PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL MODELS IN PERSUASIVE LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Jerzy Świątek Social and psychological models in persuasive language
The paper focuses on the issue of mental models as pre-existing mental structures that are activated through persuasive language and which are the real locus of persuasive processes. Even if it is a platitude that language itself has no persuasive power on its own, it is important to emphasise the complexity of various cognitive structures that are the real triggering mechanism allowing language persuasive potential to be realised.

Mentioning briefly psychological mechanisms of persuasion (as more prominent in the relevant literature) the author shows one social model in particular that seems to be of primary importance in persuasive discourse. The so-called Relational Model postulates universal decision-taking mechanisms, which means that it is the social model that constitutes the starting point for any analysis of possible persuasive potential of language.

Far from presenting any coherent approach, the paper essentially aims at emphasising the approach to persuasion that starts from a necessary cognitive model (actually pointing out the multiplicity and complexity of such models) through which "persuasive language" may be analysed and understood, rather than analysing language first, and then anchoring language used within some relevant context.

INTRODUCTION

When I read a fascinating book by R.B. Laughlin I came across the following anecdote:

> My argument was that reliable cause-and-effect relationships in the natural world have something to tell us about ourselves, in that they owe this reliability to principles of organization rather than microscopic rules. The laws of nature that we care about, in other words, emerge through collective self-organization and really do not require knowledge of their component parts to be comprehended and exploited. After listening carefully, my father-in-law declared that he did not understand. He had always thought laws cause organization, not the other way around. He was not even sure the reverse made sense. I then asked him whether legislatures and corporate boards made laws or were made by laws, and he immediately saw the problem. He pondered it for a while, and then confessed that he was now deeply confused about why things happen and needed to think more about it. Exactly so (xi).

Laughlin, a prominent physicist, comments here on two conflicting perspectives that are inherent in research and interpretation patterns in sciences. One stance, arising from ages-old human longing for order and understanding, sees universal natural laws as unchanging and humans as constantly struggling to reveal the patterns of nature by postulating simple universal and preferably nice formulas. The other stance, less conservative, sees the universe not as an autonomous entity but as a construct of the human mind, which constantly mediates between the outside world and what we can actually say about nature.

From the first perspective, laws of nature are seen as transcendent and any new discovery is a triumph of mankind over nature that moves us forward and closer to a position from which we will be able to see through the great scheme of things. The second perspective is more

human-tailored, and here each new discovery reveals more not so much about the world as about ourselves. It testifies to the emancipation of the human mind rather than to anything else.

Social laws are naturally different because they represent an attempt to describe culture, not nature. And yet, the same yearning for universal laws that transcend individual and cultural experience and its diversity has been equally prominent in the humanities. In linguistics, this type of yearning has given rise to the research concerned with universal grammar, innateness hypothesis, basic colour terms, universal word classes, or sound symbolism, to name just a few areas of research. That approach cannot be overestimated, but it is clear at the same time that what is universal is not really a mystic feature of language pointing to some sort of universal proto-language but a kind of language manifestation that stems from extra-linguistic prerequisites for language itself or else universal communicative needs. The fact that vowels and consonants are universal points to nothing else but the fact that we have come to use "the speech organ" as it is and this kind of organ is able to produce the sounds the way it does and it cannot be otherwise. The fact that (almost all) languages use the category of noun and verb points to nothing else but the basic communicative need to focus others' attention on objects and processes.

The research on persuasive functions of language has been subject to the same patterns of thinking. The birth of classical rhetoric was based on the assumption that particular language forms are inherently persuasive and that assumption, carried to the extreme, resulted in a mere formal exercise in hair-splitting and labelling game in categorising and a more and more nuanced taxonomy of language units with allegedly persuasive potential, which ultimately brought about a decline of classical rhetoric. It was as late as the middle of the 20th century that the other perspective prevailed. With *New Rhetoric* and a *Rhetoric of Motives* a new way of thinking about how persuasion actually works was introduced.

