Rhetorical Situation and Identification in British Political Speeches: Taking Churchill and Johnson as Examples

Mengchu Zhang[1, a]

[1]School of Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, 311100, China

[a]bfzy1997@163.com

Abstract

Taking a historical view, this paper investigates the rhetorical situation and identification in British political speeches situated in different historical backgrounds. It is conducted to find out how political speeches of Churchill and Johnson are rhetorically constructed, how the identification strategies are designed and adopted in different rhetorical situations to support themselves and achieve the aim of persuading and convincing the audience. Furthermore, this paper discloses different identification strategies in their speeches as British Prime Minister, which respectively declares the stand of the British government as well as implied ideology under particular rhetorical situation and historical backgrounds. In doing so it provides some insights into further study on rhetorical discourse in political speeches and new possibilities to interpret the same genre from a historical view.

Keywords

Rhetorical situation; Identification strategies; British political speeches.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to adopt the new rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke including rhetorical situation and identification theory to analyze political speeches of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill during the Second World War and Boris Johnson on the Brexit event in 2020. As a great politician and orator, Churchill's speeches during World War II have been praised as a great inspiration for Europe's united struggle against fascism at that time. However, the current British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, who has always idolized Churchill, has been criticized for Brexit for a long time. Therefore, it is significant to explore how Churchill utilized the art of language in a specific rhetorical situation to engage and align with his audience, thus combining the persuasion and identification aims of his speeches.

The research of rhetoric could be traced back to the ancient Greeks such as Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. It was a time when eloquence and oratory figured prominently in elite politics and democratic government. The word "rhetorike" therefore means public speaking and refers to the art of oratory (Hu, 2002:2). Rooted in classical rhetoric, the new rhetoric has evolved into an interdisciplinary field since the 20th century through the incorporation of linguistics, sociology, psychology, politics, etc. The new rhetoric broadens the scope of the traditional "persuasive" function of rhetoric and places greater emphasis on the use of rhetoric to maintain interpersonal relationships and cooperative relations with the audience. In other words, while the traditional function of "persuasion" implies the subjective transmission of the speaker's ideology to the audience, the new rhetoric aims to develop interpersonal interaction and cooperation, as well as overall cultural construction (Li, 2004). Kenneth Burke, seen as a founder of the new rhetoric, argues that rhetoric is the study of how to use language as a symbolic device to induce cooperation from the audience, that is, we can persuade someone

only if we speak in the same language, use the same gestures, the same sequences and metaphors, hold the same attitudes and opinions, and share the identification (Burke, 1969, 43).

Simply put, a rhetorical analysis of political discourse can help us to understand the strategies, patterns and purposes of speech, which also helps the speaker to achieve their identification with the audience, communicate and cooperate with them, thereby providing with an effective force of language to change the situation and develop a harmonious relation in society.

Winston Churchill and Boris Johnson, who both served as British Prime Ministers, differ greatly in their style of political speeches. It seems that Boris did not acquire Churchill's superior eloquence, even though he claimed to be his idol. Comparing the two men's major speeches is conducive to the exploration of how the strategies and patterns in their rhetorical language have changed significantly, which can be seen in the subtleties of the words and is closely related to the rhetorical situation. This paper therefore takes a longitudinal comparison of their speeches in the face of emergencies from a historical perspective, exploring in a relatively micro level how they differently achieve persuasion and identification through various speech acts, thereby revealing the unique socio-historical context of rhetorical discourse, the implicit motives of the speakers and the ideological discrepancies behind the language.

