

# THE LIVING ROOM CANDIDATE

## PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN COMMERCIALS 1952–2008 ★★☆☆

### Lesson One

### UNDERSTANDING THE LANGUAGE OF POLITICAL ADS

#### Objective

Students will understand the nature and uses of language in presidential ads, and become aware of the ways in which this language can be used to influence viewer opinion.

#### Overview

*“One ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end.”*

– George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” 1946

A television commercial has an average of thirty seconds to make an impact. Although television is primarily a visual medium, the choice of language in political advertisements also plays a crucial role in conveying a message. Because of the need to capture and hold the viewer’s interest and attention within a short time frame, advertising has become almost a literary genre, using specialized language and language structures. These structures often depart from standard forms. The language of political advertising combines advertising’s verbal techniques, as well as appeals to a viewer’s senses and emotions, with a strong political message.

Just as students can analyze the choices made regarding images in a political ad, so, too, can they dissect the ad’s language. Who is speaking in the ad—the candidate or a narrator? If it is a narrator, what is the tone of the narrator’s voice? The gender? (It is worth noting that most presidential ads are narrated by men.) Is there text on the screen? What words are used to describe the candidate, her vision and achievements? What words are used to criticize or attack her opponent? Is the language specific or vague? All of these are points to consider in determining the overall effect of the ad. In this lesson, the class studies the scripts of several commercials in order to analyze the uses, styles, and effects of language in political ads. Four terms are presented to describe recurring verbal techniques in these ads.

#### Preliminary Discussion

Write the following words on the board:

REPETITION, SYNTAX, POSITIVE WORDS, NEGATIVE WORDS

#### Procedures

Ask students if they are familiar with any of the concepts on the board. List their answers and

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guesses. Explain that they will now learn about ways in which these concepts are utilized in political advertising.

#### REPETITION

One way to drive a message home is repetition. In all forms of advertising that use jingles or slogans, repetition is intended to keep a word or phrase in the minds of the viewers. The more times viewers hear a name, word, or phrase, the more likely they are to remember it.

Distribute copies of this script for a commercial from Ronald Reagan's 1984 re-election campaign:

#### ANNOUNCER

Here's the difference between the two ways of dealing with the nation's economy.

With Reaganomics, you cut taxes. With Mondale-nomics, you raise taxes.

Reaganomics: You cut deficits through growth and less government. Mondale-nomics: You raise taxes.

With Reaganomics, you create incentives that move us all forward. With Mondale-nomics, you raise taxes.

They both work. The difference is Reaganomics works for you. Mondale-nomics works against you.

Questions for writing and discussion:

1. Notice the words and phrases that were repeated. How would you describe the pattern of this repetition?
2. What other words or ideas are associated with "Reaganomics" and "Mondale-nomics"?
3. What effect does this have on the ad's message?

#### SYNTAX: SHORT, INCOMPLETE SENTENCE LENGTH OR LONG, LYRICAL SENTENCE LENGTH

The syntax, or grammatical structure of words, used in political ads can achieve different purposes when used in different ways. Some ads, particularly older ones, favor complex, lengthy, complete sentences. This method requires more thought and attention on the part of the viewer, but often presents a more complete picture of the candidate. Others utilize fragments or phrases, which are easily accessible to the viewer, but may not fully explain the candidate's position.

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Distribute copies of the transcript of “Accomplishment” (Bill Clinton, 1996):

### ANNOUNCER

Ten million new jobs. Family income up \$1600. President Clinton cut the deficit 60 percent. Signed welfare reform—requiring work, time limits. Taxes cut for 15 million families. Balancing the budget. America’s moving forward with an economic plan that works. Bob Dole: \$900 billion in higher taxes. Republicans call him a tax collector for the welfare state. His risky tax scheme would raise taxes on 9 million families. Bob Dole. Wrong in the past. Wrong for our future.

Questions for writing and discussion:

1. Describe the effect of the short sentences used in this commercial.
2. What is the overall message of the ad? Is the choice of language an effective way to convey this meaning? Why or why not?

This can be paired with John F. Kennedy’s 1960 “Religion” ad, a much longer spot. Explain first that Kennedy was the first Catholic president.

### WOMAN

You would be divided between two loyalties, between your church and your state, if you were to be elected president?