The central ideas that underlie both Ch. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca's (1969) *New Rhetoric* and Kenneth Burke's *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1969) seem to have a lot in common. In their monumental *New Rhetoric* the two Belgian researchers try to present rhetoric as a theory of persuasion that relies on several basic principles. And despite their apparent simplicity, particular principles teach us first of all that persuasive communication is rational if it recognises the fact that human cognition is the actual locus where consent is arrived at. Any communication may have a rhetorical value only if it is used by a persuader as a means of identification with a particular audience in a particular context. The basic concept they use is that of *presence.* It applies to presentation and selection of the content of persuasive messages in such a way that it takes into account cognitions of the addressee. In particular, it means that linguistic coding should make certain elements present in the cognitive structures of the addressee. Similarly, Burke, although his *Rhetoric of Motives* is as much a treatise on rhetoric as a treatise on complex sociological processes in the then nascent era of mass communication, defines briefly *identification as* "any of the wide variety of means by which an author may establish a shared sense of values, attitudes, and interests with his readers"

Incidentally, the 1960s was also the time when a new paradigm of thinking about persuasive behaviour found its way to psychology. In direct opposition to the Aristotelian, adversarial model, which basically seeks to refute other views and establish one's own view as the only one, C. R. Rogers introduces "Rogerian" model based on the assumption of plural truths, mutual recognition of differing positions and aiming at generating the maximum consent rather than defeating the other party.

In what follows an attempt is made to focus on psychological and social models that are a necessary prerequisite for understanding the persuasive language used in concrete situations. In doing so, I want to emphasise the role of mental models in understanding and explicating persuasive behaviour, a role that – it seems so – has been downplayed at the cost of either linguistic/pragmatic or psychological approaches to persuasion.

THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL/SOCIAL MODELS

Although it is a platitude that language in itself is not persuasive, it is obvious at the same time that some language choices may be said to have some persuasive potential. This potential

may be revealed by purely statistical research that can show preferences for language choices (lexis, structure, pragmatics, information distribution, etc.) in successful persuasive exchanges or messages. And it is equally obvious that this kind of statistical analysis is just half the work done since it does not go to the core of the issue. It does not show what motivates people involved in persuasive practices to opt for such choices, neither does it show why those on the receiving end succumb (even if not always) to such attempts.

In practical terms, it simply means that language used for persuasive purposes is essentially informed by underlying social (or psychological) models that prompt us into choosing a word, a sentence pattern, a strategy, a sequence of speech acts, and so on. From this perspective the analysis of persuasive language is the analysis of linguistic (and other symbolic patterns) that are a manifestation of underlying psychological and social mechanisms that are brought to bear in order to elicit a preferred verbal or behavioural response or else a preferred attitudinal change.

Psychology and sociology are here two complementary approaches for obvious reasons. Naturally, persuasion is immediately associated with various verbal practices for the simple reason that language is the most elaborate system at our disposal to be used in order to regulate social life, and yet persuasion is effected, if it is effected at all, in human minds, in the minds of people who live and interact in society. In the process, language itself is but the tip of an iceberg that may effectively distort the picture, for what remains below the surface is less salient than verbal practices that are brought to bear on the addressee. No wonder, then, that understanding the effectiveness of particular language choices calls for a solid examination of – to put it simply – what is actually done when such choices are made, or – in other words – of which psychological and sociological mechanisms are called into play.

A natural corollary to such an initial statement is that language, as a tool through which persuasion works, must be investigated only in reference to the totality of cognitive and affect content and structure in the addressee's mind that is presupposed by the proponent of a persuasive message. Language obviously is not persuasive in itself. Language has a potential to be persuasive if it is used skillfully to trigger off a desired change in the addressee's mind. To put it differently, human actions and mental changes are the result of some form of external stimulus, language being one such form, if and only if the stimulus strikes the right cord and works in tune with the *pre*existing internal mediating systems that are of paramount importance in the persuasive process.

Those internal systems are repositories of the totality of experience and knowledge that has been accumulated throughout the life of an individual (actually, it seems to be the result of both ontogenetic and phylogenetic development – if this biological metaphor may be used in reference to social evolution). In face of their enormous scope and complexity any external stimulus is but a mere drop that falls down to an ocean and any chances of its being effective not only in producing a persuasive effect but even in being communicative at all rely not so much on introducing any real changes *in* the system as on its being well *adapted to* the system. And it is exactly in this sense that persuasion seems to fall in the province of psychology, sociology, (even ethnology, or theory of action) rather than linguistics or communication study. Meaningful investigation of persuasive language is first of all the investigation of how language *in* use is adapted to those *pre*existing cognitive systems.