The structure of this paper lies as follows: The first chapter introduces the research objects, goals and significance. The second chapter reviews the theoretical background consisting of the rhetorical situation and identification theory. The third chapter includes the specific analysis of the rhetoric strategies of Winston Churchill and the related historical background. The following chapter discusses Boris Johnson's speeches in the same vein. Chapter Five presents a discussion of the comparison between their speeches from the perspective of rhetorical situation and styles.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Rhetorical Situation

In 1968, the American rhetorician Bitzer published an article on Rhetorical Situation in the inaugural issue of Philosophy and Rhetoric, in which he systematically formulated the nature, composition and function of rhetorical situations and declared that the rhetorical discourse is dependent on the rhetorical situation, and the rhetorical act is a response to the rhetorical situation. He defined the rhetorical situation as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence (Bitzer, 1971: 386). Bitzer's definition, although questionable, has succeeded in establishing the status of rhetorical situation as an important rhetorical category. He later improved his definition of the rhetorical situation, but still distilled it into three key elements: exigence, audience and constraints. The exigence is a state of imperfection characterized by urgency, a defect and an obstacle. The audience refers to the one who could engage with the rhetorical activities and play a part in the exigence. the constraint is the person, the event, the event, the rhetoric and the rhetoric. The last element is a set of constraints consisting of persons, events, objects and relations that act on the speaker and the audience and thus bind the state of exigence. That means, these three elements are intertwined, and the rhetor performs rhetorical activities through the discourse governed by these three elements.

In conclusion, speakers perform the rhetorical activities in terms of bringing in constrains such as beliefs, ideologies, attitudes, facts, etc. to influence the audience engaged in the issue when under the state of exigence which is aimed to be resolved. By considering the specific rhetorical situation in Winston Churchill's and Boris Johnson' speeches, it helps to profoundly identify the state of exigence where persons, events or objects are combined together and it also provides

a significant way for us to retrospect the social background of the discourse and analyze the implied motives of the speaker.

2.2. Identification Strategies

In the 1960s, Kenneth Burke's rhetorical ideas increasingly attracted attention, and he himself also became a leading figure in the new rhetoric. According to Burke, "rhetoric is rooted in an essential function of language itself......the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (1969: 43). Burke thus regards language as a symbolic that conveys our attitudes in action, and rhetoric as an inseparable part in creating symbolic action. Later he proposed the theory of identification, which constitutes the key concept in his theory of rhetoric. In his view, language enables people to identify with themselves and motivates them to cooperate with other individuals. Burke also claimed that "we form selves or identities through various properties or substances, including physical objects, occupations, friends, activities, beliefs and values. Identification occurs when two entities are united in substance through common ideas, attitudes, possessions or properties." (1969:174). It is thus accordingly believed that the speaker would identify with people who share similar habits, beliefs, attitudes, values and so on. So, it can be assumed that if the speaker can align the audience with empathizing what they share with each other through rhetorical words conveying particular emotions, attitudes and values, the audience would be more likely to engage with the issue and believe what the speaker talks about. The speaker, therefore, attempts to persuade the audience in terms of speaking and acting like them as well as creating identification with them.

Burke then classified identification strategies into substantive and formal identification. The former consists of the identification of sympathy, antithesis and inaccuracy while the latter includes identification through conventional, repetitive and progressive form.

With regard to the substantive level, identification of sympathy emphasizes the shared beliefs, values and feelings among people so that the audience would identify itself with the speaker's interests. Identification of antithesis refers to the identification the speaker uses in terms of sharing an enemy they have in common. In this way, the speaker and the audience form a cohesion and union achieved by collectively acting against the same enemy. Identification of inaccuracy refers to inaccurate recognition and unconsciousness, and often manifested in the fact that the person is often unconsciously identical with the object of his or her mind (Burke, 1972). With regard to the formal level, the conventional form is a particular form to be expected during the speech which composes basic elements like salutation, prolusion, body part and conclusion, which is featured with institutional rules. The repetitive form refers to the restatement of the same thing and the progressive form focuses on the logical order in the structure of the speech.

In the following section, this paper will elaborately analyze the speeches of Winston Churchill and Boris Johnson from the perspective of substantive and formal identification strategies, in an attempt to distinguish their use of rhetorical language, and disclose what kind of identification they aim to achieve situated in diverse rhetorical situations.

