several things. The different actors have different views of the significance of phrasing and wording, although the referent is constant. 'Company wives' versus, for example, 'wives of employees of the company': both have the same referent, refer to the same individuals, but the different syntax can be arguably related to different conceptualisations. For example, the noun-plus-noun construction could be said to prompt the interpretation that the wives in some sense belong to the company, or have no other independent definition. Some speakers would deny that alternative phrasing changes the meaning in any way; such speakers may or may not also deny that, for example, it matters whether wives are thought of or portrayed as company property. While some speakers are sensitive to such possibilities and integrate them with their political ideology, others do not.

In fact, Sir David's moves illustrate two commonplaces in political argumentation of a certain kind. The politician (and particular political ideology may not be relevant here), when questioned about some verbal formulation, will frequently respond with some version of the formula 'do not concentrate on words' or, as it is often put, 'this is just semantics'. A similar move involves the notion of 'political correctness'. Anyone challenging a verbal formula that can be said, when its meanings are attended to in relation to political values, to contravene certain political values, may be countered with some version of the objection 'you are just being politically correct', where 'political correctness', is expected to be taken as referring to something undesirable. Of course, since politics is partly about priorities, it may be justifiable, whatever one's political values, to claim that attention to linguistic detail in ongoing discourse is an inappropriate prioritisation. But, unless one wishes to argue that alternate referential formulations are indeed arbitrary and neutral (in which case one also has to explain why they occur at all), there may also be very good reasons to relate wording and phrasing to concepts and values. Challenging verbal formulation on such grounds is a part of doing political discourse, as is refusing to do so. Some political actors regard it as legitimate, others attempt to delegitimise it. As will be seen later in this book, legitimising and delegitimising are important functions in political discourse.

Furthermore, despite the tendency of politicians to deny tactically the significance of 'language', the importance of 'language', in the sense of differential verbal formulation, is tacitly acknowledged. Political parties and government agencies employ publicists of various kinds, whose role is not merely to control the flow of, and access to information, but also to design and monitor wordings and phrasings, and in this way to respond to challenges or potential challenges. The terms 'spin', 'put a spin on' and 'spin doctor' are terms that reflect the public belief in the existence of and significance of discourse management by hired rhetoricians. The proliferation of mass communication systems has probably simply amplified the importance of a function that is found not only in contemporary societies but in traditional societies also.

## **Language, languages and states**

If politicians, through their very denials, suggest that wording and phrasing is important at the level of micro-interaction, what about language at the macro level? Or rather *languages*, in the sense that English and Spanish are separate languages. Many people take it for granted that the political entities we call states have their own language. This is not a state of affairs that comes about naturally, so to speak; it is deeply political (Haugen 1966).

The 'standard' language of the state is the medium for activity yielding the highest economic benefits. The role of the state in providing instruction in the prestige standard can be viewed not only as the part of the construction of

nationhood and national sovereignty, but also as a part of the institution of democracy. This is so not only because the standard may provide equal potential access to economic benefits, but because the standard may be demanded (openly or tacitly, rightly or wrongly) for participation in political life. If one could not speak Greek, one would not de facto be able to participate in the deliberations of the city state. If one cannot speak French, one cannot, in the French Republic, be regarded as fully French; in the United States, the defining character of American English causes controversy about the use of Spanish. What is true of national languages is also true for literacy in modern societies. The ability to use the standard writing system is even more basic. Even with a command of the spoken standard, the range of economic opportunities open to non-literates will be highly restricted. Yet states are not linguistic monoliths.

### *What is a language?*

We have already introduced an important distinction between *a* language (say English, French or Arabic) and language, the universal genetically transmitted ability of humans to acquire any language, and often more than one. However, even this distinction can be misleading, since it gives the impression that *a* language, let us say French, for example, is a uniform system that is spoken the same way throughout a whole territory. In fact, what are conventionally referred to as 'languages' show a great deal of internal variability across geographical and social space. Not only do different regions that speak the 'same' language show greater or lesser degrees of variation in one or more levels of language structure (pronunciation, word-forms, syntax, vocabulary), but so also do different social strata and different ethnic groups.