### JFK

The question is whether I think that if I were elected president, I would be divided between two loyalties, my church and my state. Let me just say that I would not. I have sworn to uphold the Constitution, in the fourteen years I have been in Congress, in the years I was in the service. The Constitution provides in the First Amendment that Congress shall make no laws abridging the freedom of religion. I must say I believe in it; I think it’s the only way that this country can go ahead. Many countries do not believe in it; many countries have unity between church and state. I would be completely opposed to it. And I say that whether I’m elected president, or whether I continue as a Senator, or whether I’m a citizen. That is my view based on long experience. So in answer to your question, I would fulfill my oath of office, as I have done for fourteen years in the Congress. There is no article of my faith that would in any way inhibit—I think it encourages—the meeting of my oath in office. And whether you vote for me or not because of my competence to be president, I am sure that no one believes that I’d be a candidate for the presidency if I didn’t think I could meet my oath of office. Secondly, Article Six of the Constitution says there shall be no religious test for office. That’s what was written in

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the Constitution: Jefferson, Washington, all the rest. They said that every American will have an opportunity. Now you cannot tell me that the day I was born it was said I could never run for president because I wouldn't meet my oath of office. I would not have come here if I didn't feel that I was going to get complete opportunity to run for office as a fellow American in this state. I would not run for it if in any way I didn't feel I could do the job. I come here today saying that I think this is an issue. . .  
[crowd cheering and clapping]

Questions for writing and discussion:

1. What is the main idea that Kennedy is trying to express? What support does he give for his answer?
2. Kennedy gives a long, detailed answer to a short question. Why do you think this is so? Would the ad's message have been more or less effective if he had just given a brief answer? Explain.
3. Compare the Clinton ad to the Kennedy ad. Which is more effective in its use of language to put forth a message? Why?

### POSITIVE WORDS AND NEGATIVE WORDS

The use of “loaded” language—words with strong positive or negative emotional associations—is a long-standing tradition in political advertising. Even in the earliest commercials, Dwight D. Eisenhower referred to a nation that was “sinking deeper into a bottomless sea of debt” and characterized Democrats as unable to “keep their confused heads above water.” This negative language was used to cast doubt on his opponent, Adlai Stevenson. At the same time, Eisenhower extended the metaphor favorably for himself by touting the “sturdy lifeboat” that the Republicans would build.

In 1990, the use of controversial language was redefined within the political arena. At the time, Newt Gingrich was the House of Representatives Republican whip and general chairman of GOPAC, a committee for the training of Republican candidates. As the midterm congressional campaign got under way, GOPAC issued “Language: A Key Mechanism of Control.” The guide consisted of two lists (see the Appendix at the end of the lesson), both of which grew out of focus group research. “Optimistic Positive Governing Words” such as “opportunity,” “challenge,” and “commitment” would help Republicans define their own vision. “Contrasting Words,” or negative words, such as “crisis,” “threaten,” or “liberal,” would help them define the opposition.

Democrats attacked the guide as cynical and demeaning, but embraced its central idea—that language serves as a mechanism for shaping the way that people think about politics. As Josh

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Chafetz of Yale University has noted, they even included the document in an information packet distributed to Democratic senators and staff in 1995. Chafetz further points out that the words themselves—rearranged into somewhat meaningless phrases—have been used with equal skill by both Democrats and Republicans. The use of positive and negative words is more than a technique of partisan attack. It is an important strategy used by candidates and advisers of both parties to sway voter opinion.

Distribute copies of this script for a commercial from Bill Clinton's 1996 re-election campaign:

BILL CLINTON [IN VOICEOVER]

Let me say to you that I am honored to have been given the opportunity to stand up for the values and interests of ordinary Americans. My job as president is to take care of the American people. And I have done my best to take care of this country. We are safer. We are more secure. We are more prosperous. But in the end, what we stand for, the values we embrace, and the things we fight for will shape the future that we will all live with. If we hold out our hands in cooperation, but always stand up for what we know is right, this country's future will be even brighter than its brilliant past. It is our responsibility to make that happen.

Questions for writing and discussion:

1. What positive words are used?
2. How do these words contribute to the overall purpose and message of the ad?

Then distribute copies of this script for "Peace," from Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign:

[images of crying, distressed, Vietnamese children]

MALE ANNOUNCER

Very slowly, one step at a time, the hope for world peace erodes. Slowly, we once slid into Korea—slowly, into Vietnam. And now, the Persian Gulf beckons.

[zoom in on portrait of Jimmy Carter]

ANNOUNCER

Jimmy Carter's weak, indecisive leadership has vacillated before events in Angola, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan. Jimmy Carter still doesn't know that it takes strong leadership to keep the peace. Weak leadership will lose it.

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[Footage of the Republican National Convention. Supertext: July 17, 1980.]

RONALD REAGAN [IN FOOTAGE]

Of all the objectives we seek, first and foremost is the establishment of lasting world peace. We know only too well that war comes not when the forces of freedom are strong. It is when they are weak that tyrants are tempted. Four times in my lifetime, America has gone to war. . .[fades out]

ANNOUNCER

The message Ronald Reagan has carried to America is one of strength.

REAGAN

[Addressing camera. Supertext: October 19, 1980.]

Peace is made by the fact of strength—economic, military, and strategic. Peace is lost when such strength disappears, or, just as bad, is seen by an adversary as already disappearing.