3. Identification Strategies Adopted By Winston Churchill

3.1. The Historical Background

On 8 May 1940, former British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was forced to resign due to a no-confidence challenge motion, and on 10 May Hitler launched a devastating blitzkrieg against Belgium, France and the Netherlands. Afterwards, Churchill made his first appearance as Prime Minister in the House of Commons of the British Parliament, delivering his famous speech Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat. When he concluded his speech, it was met with an

enthusiastic response from the audience, and the House of Commons of Parliament eventually showed its support for Churchill's government by an overwhelming margin of 381 votes to 0. By June 1941, Hitler's Germany had taken control of 14 European countries and began to turn its attention to the Soviet Union in the East (Zha, 2011). On 22 June 1941, Germany suddenly attacked the Soviet Union. That evening, the British public listened to Churchill's radio speech The Fourth Climacteric on the radio. Although some audience approved of his decision to support the Soviet Union, some were still hesitant or even opposed. In his speech, however, Churchill tremendously inspired the British people to give their full support to the Soviet Union and to destroy the fascist Nazis by his political wisdom and linguistic charm.

3.2. The Rhetorical Situation

The exigence is a rhetorical situation in which at least one constraint plays a major role and a defect or obstacle that needs to be addressed. It could alter the audience's attitudes or behaviors to by the rhetor's words. In other words, the audience are able to feel an urgent sense and thus want to solve the problem if they understand the rhetor's use of rhetorical words creating a situation consisting of several elements like images, sounds, voice and so on. Then the rhetor will achieve the rhetorical effect of discourse.

In Churchill's first speech, Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat, the rhetorical situation is quite complex. After Churchill became Prime Minister and invited the Labour Party to join the Cabinet, on the same day that Hitler launched the Blitz, bringing great damage and shock to Europe. In the face of a newly formed Cabinet that was not yet fully mature and a very tense international situation, Churchill made this famous speech at a meeting of the House of Commons of Parliament, demonstrating the determination and governing objectives of the then newly formed Churchill government, greatly supported by The House of Commons. In addition, the audience of this speech not only includes the members of Parliament, but also the British people and anti-fascist fighters in the world, with its subsequent broadcast around the world. Churchill thus utilizes the rhetorical words which lifted the spirits of the British people and the world's anti-fascist fighters, and created an image of a Britain that would never give up the fight. In this speech, Churchill used the stark facts of the war and the values of the new government that would do whatever it took to win the war as a constraint, responding positively to the audience and engaging in a timely dialogue with them to achieve identification.

In his next speech, The Fourth Climacteric, the rhetorical situation has changed to a large degree. On 22 June 1941, Germany raided the Soviet Union without a declaration of war, in defiance of the entente and international credibility with the Soviet Union. The fact that Germany had violated the entente and international credibility by committing atrocities and brutal repression against most of Europe made audiences aware of the bloodthirsty nature of the German army and their own precarious situation. At this stage, the constraints appear to bring this exigence to the attention of the audience, who were eager for an appropriate rhetorical act and aim to address the state of emergency. Churchill prepared his speech as soon as he was informed and delivered it that evening, performing a rhetorical act that takes place at the very time when the audience was desperate for a response.

3.3. Identification Strategies

3.3.1. Identification By Sympathy

Identification by sympathy emphasizes shared emotions, shared values and shared beliefs between people. By constructing shared emotions and aspirations with the audience, the speaker creates a personal rhetorical persona and an authoritative identity that achieves identification. In the speeches Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat and The Fourth Climacteric, Churchill adopted different dimensions of sympathy strategies to establish an authoritative

image as British Prime Minister and engage the audience with shared values and beliefs. The following comes the specific analysis.

In the first speech, Churchill first reported to the House of Commons of Parliament on the progress of forming a cabinet for the new Administration, then explained the necessity and urgency of calling that meeting. After analyzing the dire situation facing the new government, Churchill looked ahead to the battles and victories and called on the nation to unite and move forward together. Churchill repeatedly emphasized unity in his speech, using such terms as "the evident wish and will of Parliament and the nation", "the broadest basis", "all parties", "the unity of the nation", "the aid of all", "go forward together", "united strength", etc. to evoke the audience's emotional resonance and identification for sympathy. Such expressions implying shared values and beliefs with the audience are intended to encourage people to unite and fight together against the enemy.