Furthermore, if one considers the language that people speak over a geographical area, one frequently finds one speech community shading off gradually into another, without a sudden break. Such linguistic spaces are known as 'dialect continua'. In so far as it is possible to isolate distinct dialects in the linguistic flux, one can say that dialect  $d_1$  overlaps with dialect  $d_2$  which overlaps with dialect  $d_3$ . Adjacent dialects are usually mutually intelligible, although speakers often perceive differences that may be exaggerated, associated with feelings of hostility and politicised. Between certain points along the chain mutual intelligibility decreases and ceases. There are well-known examples of such linguistic continua. One example is north-western Europe, where Germanic dialects merge into one another; another case is the west Romance continuum, and a third the Slavic continuum. What is significant for present purposes is that such continua override political boundaries between the historic nation states, but interact with them in complex ways.

Linguistic closeness does not necessarily imply social or political closeness. Small differences can become hugely significant from a political point of view.



In the former Yugoslavia, for example, this was certainly the case for eastern and western varieties of Serbo-Croat used in Bosnia–Hercegovina. The varieties differ in relatively minor ways, and are certainly mutually intelligible, despite the fact that one difference is salient – the use of the Cyrillic alphabet by Orthodox Serbs in the eastern regions, and the use of the Roman alphabet in the Catholic western regions. There are other differences on the level of phonology, morphology and syntax, and to some extent the vocabulary itself differs slightly. These differences are in themselves minor, but all differences are capable of being politically indexed. The differences in the Serbo-Croat dialect continuum were seized upon and politicised by nationalist movements during the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia that began in 1991. Previously, under the structures of Tito’s communist state, there had been a pluralistic mixture and alternation of linguistic forms in educational institutions and in the media in Bosnia–Hercegovina, but different nationalist discourses emphasised eastern or western variants, or words of Turkish origin, according to their perceived ethnic or religious allegiance (Levinger 1998; Carmichael 2002). Linguistic ‘cleansing’, went along with ‘ethnic cleansing’. This example is a clear case of linguistic difference being selected in a particular political situation for particular political ends formulated by an elite, specifically to create identity through difference. It shows that the process of codifying differences that occur ‘naturally’, through social and geographical differentiation that have little to do with the politics of states, can contribute to the production of structures maintaining violence and warfare. Another such case is that of the form of Rumanian spoken in the former Soviet republic of Moldavia, now known as Moldova. From 1945 the Cyrillic writing system was administratively imposed in order to distance ‘Moldavian’ from Rumanian, and local linguistic variants were codified into the descriptions – actually, prescriptions – of the standard (Trudgill 1999: 176).

Relatively small linguistic differences can be exploited in politically different ways. Blommaert and Verschuere (1998: 135–8) contrast and compare the Belgium situation with that of the Balkans in the 1990s. The situation is similar only in so far as the close varieties of the same language are involved. In the Balkans Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina use varieties that are mutually intelligible, varying only in some pronunciations, word-forms and syntactic structures. In Belgium, there is a similar relationship between the Dutch spoken in the northern part of the country, Flanders, and the Dutch spoken in the neighbouring Netherlands. The major linguistic division of Belgium is between the Dutch-speaking north and the French-speaking south (Wallonia), while there is a bilingual enclave in the north constituted by Brussels. The significant contrast between the Belgian situation and that of the Balkans lies in the fact that in the Balkans nationalist ideologies have led to the magnification of linguistic variants and to claims that close varieties are separate ‘languages’, while in Flanders the political

argument has been the reverse – Flemish nationalists seek to emphasise the similarities between Flemish varieties and standard Dutch.

The role of language in the construction of states, though variable, is more crucial than many historians and political scientists are wont to acknowledge (but see Deutsch 1953; Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm 1990; Barbour and Carmichael 2000; Wright 1996 and 2000). There have been many periods of history when linguistic borders – and such borders, as we have noted, are generally not distinct lines – have not at all coincided with the borders of government. For Europe, one can make the generalisation that a language became criterial for ethnic and political identity only through discourse processes that occurred in the nineteenth century. That is to say, there emerged among literary elites in different countries talk and texts which promoted the notion that linguistic identity was essential to political identity. There were different forms of this kind of thinking, both supporting linguistic centralisation and the suppression of minority languages. Intellectuals of German Romanticism such as Herder and Fichte, expressed a quasi-mystical bond between language and social belonging, between the *Volk* and the *Volksprache*.

