

Presidential candidates could get medieval with 'indirect aggression' debate tactics

September 26 2012

(Phys.org)—As Barack Obama and Mitt Romney prepare to square off in a series of presidential debates, the candidates and their running mates could go medieval on their opponents by using a rhetorical technique that dates back to Nordic and Germanic legends of the Middle Ages, says a scholar of medieval literature at Missouri University of Science and Technology.

According to Dr. Eric S. Bryan, an assistant professor of English and technical communication at Missouri S&T, the candidate who does the best job using "indirect aggression" techniques in a debate could be perceived as the winner of that debate.

Indirect aggression - speech that requires interpretation, such as sarcasm or veiled threats - is a rhetorical device that dates back to the Middle Ages, if not earlier, says Bryan. In a paper to be published in *Neophilologus*, an international journal of modern and medieval language and literature, he examines how two characters from a medieval legend that formed the basis for Richard Wagner's opera "Der Ring des Nibelungen" ("The Ring of the Nibelung") used indirect aggression to gain the upper hand in their argument.

The same rhetorical approaches are still in use today, he says, although "modern culture seems to have lost its talent for it."

In his article, Bryan discusses how two fictional queens used indirect aggression in the Nibelungen legend, which dates back to the 13th

century. He notes that indirect aggressive speech is typically associated with the queen who holds the upper hand in an argument.

In similar fashion, candidates in political debates who deliver the best indirect one-liner can be perceived as the winner of the contest, he says.

'...no Jack Kennedy'

One famous example of this occurred during a 1988 vice presidential debate between Texas Sen. Lloyd Bentsen and Indiana Sen. Dan Quayle. After Quayle defended his inexperience as similar to that of John F. Kennedy, Bentsen replied: "Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you are no Jack Kennedy."

That slight is an example of indirect aggression, Bryan says, because it requires interpretation on the part of the opponent.

"It raises the question, 'If I'm no Jack Kennedy, then what am I? I must be something less than Jack Kennedy,'" Bryan says.

In his article, Bryan examines an argument that takes place between two queens involved in a struggle to achieve status.

Bryan analyzes "the verbal conflict in the so-called 'Quarrel of the Queens' episode" from three different texts of the Nibelung legends. One version is German, one Norwegian and the third Icelandic. The two queens, called Prunhilt and Kriemhilt in one version but similarly named in the other two, "argue fiercely about who has the stronger, braver husband" and "give as good as they get in the argument," Bryan writes in his paper, "Indirect Aggression: A Pragmatic Analysis of the Quarrel of the Queens in Volsungasaga, Pioreks Saga and Das Nibelungenlied."

Although each of the three text sources takes a different approach to the two queens' argument, "each relies heavily upon a strategy of verbal conflict that vacillates between indirectness in speech ... and directness of speech." The indirect approaches employ sarcasm and veiled threats that require interpretation, while the direct approaches can be taken at face value.

"The arguer perceived (or who perceives herself) as holding the stronger position in the argument tends to maintain a veil of indirectness, while the arguer in the losing position may either attempt to gain the upper hand by intensifying indirectness or, conceding the weaker position, attempt to salvage her status by resorting to directness in speech."

In other words, Bryan says, "Indirectness reflects a position of strength, whereas directness reflects the weaker rhetorical and social status."

24/7 news media

Could the same approach to rhetoric hold true among political candidates? Could the candidate who takes pride in being the "straight talker," as GOP nominee John McCain did in 2008, actually be at a disadvantage to one who is less direct?

Bryan believes that is possible. But in modern political campaigns, one factor comes in to play that didn't exist in the [Middle Ages](#): the 24/7 news media.

"Modern politicians have a huge problem," Bryan says. "They have to understand all of the policy issues, and then they have to translate all of that into something that all Americans understand, regardless of education or status. So there's this translation that happens through the news media and on the campaign trail that has to appeal to a wide audience."

This has become an issue recently for [Mitt Romney](#) after a tape from a campaign fundraising dinner held last spring became public. In that tape, Romney discusses issues in terms he had not used in public venues, such as campaign speeches or media interviews.

"He wasn't speaking to that mass audience," Bryan says. "He was speaking to ultra-rich donors. It was still a gaffe, but in that room, with that audience, it was not."

In a media-saturated world, political debates may be one of the few opportunities political candidates have to come across as relatively unfiltered. For those skilled in rhetoric, this can be an advantage.

"Most of the time in political discourse, the politicians aren't talking directly to each other," Bryan says. "They're talking around each other and talking to the audience."

The rise of print - and the transition of communication from oral to written - has lessened the impact of rhetorical techniques such as indirect aggression over the centuries, Bryan says. As a result, people have become less skilled at it.

"The interesting thing to me is that, while we do use the same tactics of argumentation today, modern culture seems to have lost its talent for it," says Bryan. "These medieval texts actually show far greater nuance and sophistication in their strategies of [indirect aggression](#) than anything employed today."

The lessons of going medieval

He sees lessons to be learned from studying the rhetoric of the Quarrel of the Queens and similar vignettes from medieval legends.

"We can really learn something by looking at a time like this when aggression was a political and economic instrument," Bryan says.

"Understanding aggression and conflict in a different way, constructively rather than something that should be avoided at all costs, would be a good thing."

Bryan will be watching the [presidential debates](#) closely, as will students in his English 306 class, "A Linguistic Study of Modern English."

"We'll be doing a lot of discourse analysis" around the presidential debates, he says.

More information: www.springerlink.com/content/d...41uh0411766q/?MUD=MP

Provided by Missouri University of Science and Technology

Citation: Presidential candidates could get medieval with 'indirect aggression' debate tactics (2012, September 26) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-09-presidential-candidates-medieval-indirect-aggression.html>

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