In his second speech, the rhetorical situation has changed dramatically, and so has Churchill's stance on the speech. Faced with ideological discrepancies, Churchill's anti-communist stance was an inevitable topic before he delivered his speech in solidarity with Russia. Therefore, it is well worth studying how Churchill used rhetorical discourse to persuade domestic anti-communist forces and all countries and peoples that might be united in the same way to build a large united anti-fascist front. In his speech, Churchill made many impassioning parallelism constructions of "I see", describing to the audience the ongoing duel between fascists and anti-fascists in Russia, such as "I see the Russian soldiers standing on the threshold of their native land, guarding the fields which their fathers have tilled from time immemorial", "I see them guarding their homes where mothers and wives pray", "I see the ten thousand villages of Russia, where the means of existence was wrung so hardly from the soil...", "I see the German bombers and fighters in the sky, still smarting from many a British whipping, delayed to find what they believe is an easier and a safer pray". These parallelism lines vividly represent the calm, peaceful and happy life of the Russian people before German's invasion, and the barbaric and cruel crimes of German fascism. Churchill deliberately chose appropriate words to adapt to the rhetorical situation in order to create the same attitudes and values as his audience, and to evoke the compassionate and sympathetic emotion to the Soviet Union. At the same time, it helps to solidate an image of a man who defends peace and justice and seeks to unite the forces of Europe. Churchill used this speech to announce Britain's determination to align with Russia despite the ideological discrepancy for the time being and to support Russia of fighting together to destroy fascism, calling on all countries to learn from the lessons of the past and to unite their forces against the enemy.

3.3.2. Identification by Antitheses

Identification by antitheses can be achieved if a common enemy is threatening, which helps to establish a strong sense of cohesiveness between the speaker and audience. In Churchill's speeches, he frequently portrayed the then common enemy, that is, the German fascist and the Nazi regime, with Russia and with the whole world as cold and cruel executioners in order to create a negative image of the common enemy with the audience, identifying with the audience by antitheses.

For instance, in the speech Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat, Churchill adopted particular expressions like "the extreme urgency" "an ordeal of the most grievous kind" to restate the current dire situation, as well as some phrases with strong emotions to evoke the audience into a sense of solidarity and determination to fight to the end. At the same time, he also repeatedly uses parallelism structure to show and emphasize the dire situation facing the new administration, as well as using counter-evidence to point out the serious consequences if they were defeated, thus expressing Britain's determination to fight and win.

In the second speech, Churchill applied more subtle rhetorical devices to represent this common enemy. In describing the German soldiers as "plodding on like swarm of crawling locusts", Churchill uses the rhetorical device of simile to give a figurative dimension to the language, not only illustrating the destructive nature of the Nazi regime, but also comparing the German army to crawling locusts, leading the audience to subconsciously transfer the emotion from the disgust and hatred of the vermin to the enemy. In addition, Churchill demonstrates his great mastery of the English language, such as the use of the alliteration like "any Russian fighting for his heart and home" "the dull, drilled, docile, brutish masses of the Hun soldiery", which not only adds to the rhythmic beauty of the speech, but also vividly portrays the severe crimes of the German Nazi soldiers, thus arousing the audience's hatred of the common enemy.

3.3.3. Identification by Inaccuracy

When identification is achieved with unconsciousness, then inaccurate cognition is arisen. The speaker thus creates the truth in a specific rhetorical situation. When Churchill delivered the speech via the BBC, he considered that the audience included not only the British public and members of the Commonwealth, but also all the anti-fascist countries of the world. So he aimed to unite all the forces that could be united to form a powerful anti-fascist front in terms of utilizing inaccuracy strategies in the cognitive level (Scott, 1967).

The first-person plural is the most widely used form of inaccuracy that in political speeches and is the most effective weapon to strengthen the emotional identification of the speaker with the audience and to gain the support of the public (Han, 2019). For instance, in the first speech, Churchill said, "You ask, what is our policy? I will say: it is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpasses in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime." Moreover, in the second speech he said, "We shall fight him by land, we shall fight him by sea, we shall fight him in the air. That is our policy and that is our declaration." In the end of the speech, Churchill repeated the form "let us" twice, "Let us learn the lessons already taught by such cruel experience. Let us redouble our exertions, and strike with united strength while life and power remain." Here he mentioned the first-person plural "we", "us", "our" several times, though what they refer to is vague. But these vague indications implicitly cover all the all the countries and peoples who might have formed a united front with Britain and the Soviet Union against the Fascists. Churchill skillfully used this strategy to rally these audiences against the enemy and thus achieve his goal of persuasion.