A somewhat different case is that of France, a unitary state in the making since the sixteenth century that had remained multilingual until the eve of the 1789 Revolution. It is worth recalling how a multilingual situation can become monolithic. Perhaps only 50 per cent of the population inhabiting territorial France in the eighteenth century spoke anything close to the standard of the court that had been codified by the Académie Française, although many of the non-standard French speakers spoke closely related Romance variants. The remainder spoke distinct languages: Breton, regarded as particularly threatening by the Revolutionaries because Brittany was a conservative feudalist region, and German, regarded as representing alien political entities. The language policy of the French Revolution was not inconsistent with already existing centralising linguistic tendencies, but inscribed itself as part of a democratic-revolutionary programme aimed to root out reaction and deliver equality of citizenship. The *Comité du salut public* deputed Bertrand Barrère, who supported the Terror of 1793–4, to report on the linguistic state of the nation, which he did in February 1793. The abbé Grégoire – a constitutional revolution-supporting cleric – had already been charged in 1790 to prepare a similar report based on a national questionnaire, and his report was returned in June 1794 to the National Convention. Grégoire's famous document was entitled 'On the Necessity and the Means of Annihilating the *Patois* and Universalising the Use of the French Language'.<sup>5</sup> This was not transitory revolutionary madness; the policy was effected over a long period of time and different constitutions through educational policy, curriculum planning, media control and legislation on linguistic 'correctness' that continued throughout the twentieth century.

These details give some indication of the explicit and deliberate way in which regimes can approach language policy. In the early nineteenth century we have the cultural avant-garde in German-speaking territories lending legitimacy to the notion of a monolingual nation state, arguing that there is an essential *natural* and *organic* bond between national, ethnic and linguistic identity. This is an ethno-linguistic or ethno-cultural view of nationhood (Brubaker 1999: 113–14) that subsequently united with an ethno-territorial conception and the construction of the German Reich in 1870–1. In the case of France we have a revolutionary bureaucratised ideology partly arguing in instrumental terms for national linguistic unity on the grounds of democratisation, but also partly inspired by a rationalist ideology and belief that the French language was inherently more rational *qua* symbolic system than other languages. In England the same general tendency towards linguistic unification and purism was not the less powerful for being less obviously enshrined in the organs of the state.

### *Implications for political philosophy*

The existence of a social group speaking a language different from the language of the majority, or different from the official language of the state, or in a variety of the majority or official language that is perceived as significantly deviant, gives rise to questions of minority rights in political theory. Ronald Dworkin proposed two fundamental inalienable rights of citizens: the right to be treated equally and the right of citizens to have their human dignity respected (Dworkin 1977). The right to life, liberty, property and the pursuit of happiness is not absolute in this philosophical framework. Equality and human dignity are prior, though Dworkin argues for specific liberties such as the right to free expression. All we need to note here is that the general principles (equality and human dignity) make speaking the language of one's social group at least a very good candidate to be a human right.

The debate about which minority groups have (or should be recognised as having) particular rights is complex and controversial. One problem identified by political scientists is how to circumscribe a minority group. Some groups (e.g. women, widows, mothers, senior citizens) have or can be given clear legal definitions. Cultural groups on the other hand are said to be more difficult to define. One solution is to regard all rights as essentially individual rights. Members of both sorts of groups thus have rights. But what sort of rights? The notion of 'positive rights' makes it feasible to say that individuals have rights to, for example, family allowances or pensions in the clear-cut groups. What rights might be claimed by minority cultural groups? As Birch (1993) notes, the claim is usually for special protection of language and culture. Several conundrums arise from putting the matter in this way. One of them – the argument that 'language and cultures are not right-bearing entities' (Birch 1993: 126) – can be easily

disposed of. The issue does not have to be stated in the form of a sentence such as 'languages and cultures have rights'. Languages and cultures are not entities. It can be formulated, as above, in the sentence: 'individuals have the right to speak the language of the social group with which they primarily identify', in which case the problem returns to the domain of individual rights, and arguably to the domain of the right to free expression. Two other problems are less soluble. Should the taxpayers of a polity be required to pay for the protection of a minority language? Should a minority language be protected when parents who speak it want their children to learn the majority language?

