

THE CULTURAL DIMENSION OF RHETORIC: THE USE OF MEIOSIS AND HYPERBOLE IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between culture and rhetoric starting from the premise that language is not only a major element of culture, but also a faithful reflection of it, as confirmed by linguistic anthropologists who tend to equate language learning with culture learning. More specifically, it focuses on the cultural characteristics of the UK and the US along two pairs of descriptors (“dimensions”) provided by Geert Hofstede and Michael Minkov – Long-Term Orientation vs. Short-Term Orientation, on the one hand, and Monumentalism vs. Flexumility (understood as a mix of flexibility and humility) on the other-, in an attempt to identify certain cultural differences and their corresponding linguistic expression: an effaced vs. an enhanced self-image, and the rhetorical use of understatement vs. overstatement. The article is meant as a tentative, cultural approach to rhetoric, and a possible starting point for future research on the rhetoric-culture relationship.

Keywords: “Monumentalism vs. Flexumility”, self, rhetoric, overstatement, understatement

Preliminaries on Language and Culture

Language is not only a major element of culture, but also perhaps the most faithful reflection of the national psyche and of multiple other aspects that make up the social construct that we usually call “national culture”. The inextricable relationship between language and culture has been confirmed by linguistic anthropologists, who have come to the conclusion that language learning is coextensive with culture learning. The most vivid expression of this relationship is a term coined by Michael Agar, “languaculture” (Agar, 1994) which emphasizes the idea unanimously embraced by anthropologists (Watson-Gegeo, 2004: 339, Heath, 1983: 5) that language learning cannot be distinguished from the process of enculturation to which every member of a society is exposed from early childhood.

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Following this line of thought, it would be interesting to see how the various differences between British and American English can be explained by the separate development of the two linguistic varieties within the borders of distinct nations with distinct cultural and sociopolitical characteristics.

A quick look at the cultural differences between the two nations as the ones identified by Geert Hofstede and Michael Minkov may shed some light on several linguistic aspects that separate one variety of English from another. We will however focus on a single cultural variable and the way it finds its linguistic equivalents in the conflicting rhetorics of British and American English in order to verify, from a different perspective, the anthropological idea of a “languaculture”.

A US-UK Culture Gap: “Monumentalism vs. Flexumility”

We will therefore consider the cultural distance between the two English-speaking countries by comparing these nations’ country scores along one major “dimension”, Long-term orientation (LTO) – the only variable among the six cultural aspects analyzed by Hofstede in the third edition of *Cultures and Organizations. Software of the Mind* (PD, IDV, MAS, UAI, LTO and IVR) where the Anglo-American culture clash becomes apparent – and its negative correlation with a new dimension that Michael Minkov calls “Monumentalism” (Hofstede et. al, 2012); on all the other Hofstede-Minkov dimensions with the exception of LTO, UK and US scores are almost similar, or at least very close to each other.

LTO, a cultural dimension that was added by Hofstede under the influence of Canadian researcher Michael Bond’s work, reflects a society’s time horizon, i.e. the degree to which it is either future-oriented, or past- and present-oriented. Although the values associated with this variable are derived from the teachings of Confucius, the Chinese philosopher who lived around 500 B.C., the dimension itself equally applies to cultures that are in no way connected with Confucianism.

The “Chinese Value Survey” designed by Michael Bond in the mid 1980s consisted of a questionnaire (developed on the basis of a list of basic Chinese values drawn up by Chinese social scientists from Hong Kong and Taiwan) which he administered to students in China and other countries around the world. The answers to the questionnaire helped identify significant differences between Confucian and Western thinking along four cultural dimensions: “integration”, “human-heartedness”, “moral discipline” and “Confucian work dynamism” (with two poles: long- and short-term orientation), the last of which was later integrated by Hofstede into his model of intercultural analysis under the title “Long Term Orientation”.

According to Hofstede, the long term orientation pole (best illustrated by China, Japan and South Korea) is associated with an emphasis on hierarchy rather than equality, a pursuit of general (collective) rather than individual interests, persistence or perseverance, ethical relativism, personal adaptability, thrift, and a sense of shame (accompanying a loss of “face”). At the other extreme, short-term oriented (STO) cultures (such as Finland, France, the UK, Germany, Pakistan; Canada, the US) are characterized, among other things, by the importance attached to the protection of “face” (Chinese “*mian zi*”, meaning “reputation, prestige, honour, social standing” earned through one’s own efforts), reciprocation (of greetings, favours, gifts), absolute ethical values, a sense of guilt (and loss of self-respect) caused by failure to fulfill one’s social obligations, impatience about results, indifference to status, a strong inclination towards consumption (or excess), an orientation towards the past and the present, personal steadfastness and stability.