4. Identification Strategies Adopted by Boris Johnson

In this section, two speeches of Boris Johnson are also presented. The first one is his inaugural speech in July 2019 and another is about Brexit in February 2020. In his inauguration speech he said he wanted a new Brexit deal but also called for people to be prepared for a no-deal Brexit. He promised to complete Brexit in the next 99 days and hoped for a better partnership with the EU. However, in 2020, the UK did complete the controversial and big event of Brexit.

4.1. The Historical Background

Johnson regarded Winston Churchill as a true idol. Some say that the brash and brutal mannerisms Johnson often displayed were in fact a deliberate imitation of Churchill. Johnson once wrote a biography of his idol The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History. Johnson also said that Churchill bet his entire fortune on anti-Nazism and his bet was a brilliant success. Now Johnson has also staked his fortune on what might be called as "Euroscepticism". For the time being, this seems to put him on the right side of history. Those opposing sides have sought to evoke and exploit the heroic memories of Churchill in the British public. Boris Johnson, the flagbearer of the Brexit campaign at the time of the referendum, claimed that the Churchill

would undoubtedly be on his side and that he would certainly campaign for them to leave the European Union. However, David Cameron, the Remainer Prime Minister at the time, reminded voters that Churchill must have been a Remainer because of his passionate advocacy of Western European unity after the Second World War.

4.2.   The Rhetorical Situation

The exigence in Johnson's two speeches could be Brexit. As people witnessed the dismal state of Britain's dysfunctional politics, its severely torn society and inevitable economic decline, affected by the world economy and COVID-19, there was a strong desire for a strong leader among citizens. At this moment, Churchill's magnificent figure reappears in all its glamorous glory. Boris Johnson, for his part, was keen to respond to this sentiment by presenting himself as the man who, like Churchill, could bring Britain back to the center of the world. However, in the long run, Johnson is unlikely to become another Churchill, for Churchill led Britain to a glorious victory over fascism, while Johnson will only pay a very high price from the Brexit. So the exigence here plays a major role that calls for being addressed for the audience, those voters, whose attitudes and beliefs could be altered if they understand the rhetor's use of rhetorical words. So next section is going to analyze how Boris Johnson tried to imitate Churchill as well as his language skills in rhetoric.

4.3.   Identification Strategies Adopted By Boris Johnson

4.3.1. Identification By Sympathy

Identification by sympathy emphasizes the shared emotions between people, in Johnson's speeches, it refers to the shared identity between speaker and audience based on the issue of Brexit. However, the issue of whether to leave the European Union has also been a matter of debate within the British Parliament for a long time. Therefore, it is not easy for Boris Johnson to choose the rhetorical discourse appropriately to achieve understanding and acceptance by the audience.

In contrast to Churchill's rhetorical persona, which was adept at demonstrating and portraying the authority and charisma of his status as Prime Minister of British, Johnson seemed to place more emphasis in his inaugural speech on his own responsibilities and the political achievements he would bring to Britain once in power.

For instance, he said, "And I will tell you something else about my job. It is to be Prime Minister of the whole United Kingdom and that means uniting our country answering at last the plea of the forgotten people and the left-behind towns by physically and literally renewing the ties that bind us together..."; "...in the end Brexit was a fundamental decision by the British people that they wanted their laws made by people that they can elect and they can remove from office..."; "The time has come to act, to take decisions to give strong leadership and to change this country for the better and though the Queen has just honored me with this extraordinary office of state my job is to serve you...". In addition, he later claimed, "That is a judgment that you, the people, have now confirmed at the polls. Not once but twice.", which proves that it is the people's choice to leave the European Union so it is the right, healthy and democratic thing to do so. In this way Johnson identify with the audience sharing common values and beliefs in terms of engaging them into the exigence.