The answers to these questions require more argument. Birch, who raises them, seeks to clear the ground by distinguishing between four different types of right claimed by cultural minorities. First, the 'right to be in' confers the right of individuals belonging to groups that do not speak the majority or official language to receive instruction in that language, as a precondition for economic rights. Alternatively, it can lead to the right to speak one's language in the workplace and as part of the work process, as has happened in the case of Canada for French speakers. Such situations can lead to arguments about 'affirmative action' and 'positive discrimination'. Should French speakers be favoured as against English speakers, especially if qualifications are not equal? Such language cases are analogous to contentious cases concerning discrimination in favour of blacks claimed to have inferior qualifications.

Birch's second and third categories, the 'right to be out' and the 'right to stay out', concern the right of cultural minorities to retain cultural identity, however that is defined. A non-linguistic example is the celebrated 1989 case of the *foulards islamiques* (Islamic headscarves) in France, which brought claims to traditional dress code into conflict with principles of the secular state. The affair, which led to a wide and protracted media debate involving France's intellectual personalities, involved three Muslim schoolgirls whose wearing of traditional scarves was deemed to be an infringement of school rules and French law, in particular the constitutional principle that education is secular. If the issue of headscarves is replaced by that of languages, the problems for political theorists are even more contentious, as Birch's discussion shows. Suppose, for example, that some cultural minority wants support for the maintenance of a bilingual system. Birch argues as follows:

It is clear that bilingualism is not a natural state of affairs and that if two languages are spoken in a given area the stronger of them will normally drive out the weaker. A weaker language cannot be expected to survive over a long period unless it receives government help.

(Birch 1993: 129)

There are several misconceptions here. What does it mean to say bilingualism is 'not a natural state of affairs'? It is certainly not unnatural for the human brain:

individuals grow up as natural bilinguals in many regions of the world. To say that it is not natural for societies or polities is to beg some very serious questions of political philosophy. Nor can languages seriously be conceived as individuals, more or less ‘strong’, in a state of nature characterised by the survival of the fittest. Moreover, to say that a language cannot ‘survive’ without government help makes precisely the point that we made above in discussing the role of language in the emergence of states. The term ‘a language’ cannot be taken for granted; a language, such as French or German or Japanese, is the product of a political process in which that language is defined, codified and promoted – in short, given ‘government help’. ‘Strong’ languages are the ones that have been bound up in the state’s production of itself.

To ask whether languages have rights can easily lead to the conclusion that the political discourse of rights is simply inappropriate – that, for example, because motives and goals are diverse among individuals, it is impossible to identify a group claim to minority cultural rights to language protection. The problem arises because of the confusion of individual and group perspectives. A language is clearly a group phenomenon; but the discourse of rights is generally couched in terms of the individual. Instead of personifying languages, the question could be formulated as follows: Do individuals have the right not to have a language imposed upon them which they do not wish to speak?

This may seem to be simply a negative reformulation of ‘Do individuals have a right to speak their own language?’ In fact, however, the negative formulation avoids the pitfalls of the first formulation. It is based on the individual rather than the group. It allows for individuals who do not want to continue to speak a minority language, and for the numerical decline that may arise from such individual choices. The issue of assuming rights for collective entities does not arise; a language as such, cannot have rights, only the individuals who speak it. Although the formulation is syntactically negative, it can be seen as equivalent to other concepts in rights discourse that have to do with ‘freedom from’. This perspective also puts in question the legitimacy of the imposition of a particular language by groups and polities on their members or citizens.

### **So what next?**

We have moved rapidly from Aristotle to the modern period, from micro aspects of political intercourse to macro aspects of languages in states. At every stage we have seen that politics comes up against questions of language, and that these questions range from the choice of words to the choice of language – in other words, from fine detail of phrasing and wording to large-scale issues of national language policy. Political actors recognise the role of language because its use has effects, and because politics *is* very largely the use of language, even if the converse is not true – not every use of language is political. The point has

been to try to convince you that language is important for political life and that it is worth spending time looking more closely at language from this perspective. In this book we cannot, however, look at *all* aspects. Languages (in the plural) are implicated in politics, as we have seen. But for the rest of this book we focus on language. How do we use its complexities, fluidities and rigidities in doing what we call 'politics'? One final caveat: we are approaching these questions in English, and with a necessarily limited collection of English-language examples.

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