

Robert Spence
Universitaet des Saarlandes, Germany

“Modelling the role of the interpersonal dimension in political rhetoric:
some recycled metaphors from acoustics, electronics, geology, knitting, mathematics, music, optics,
and pastry-making.”

The predominantly persuasive function of political rhetoric produces a strong foregrounding of typically interpersonal articulations of semantic space in the paradigmatics of such discourse. With the benefit of hindsight, the syntagmatic consequences of this are predictable: the specific realizational profile of the interpersonal metafunction (“language as field”, in Pike’s terms) is so heavily overlaid upon that of the experiential metafunction that it awakens the latter’s dormant non-particulate potential, allowing experience to be represented trans-sententially in ways that would otherwise be impossible.

Such a co-opting (subversion, expansion, ...) of the resources of the experiential metafunction is of course only possible if the right selections are simultaneously taken up in the textual and logical metafunctions; and the entire attempt at a falsified experiential representation of political processes can unexpectedly come a cropper, due to higher-level properties of the symbiosis of semioses that both enable and constrain the discourse.

The present paper is an ecological experiment in recycling: as a meta-discourse, it attempts to polish up and revive a loose coalition of approximately twenty-year-old metaphors, applying them to the analysis of the rhetorical strategies exemplified by two (superficially) mutually opposed twenty-five-year-old object discourses:

- (i.) a speech read aloud by a conservative politician, and
- (ii.) a news conference in which a labourite politician attempts to pursue his own discourse goals at the expense of those of the journalists.

Although both politicians construct their discourse with great skill, there are points at which the entire semiotic construct threatens to break; at these points the interpersonal metafunction is particularly strongly foregrounded and its interactions with the other metafunctions can be perceived with an unusual degree of clarity.

The key cabinet posts in the metadiscourse’s coalition of metaphors, together with their respective political affiliations, are as follows:

- the Minister for Resonance (Acoustics Party);
- the Minister for Accumulation, Discharge and Hysteresis (Electronics Party);
- the Minister for Plate Tectonics (Geology Party);
- the Minister for Fractality (Mathematics Party);
- the Minister for Two-Part Fugues for Solo Violin (Musicians’ Union);
- the Minister for Refraction (Optics Party); and
- the Minister for Emplexis (Knitters’ and Pastry-makers’ Union).

It would be presumptuous to claim that this quaintly antiquated coalition of metaphors from pre-Appraisal Theory days is capable of maintaining itself in the face of the theoretical rigour of more modern approaches to the discursive role of the interpersonal metafunction; but where fundamental positions are no longer successfully contestable, an orderly withdrawal will be made, accompanied by a sustained series of earnest skirmishes.