The above could be expressed in yet another way. Since language is *just one possible means* through which persuasion could be effected a broader perspective is necessary, a perspective from which one can look at the phenomenon as a form of action that is driven by socially shared mechanisms that bring about psychological changes. We are collectively involved in the process, but the process is meant to effect changes in individual minds. Bara has probably this in mind when he writes:

> In order to take a unitary approach, we must start from a high level of generalization, at which the modes of expression are not the dominant spheres of discourse. In other words, we must start from a level at which the differences between linguistic and extralinguistic acts (both of which must be intentionally communicative) are of little or no importance. This

will enable us to focus on those features that are common to all acts of communication, and leave the analysis of the specific modes in which a given interaction may be realized to later chapters. (Bara 2010:1)

PSYCHOLOGICAL MODELS

Psychological perspective should probably come in first, persuasion being a change in an individual's mental structure. Persuasive communication may properly be called so if and only if "the perlocutionary act" is an act of free will, a change in attitude or a willingness to undertake a course of action that is not the result of coercion but an autonomous decision resulting from a persuasive attempt. To put it simply, the analysis of persuasive language should focus on how language activates universal psychological mechanisms that elicit *identification* or *presence.*

Persuasion is a protean concept. It is a form of action that is effected either through language or other symbolic codes on their own or through such codes and some form of accompanying action. It is exactly in the sense of *persuasion-as-behaviour* that the concept is defined by psychologists. In their monograph, Seiter and Gass (2013) provide 22 definitions of the term, but they openly state that

[they] wish to acknowledge from the outset that [they] maintain no illusions about there being a "correct" definition of persuasion. Various scholars and researchers conceptualize persuasion differently and therefore subscribe to varying definitions of the term. And although there are some commonalities among some definitions, there are as many differences as there are similarities (Seiter & Gass 2013: 17).

The multitude of definitions reflect five basic issues about which there is no universal agreement among researchers. The issues are the following: (1) whether persuasion is intentional or not, (2) whether persuasion means only a successful activity, (3) whether persuasion refers only to conscious efforts, (4) whether persuasion is effected only via symbolic action, and (5) whether self-persuasion may also be legitimately call persuasion (Gass & Seiter 2004).

The analysis of the phenomenon as it is understood by various scholars leads to the conclusion that persuasion is a prototypical category: prototypical in the sense used in cognitive sciences. In other words, there are no clear sufficient and necessary conditions/properties that must obtain for a phenomenon to be called persuasion (which would be typical of classical categorization). Rather, individual instances of persuasion, particular persuasive attempts, share only *some* properties, and what really ties them all together within one conceptual category is 'family resemblance' (Wittgenstein 1953).

This conclusion obviously reflects psychological reality and our common experience concerning the phenomenon of persuasion. The abundance of contexts, mediums, channels, and behaviours that are involved in persuasive efforts makes it impossible to provide a satisfactory and exhaustive description that could cover all instances counting as persuasion. Some actions aiming at influencing people are considered more prototypical cases of persuasion than others and there are also actions that will be regarded as persuasive attempts by some and not by others.

In view of the fact that the persuasion process is elusive and persuasion itself should be treated as a prototypical category rather than a classical one, it comes as no surprise that at present no single theoretical perspective upon which all scholars would agree can be identified. There is a multitude of theories, some accounting for a great number of persuasive phenomena, some applying only to a very limited and specific contexts or situations.

In the 1980s two models that are somehow complementary and move away from the attitude-behaviour issue, central to the persuasion research earlier on, were proposed. One is *the Elaboration Likelihood Model* (ELM), the other *the Heuristic Model* (HMP). The ELM, postulated by Petty & Cacioppo (1981, 1986) focuses on how messages are received. The authors argue that there are two 'modes', two distinct routes to persuasion: the central route and

the peripheral route. The central route means careful examination of persuasive messages, the effect of which is dependent on both the content of the message and the elaboration of the content. The peripheral route means practically no elaboration of the message but reliance on various heuristics and the 'peripheral' cues in message evaluations.