What we are interested in is not LTO in itself and under all its manifestations, but only the negative correlation between a pair of opposites corresponding to LTO and STO on the one hand (i.e., thrift vs. excess), and Michael Minkov’s notion of “Monumentalism” (Hofstede et. al., 2012: 242-250), on the other. Monumentalism (and its contrary, “Flexumility”, a mix of flexibility and humility) is a dimension inspired by the writings of Steve Heine, a Canadian psychologist, and other authors on the subject of “self-enhancement” (and its opposite, “self-effacement”) viewed as a characteristic of certain cultures (North Americans in particular, as opposed to East Asians). The contradiction between Monumentalism and Flexumility is explained by Minkov in terms of self-stability and pride (inflated self-regard, or self-enhancement) vs. self-flexibility (“flexible, malleable selves” that accept the idea of change) and humility (self-effacement, moderation, restraint).

The following table shows the UK and US LTO scores, according to the 3rd edition of *Cultures and Organizations* (2010). We will use them to infer the two cultures’ degree of Monumentalism:

Dimension	UK	US
LTO	51	26

Although Hofstede and Minkov do not provide any Monumentalism country scores, we think it is safe to assume, on the basis of the acknowledged negative correlation between LTO and Monumentalism, that the scores on the two dimensions are opposed to each other. Great Britain’s LTO score places UK culture somewhere in the middle of the continuum, so we can expect its Monumentalism score to be moderate (with only a slight inclination towards Flexumility), but much lower than the US one.

Culture and Rhetoric: Hyperbole vs. Meiosis/Litotes

In keeping with Hofstede and Minkov's theory about the opposition between LTO and Monumentalism, it is worth noting that the British culture seems to be defined by both a wider time horizon and by considerably more modesty ("Flexumility") than the American culture with which it otherwise has a lot in common, in point of PD, IDV, MAS, UAI AND IVR. For the purposes of this article, we will concentrate on one aspect of modesty, which is restraint, already associated by Minkov with the concept of self-effacement. We will further link it to the specific use of language, on the basis of the principle that someone who is modest in projecting a low-profile self-image is likely to manifest the same virtue in the course of verbal interaction with others. By contrast, someone who has an inflated ego will also look for big words to express himself/ herself linguistically, and to describe others (since every portrait is, to a certain extent, a self-portrait).

We can, for instance, assume that the striking difference between Americans' preference for superlative and hyperbolic expression (frequently referred to by linguists), and the British indulgence in understatement are manifestations of exacerbated linguistic Monumentalism (or self-enhancement) on the one hand, and a certain measure of linguistically revealed modesty, or restraint, on the other.

The contrast between the British and the American use of language was described by Horace Greeley as early as 1851 as follows:

the American tendency to hyperbole and exaggeration grates harshly on their [Englishmen's] ears. They can only account for it by a presumption of ill breeding on the part of the utterer. Forward lads and 'fast' people are scarce and uncurrent here. A Western 'screamer,' eager to fight or drink, to run horses or shoot for a wager, and boasting that he had 'the prettiest sister, the likeliest wife and the ugliest dog in all Kentucky,' would be no where else so out of place and incomprehensible as in this country, no matter in what circle of society. (Greeley, 2008: 340).

A century later, Albert H. Marckwardt, the American linguist and author of *American English*, finds the explanation of the "spirit behind this process" of using and inventing "high-sounding, mouth-filling words" in Carl Carmer's foreword to *Hurricane's Children*, a collection of American folklore that brings together some of the most popular American folk characters (larger-than-life legendary or semi-legendary figures like Paul Bunyan, Mike Fink, John Henry, Strap Buckner, and Steamboat Annie):

The people of almost every nation in the world except the United States have liked to make up stories about 'the little people'. [...] But Americans have been so busy doing big jobs that they have never taken time off to let their minds play with the tiny folk who have magic powers. At the end of a hard day's work the American cowboys or miners or lumberjacks or applepickers have had their fun out of making up stories about men that could do jobs that could just not be done, and in an impossibly short time, with one hand tied behind them. The dreams of American workers, naturally enough, have never been delicate, exquisite or polite – like most fairy stories. They have been big and powerful, and a strong wind is always blowing through them. (Marckwardt, 1958: 99).