[images of Reagan giving public addresses]

ANNOUNCER

The message Ronald Reagan has carried to America is one of restraint.

REAGAN [IN VOICEOVER]

I have repeatedly said in this campaign that I will sit down with the Soviet Union for as long as it takes to negotiate a balanced and equitable arms limitation agreement, designed to improve the prospects for peace.

[Reagan walking through throngs of military personnel]

ANNOUNCER

The message Ronald Reagan has carried to America is one of confidence.

REAGAN

Whatever else history may say about my candidacy, I hope it will be recorded that I appealed to our best hopes, not our worst fears; to our confidence, rather than our doubts; to the facts, not to fantasies. And these three—hope, confidence, and facts—are at the heart of my vision of peace.

[images of the Statue of Liberty]

ANNOUNCER

Strength, restraint, inspired leadership. The time is now: Reagan for president.

[Title: Reagan & Bush. Accompanied by portraits of each.]

## **Lesson One**

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Answer the following questions:

1. What negative words are used? What positive words?
2. Describe the placement of the words in the ad. What effect does this have?
3. How do these words contribute to the overall purpose of the ad?

## **Assessment**

Students should have gained an understanding that language, especially in political campaigns, can be manipulated to serve very different purposes. The candidate's intent determines his choice of words. Students may be encouraged to apply this lesson to all aspects of everyday life (advertising, television news, common speech).

## **Extension Activities/Homework**

1. Imagine that you are running for president. Write a script for a thirty-second campaign commercial to get your views out to the public. Use at least two of the features of language discussed in class.
2. Choose one ad from 1960 and one ad from 2008. Watch the ads and then read the transcripts. Compare and contrast the use of language (both spoken and written) in the ads from different eras. What similarities do you notice? What differences?

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## Lesson One: Appendix

The following is taken from Newt Gingrich's "Language: A Key Mechanism of Control" (1990)

### *OPTIMISTIC POSITIVE GOVERNING WORDS*

*Use the list below to help define your campaign and your vision of public service. These words can help give extra power to your message. In addition, these words help develop the positive side of the contrast you should create with your opponent, giving your community something to vote for!*

- active(ly)
- activist
- building
- candid(ly)
- care(ing)
- challenge(s)
- change
- children
- choice/choose
- citizen
- commitment
- common sense
- compete
- confident
- conflict
- control
- courage
- crusade
- debate
- dream
- duty
- eliminate good-time  
in prison
- empower(ment)
- fair
- family
- freedom
- hard work
- help
- humane
- incentive
- initiative
- lead
- learn
- legacy
- liberty
- light
- listen
- mobilize
- moral
- movement
- opportunity
- passionate
- peace
- pioneer
- precious
- premise
- preserve
- principle(d)
- pristine
- pro [issue]: flag,  
children, environment,  
reform
- prosperity
- protect
- proud/pride
- provide
- reform
- rights
- share
- strength
- success
- tough
- truth
- unique
- vision
- we / us / our



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## Lesson One: Appendix (continued)

### CONTRASTING WORDS

*Often we search hard for words to define our opponents. Sometimes we are hesitant to use contrast. Remember that creating a difference helps you. These are powerful words that can create a clear and easily understood contrast. Apply these to the opponent, their record, proposals and their party.*

- |   |                       |                    |
|---|-----------------------|--------------------|
| • abuse of power                          | • disgrace            | • punish (poor...) |
| • anti (issue): flag, family, child, jobs | • endanger            | • radical          |
| • betray                                  | • excuses             | • red tape         |
| • bizarre                                 | • failure (fail)      | • self-serving     |
| • bosses                                  | • greed               | • selfish          |
| • bureaucracy                             | • hypocrisy           | • sensationalists  |
| • cheat                                   | • ideological         | • shallow          |
| • coercion                                | • impose              | • shame            |
| • collapse(ing)                           | • incompetent         | • sick             |
| • “compassion” is not enough              | • insecure            | • spend(ing)       |
| • consequences                            | • insensitive         | • stagnation       |
| • corrupt                                 | • intolerant          | • status quo       |
| • corruption                              | • liberal             | • steal            |
| • criminal rights                         | • lie                 | • taxes            |
| • crisis                                  | • limit(s)            | • they/them        |
| • cynicism                                | • machine             | • threaten         |
| • decay                                   | • mandate(s)          | • traitors         |
| • deeper                                  | • obsolete            | • unionized        |
| • destroy                                 | • pathetic            | • urgent(cy)       |
| • destructive                             | • patronage           | • waste            |
| • devour                                  | • permissive attitude | • welfare          |
|   | • pessimistic         |                    |

### Curriculum Standards Addressed

New York City English Language Arts: E1c, E3d, E4a

New York State Social Studies: 5

### To View

“Country I Love” (2008, Democratic)

“Celeb” (2008, Republican)