The model stipulates that message elaboration varies along 'elaboration likelihood continuum.' One end of this continuum is a cognitive involvement characterised by active processing. The other is a cognitive inactivity, where processing is performed almost without or with very little cognitive effort. From this perspective specifying conditions for the occurrence of both modes of processing becomes the central issue. Petty and Cacioppo acknowledge that there are a variety of factors that may determine whether the central or peripheral route is followed; three factors, however, are especially decisive: motivation, cognitive ability, and need for cognition. A message is likely to motivate the message recipient to cognitively process it if the message content is of high relevance for him. Cognitive ability, just as need for cognition, means not only idiosyncratic characteristics of the message recipient but also external factors such as, for example, distraction.

Some of the theoretical and practical limitations of this model gave an impulse for postulating *the Heuristic Model* (HMP). Chaiken (1987) suggested also two modes of message elaboration: systematic processing and heuristic processing. The concept of systematic processing is similar to Petty and Cacioppo's central route; heuristic processing is slightly different from peripheral processing:

> Peripheral processing reflects a variety of psychological motivations emphasizing the association of the speaker's position with rewarding or unrewarding persuasive cues. Conversely, heuristic processing reflects a single motivation, that is, evaluation of the message recommendation with minimal cognitive effort (Stiff 1994: 192).

The ELM model is an either-or model, so it cannot explain the instances where both peripheral and central processing co-occur; the HMP model, on the other hand, accounts for parallel processing without difficulties.

Without going into detail on the ELM and putting aside some reservations that have been put forward since the model was presented for the first time, it may be assumed that in specific situations when the addressee is unlikely to put in a lot of cognitive effort (press adds, billbords, etc), the essential way of creating a persuasive potential is using elements whose powers of persuasion consist first of all in activating the peripheral route. The addressee is to accept the message reflexively and intuitively. Or, at least such acceptance has to be the first step leading to further elaboration based on rational argumentation. In other words, peripheral elaboration may be a necessary stage creating a favourable attitude on the part of the addressee that may, but does not have to, be followed by activating the central route. On the other hand, it should be emphasized that a great number of advertisements are based on activating solely the peripheral route, which is not a preliminary stage leading to further analysis but an aim in itself.

I have focused here on the ELM because it is *the* model that, from a psychological point of view, reflects best a particular type of communicative situation (in this case press and outdoor adds). The analysis of this situation leads to the conclusion that most advertisements in the press (in particular, slogans, headlines, catchphrases) are messages in which all constituent elements, the verbal layer included, are subject to one governing principle: the message has to be composed in such a way that its basic functions may be performed on the assumption that the receiver does not get involved in the decoding process and the process itself is short-lived. Simplifying things a bit, one can say that it means that the message should be simple, clear, acceptable, familiar, natural, and attractive. And all those postulates have, first and foremost, a psychological basis resulting from the analysis of the constraints of the communicative situation.

In practical terms, psychological perspective means also a reliance on well established, mentally entrenched patterns that, supposedly, reflect our rationality. Such schemes, recurrent rhetorical patterns reflecting our general mental preferences and motivations in persuasive processes, find numerous applications. At the beginning of his book about rhetoric, Nash (1989)

analyses the seduction of Eve as presented in the Book of Genesis and points out to a pattern that is repeated in numerous persuasive messages that appeared later on in various persuasive 'genres'. Here is the scheme and particular sentences from the Book of Genesis (cf. Genesis 3: 1 - 4) that mark off consecutive segments of the scheme:

1. The Teasing Question 'Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?
2. The Robust Assurance 'You will not surely die'
3. The Authority   'For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened ...'
4. The Guarantee   '… you will be like God, knowing good and evil'

and here is how Nash comments on the scheme:

> The biblical example presents two aspects of the rhetorical act. On the one hand, we see in it a kind of programme, a set of steps upon which the design is constructed; and on the other, an aesthetic form or genre, here taking shape round the designated markers of the argument; and yet it would be perfectly possible for the same construction to be incorporated in a different genre. That is to say, we might take the suggested model - Teasing Question, Robust Assurance, Authority, Guarantee - and build it into a different sort of story; into a dialogue set in a supermarket; into a newspaper editorial on commercial ethics; into a sonnet on love or democracy or malt whisky (Nash 1989: 4).