Americans' bias towards linguistic exaggeration, or "high-sounding words" (Marckwardt, 1958: 100) is thus traced back to its historical and cultural origins: the 19th-century tall tales narrating the typical frontiersman's incredible exploits in the backwoods. The above explanation of such linguistic biases makes perfect sense, since all forms of folklore, and folk-tales in particular, are works of paradigmatic value; they are unanimously acknowledged as repositories of a nation's deep-seated and enduring patterns of thought underlying its culture-specific use of language and its behaviour. And a common belief, at the time, must have been that it took larger-than-life characters endowed with unusual powers to overcome the huge challenges of everyday frontier life.

Marckwardt insists that the "tall talk" of folk characters, which usually takes the literary form of "striking concoctions of ingeniously contrived epithets", "fantastic simile and metaphor", a "bombastic display of oratory", and especially "wild hyperbole" (Marckwardt, 1958: 99), specific to legendary figures of supernatural physical prowess, used to find their equivalents in the speech of real individuals in those times. The stylistic similarity is easy to notice if we compare a classic example of pioneer "tall talk" (Paul Bunyan's hyperbolic opening remarks in the American folktale *Babe, the Blue Ox*) with the "high-flown similes" found in a fragment from a speech delivered by a real-life character, an Arkansas legislator of those times, in opposition to a proposal to change the state's name:

'Well now, one winter it was so cold that all the geese flew backward and all the fish moved south and even the snow turned blue. Late at night, it got so frigid that all spoken words froze solid afore they could be heard. People had to wait until sunup to find out what folks were talking about the night before.' (*Babe, the Blue Ox*) cf. *'Compare the lily of the valley to the gorgeous sunrise; the discordant croak of the bullfrog to the melodious tones of a nightingale; the classic strains of Mozart to the bray of a Mexican mule; the puny arm of a Peruvian prince to the muscles of a Roman gladiator – but never change the name of Arkansas'* (Marckwardt, 1958: 100)

The wide category of “mouth-filling words” includes, as Marckwardt notes, not only far-fetched similes, hyperboles, “high-sounding” adjectives but also a multitude of factitious coinages built especially upon suffixes like “-acious”, “-iferious”, “-ticate”, “-icute”, e.g. rambunctious (boisterous, difficult to handle), splendiferous (splendid), angeliferous (angelical), obfuscated (confused) – some of which, we should add, are still preserved in present-day American English dictionaries as humorous terms (Webster’s Dictionary, 1998). The freedom with which certain lexical patterns of English are still treated by Americans of today is nothing but the natural linguistic manifestation of the nation’s “independence of spirit”, and disregard of “accepted tradition” (to use Marckwardt’s words) (Marckwardt, 1958: 108), which have been distinguishing characteristics of US culture from pioneer times to the present.

Marckwardt’s remark that “the American of today” (the late 1950’s) still revels in “mouth-filling” vocabulary, and “this will undoubtedly continue as a characteristic of American English for some time to come” (Marckwardt, 1958: 102; 102-103) is fully demonstrated, apart from the dictionary survival of obsolete pompous words, by the present-day frequency of “high-sounding” terms, especially superlatives and adjectives with a hyperbolic meaning such as “gorgeous” (reminiscent of the above quote from the 19th senatorial speech), “terrific”, “fantastic”, “awesome”, “fabulous”, “phenomenal”, “incredible”, “amazing”, and the like. The evolution of language indeed mirrors a culture’s evolution, and the deepest, most influential layers of culture (i.e. its values, according to Hofstede (Hofstede et. al, 2012: 20)) do not change easily in time. The continued use of a whole array of overblown words illustrates a culturally-based linguistic propensity towards exaggeration or overstatement in the broad sense of the word, which often finds its extreme outlet in hyperbole, the rhetorical figure of excess (< Greek *hyperballein*, to throw over/beyond).