4.3.2. Identification by Antitheses

Identification by antitheses refers to the division against the opposite side and then achieve identification. In his speech, Johnson attempted to inform his audience of the dangers against Brexit so as to resonate with them and achieve unity. For instance, in his inaugural speech he said, "this country has become a prisoner to the old arguments of 2016 and that in this home of democracy we are incapable of honouring a basic democratic mandate", which implied that the

previous governments were in a tangle of the issue of Brexit and didn't get result in the end and expressed his determination to changing the record.

4.3.3. Identification by Inaccuracy

Sometimes, speakers will use positive words to express praise and commendation in order to make the audience unconsciously identify with the feeling and evoke the illusion that they seem to be as described, thus achieving identification by inaccuracy (Ju, 2012). In the first speech of Johnson, he said "…to recover our natural and historic role as an enterprising, outward-looking and truly global Britain, generous in temper and engaged with the world". Some positive words like "natural", "historic", "enterprising", "outward-looking" and "global" all describe a great image of British, which make the audience unconsciously mistake themselves for members of a great nation and thus make them support the resolutions of the new Boris government. In addition, he also claimed in his speech on Brexit that for many people that is an "astonishing moment of hope, a moment they thought would never come" and "the dawn of a new era". It seems that Johnson aimed to persuade the audience and those voters that Brexit would bring a bright future for British with these positive words.

5. Discussion

At different periods in history, confronted with a state of exigence that was equally likely to divide the nation and even Europe as a whole, the two British prime ministers employed sharply different rhetorical discourses and linguistic techniques to persuade their audiences and try to identify with them.

In terms of rhetorical situations, Churchill was a tough fighter who never gave up, but he was facing brutal fascist militarism at that time. Today, Europe doesn't lie in the same exigence that Johnson liked to compare it to back then, and what may be needed between Britain and Europe is friendly and mutually beneficial negotiation rather than a fight. In terms of identification strategies, Churchill's wartime speeches comprehensively combine identification strategies of sympathy, antitheses and inaccuracy to mobilize audiences to learn the lessons of the past and the whole of Europe to unite against the fascist all the time. This reflects extraordinary rhetorical skills and oratorical charisma of Churchill, in addition to his extensive use of conventional forms like parallelism, repetition, metaphor and simile that are conducive to inspiring the audience and bringing them closer to him, while allowing them to engage into the speech so as to achieve the rhetorical effect of identification. In contrast, Johnson's language is pretty plain and simple, and does not make full use of the linguistic skills like his idol Churchill. He was always criticized by other British parliamentarians for his vulgarity, his lies and his lack of honour in speeches, and was accused of being particularly good at creating divisions rather than bridging them and seeking consensus among politicians. So, to idolize Churchill, and even to write a biography of him, is a sign that Boris Johnson was keen to present himself as the man who could bring Britain back to the center of the world again. However, it is also clear from just the four speeches excerpted in this article that the British Prime Minister is now far less capable than he once was, with language becoming increasingly concise and brief, and with no rhythmic beauty or sense of rhythm in his speeches.

In conclusion, taking a comparative and historical view, this paper investigates the rhetorical situation and identification strategies in British political speeches situated in different historical backgrounds. Taking Winston Churchill and Boris Johnson as examples and identification theory of Burke as theoretical background, this paper helps to reveal how political speeches of them are rhetorically constructed, how the identification strategies are designed and adopted in different rhetorical situations to support themselves and achieve the aim of persuading and convincing the audience. Furthermore, this paper discloses different identification strategies in their speeches as British Prime Minister, and proves that although

Boris Johnson was keen to present himself as Churchill who could bring Britain back to the center of the world again, his language skills and rhetorical devices are far less elaborate as Churchill's. However, this paper also has some limitations. It doesn't collect as many speeches of British Prime Minister as possible which might make the findings more convincing. Also, as it is hard to collect the video materials of their speeches, this paper only focuses on the text while neglecting non-verbal elements that might also play an important role in the speech.

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