The same pattern may be applied to a lot of contemporary advertising texts. Let us have a look at one:

1. The Teasing Question:	How do you conquer the highest mountain?
2. The Robust Assurance:	The same way you accomplish any task. One step at a time. The gutsy part is setting the goal in the first place.
3. The Authority:	Fairchild Aerospace is determined to set the pace in the global market for 30- to 95-seat jet airliners and large-cabin business jets.
4. The Guarantee:	And we're doing it one aircraft at a time. Starting with our revolutionary 328JET and moving forward with the all new 428JET, 528JET, 728JET, and 928JET. Eventually we'll have an entire family of aircraft that fits the market. All designed for long-haul comfort. Maximum economy. And peak performance. (press add)

As a consequence, we could say that the overall organisation of the advertisement follows a certain pattern – quite commonly used – that is motivated by, and results from, the psychology of composition. The composition and the corresponding rhetorical effects are results of rhetorical procedures that classical rhetoric called *heuresis*, *taxis*, and *lexis*. That is to say, the effects are achieved through such composition of the text that is based on a very general knowledge of the addressee, the world, and the language.

SOCIOLOGICAL MODELS

But the psychological model (or more psychological models that reflect a cognitive situation of a receiver) is just the beginning of the full story. It may elucidate why within a particular context such and such language input (understood very broadly – in the case of adds it also means, for example, the choice of layout and the size of typeface) releases relevant

psychological mechanisms. The full story is the story of how we have socially evolved mutually shared mechanisms of generating consent and arriving at a decision.

Persuasion is a social process in which one party aims at the other party's making a decision. What the persuader does focuses on influencing this decision, but, whatever the outcome, there is one thing both of them have to agree upon. They may negotiate an issue, but they must previously agree (not necessarily realizing the fact) that negotiation is *the* way to influence decisions.

What it means, in other words, is that persuasion is a two-layered process in which people try to exert influence on others using symbolic codes, but in doing so they (both the persuader and the persuadee) rely on a previously agreed or *pre-existing* social model (or models) entrenched in our minds. Such a model is essentially a model of how an individual takes up a decision, a decision which is at the same time autonomous and society-bound, as a result of the decision-taking process being a social process.

An interesting fact about decision-taking processes is that decisions, even if they are autonomous, individual acts, are taken within a specific social context and, if their implications have a bearing on other people (which is usually the case) they are taken on the basis of one's understanding of one's social position and one's understanding of how society works. Fiske and Haslam (2005) are the authors of the so called relational model theory which posits that despite all cultural differences there are essentially four universal structures of understanding social relations that allow us to understand, evaluate, sanction, and motivate all social acts. Fiske writes that

> people do more than cognize each other, they coordinate. They create relationships that are intrinsically motivating, that evoke emotions, and that they are constantly evaluating with respect to shared models of how people should coordinate with each other. The structures and mechanisms of social relationships are distinct from the psychological structures and mechanisms of individual persons – and the characteristics of relation-ships are not simply combinations of the characteristics of the individuals that engage in them. Social relationships are distinct entities that must be analysed at their own level, as forms of motivated coordination (267).

This collectively-sanctioned model of decision taking postulates four basic operational modes of interacting that are assumed when humans try to regulate social interaction. This is how Fiske comments on the model:

> Relational models theory is simple. People relate to each other in just four ways, structured with respect to (1) what they have in common, (2) ordered differences, (3) additive imbalances, or (4) ratios. When people focus on what they have in common, they are using a model we call Communal Sharing. When people construct some aspect of an interaction in terms of ordered differences, the model is Authority Ranking. When people attend to additive imbalances, they are framing the interaction in terms of the Equality Matching model. When they coordinate certain of their actions according to proportions or rates, the model is Market Pricing. Everyone uses this repertoire of relational capacities to plan and to generate their own action, to under-stand, remember, and anticipate others, to coordinate the joint production of collective action and institutions, and to evaluate their own and other's action. In different cultures, people use these four relational models in different ways, in different contexts, and in differing degrees. In short, four innate, open-ended relational structures, completed by congruent socially transmit-ted complements, structure most social action, thought, and motivation (Fiske 2004: 3).