Some could justifiably argue that hyperbole is found in folk literature all over the world. UK folklore is indeed no exception, as illustrated by the giants and giant-slayers that abundantly inhabit the world of Cornish and Welsh folklore (e.g. “Ysbaddaden, Chief of Giants”, Jack “the Giant Killer”, Idris Gawr, Ysbaddaden Bencawr, Bendigeidfran fab Llyr, etc.) and their extraordinary exploits. King Arthur himself, the legendary figure of the late 5th and early 6th century, is described in Welsh folk tales as fighting against enemies of supernatural power. The hyperbolic bias manifested itself throughout the Middle Ages and continued well into the Renaissance. However, the Elizabethan tendency towards overstatement seems to have given way to an altogether different rhetoric in the next two centuries. As Marckwardt puts it, the hyperbolic tendency was “submerged” by a rhetorical “countermovement toward litotes, or understatement” (Marckwardt, 1958: 102), which was a characteristic of the British “classical revival” of the late 17th and 18th centuries, and which would leave its lasting mark

on British English for centuries to come. By contrast, no similar switch from a hyperbolic to a more restrained use of vocabulary seems to have occurred in American English over the last two centuries.

Various factors have certainly played an important role in the separate evolution of each variety of English. Even though the LTO may lead us to infer that the UK is only slightly oriented towards Flexumility, the cultural distance between it and the US is considerable, due to the latter's extremely high Monumentalism. The difference is revealed at the linguistic level by the above-mentioned, specifically British use of understatement (*diminutio*), the opposite of American linguistic excess, or overstatement. Rhetorically, understatement may translate as either meiosis or litotes.

Meiosis (< Greek *meiosis*, lessening) is a euphemistic figure of speech that uses understatement rhetorically to represent something as less than it actually is and thus to "enhance the impression on the hearer" (Fowler's Modern English Usage). In British English, its "lessening" effect is often given by such qualifiers as "a bit", "a little", "some", "only", "quite", "rather", placed before verbs or adjectives, as in the following examples:

"I **rather** think so." (That's my opinion, I strongly believe that).

"It's **only** a suggestion." (I'm very particular about this, so you'd better do as I tell you).

"I was **a little** upset." (I was very upset).

"I'm **a bit** disappointed with the new design." (I was very disappointed..., I didn't like...).

"I played **a bit** of tennis when I was young." (I played a lot, or even: I was a professional tennis player).

"I **quite** understand your feelings." (I completely understand...).

Sometimes, British understatement can be tricky to non-native speakers, who tend to ignore its rhetorical value, and interpret it literally, as mere precaution or restraint:

"I **almost** agree." (meaning "I don't really agree", or even "I disagree"), or the example given by Fowler: "**didn't half** swear" (Fowler, 1970: 357) (meaning "swore horribly").

Litotes (< Greek *litotes*, plainness, simplicity) is often viewed as a variety of meiosis that uses understatement to express meaning indirectly, euphemistically, by means of double negatives, or through the negation of the opposite. As in the case of meiosis, understatement is meant to impress by moderation or linguistic restraint, as in:

"He's **not a bad** boy" (he's a good boy).

“He’s a scholar of **no ordinary** achievement” (he’s a scholar of extraordinary achievement).

Or as in the following examples provided by Fowler:

“**Not bad**, eh?” (said after an anecdote, and meaning “excellent”);

“**not a few**” (meaning “a great number”);

“I **praise** you **not**” ([I Cor. XI, 17, 22] - an indirect and emphatic way of saying “I blame you”) (Fowler, 1970: 340).

Conclusions

In spite of our scepticism towards rigid, binary oppositions such as the ones generally used by interculturalists to distinguish among cultures, we find Hofstede’s and Minkov’s LTO-Monumentalism correlation quite valuable and useful in identifying general cultural and linguistic biases. The main tenet of the present article has been that language cannot be viewed in isolation from the culture it is part of. Since language is not only a component, but also a faithful reflection of culture, its rhetoric is likely to be shaped by the main cultural traits specific to each nation. The two pairs of descriptors provided by Hofstede and Minkov (LTO vs. STO and Monumentalism vs. Flexumility) have helped us identify those traits and their corresponding linguistic expression in British and American English: an enhanced vs. an effaced self-image, and the rhetorical use of understatement vs. overstatement. Our conclusions on the subject are not final. We would rather look at our present article as a tentative way of approaching rhetoric from a cultural perspective, and as a possible starting point for future research on the rhetoric-culture relationship.

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