To put it simply, the argument goes that what regulates our decision-taking processes are four templates that are implicitly assumed as a kind of background, or a yardstick, against which actions or decisions are measured. If what the model postulates is true, our actions are measured not in any objectively absolute sense, but always from within a system of assumptions that are natural (obvious, axiomatic) within a particular area of social interaction. The research shows that the elementary models play an important role in cognition including perception of other persons (Haslam 2004).

The models postulated by the authors are structures, implicit schemas for generating, evaluating and coordinating interactions, but it also means that they are understood as one of primary references for our own decisions. And that naturally means that all four models are used as perspectives that are adopted, and if they are not mutually shared they have to be negotiated. Let us have a look at the opening paragraph of an individual voice in the abortion debate:

> In the following essay I will address the issue of abortion and defend the pro-life position unemotionally, in a tasteful manner, and without reference to religious scripture to support my assertions. Plain reason and the evidence of science make the issue clear enough. My only demand of the reader is that you would also suspend your emotional predispositions and genuinely read and reflect on the validity of the propositions I make. http://www.humblelibertarian.com/2009/06/abortion-debate-reasoned-pro-life.html

On the meta-level this opening paragraph should be read as follows: In the following essay I will address a specific issue and I will defend a concrete position. In doing so, I assume that the decision should not be taken within the Authority Ranking model ("without reference to religious scripture to support my assertions") but within the Market Pricing and/or Equality Matching model ("Plain reason and the evidence of science make the issue clear enough"). Whatever the follow-up, the author seems to make it clear that this particular issue has to be discussed from within a model and in that case it is possible to look at the issue from within two different models, but one model (supposedly embraced by some in the debate) has to be rejected. And unless a commonly shared model is agreed upon first, the whole discussion must be futile, because no judgement (no decision) is possible if the decision is discussed within a disparate sets of axiomatic assumptions, outside a common platform that as if mutually constitutes a shareable space within which the merits of an issue are debatable.

Incidentally, it should be noted that in some areas of human activity there is a universally accepted model that is not challenged by anyone. In advertising, for example, our decisions are informed exclusively by subjective value that advertised products have (or seem to have) for us, so the model we adhere to is the Market Pricing model. But for a number of issues that are socially controversial there is no such a common platform, there are no universally acceptable models from within which an issue is debatable. And for this reason the abortion issue is, in a sense, unresolvable. My assumption is, although I have not seen any explanation of the issue in sociological literature, that such models (mental and linguistic) evolved at a relatively early level of the species development, so they were naturally geared to solving problems that our ancestor faced. So the patterns entrenched in the cognitive and language structures are not suitable to solving problems created by modern civilization. The opportunity to use a life supporting system, for example, makes us face decisions that we are not prepared for, in the sense that there are no fixed relational models that we collectively agree to embrace; in the absence of such models, some of us (as a rule, unconsciously, as something obvious and unchallengeable) choose this model, some that model, and, as a result, any argumentation (on the lower, factual level) is hardly possible.

CONCLUSIONS

Persuasion as a social act *per se* has to be analyzed only and exclusively within a psychological and social reality assumed (or objectively existing) within the context of a

persuasive attempt. It is so because generating consent or influencing others' decision is effected by language or other symbolic means, but the effect is not brought about by any inherent properties of language (or other symbolic code). If anything, it is the result of language activating preexisting mental structures that might by seen in terms of psychological or social models that underlie decision-making processes.

The article focuses very briefly on only a couple of such models. The real challenge is posed by the fact that even a very simple attempt to influence others is unavoidably immersed in a greater number of such models, which naturally complicates the issue. Nevertheless, even if disentangling a persuasive act from all the psychological and social parameters that are the actual background against which persuasion is effected might seem mission impossible, it does not make sense to downplay or bypass this psychological and social reality, since it is *there* that we are persuaded, not *within* or *by means* of language.

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