

UNDERSTANDING THE LANGUAGE OF POLITICAL ADS

OBJECTIVE

Students will understand the nature and uses of language in presidential ads, and become aware of how candidates use words to influence viewer opinion.

OVERVIEW

A political commercial typically has 30 seconds to make an impact. Although commercials are primarily a visual medium, the choice of language in political advertisements also plays a crucial role in conveying a message. The language of campaign commercials combines a strong political message with the verbal techniques and emotional appeals typical of television advertising.

Just as students can analyze the images chosen for 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 does the ad use to describe the candidate, his or her vision, and his or her achievements? What words does it use to criticize or attack his or her opponent? Is the language specific or vague? All of these are points to consider in determining the overall effect of the ad.

PROCEDURE

Explain to students that you will be analyzing a presidential ad in order to understand how the language and the visual elements of the ad work together.

Text analysis of an ad: "Prouder, Stronger, Better" (Reagan, 1984).

Hand out the text of the ad and ask students to underline three phrases or words in the text that stand out. Then ask students to place a "+" next to a phrase that gives them a positive feeling. They can put a "-" next to a phrase that gives them a negative feeling. (You may also want to refer to Lesson Appendix One.)

Transcript:

NARRATOR: It's morning again in America. Today, more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history. With interest rates at about half the record highs of 1980, nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past 4 years. This afternoon, 6500 young men and women will be married, and with inflation at less than half of what it was just 4 years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future. It's morning again, in America, and under the leadership of President Reagan our country is prouder, and stronger, and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than 4 short years ago?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What phrases or words did you mark as “positive”? Why?
- What phrases or words did you mark as “negative”? Why?
- How does the ad portray President Reagan?
- What does the ad say about the opposing candidate? Is there any direct or indirect criticism?
- If you had to pick a phrase to use as a title for this ad, what would it be?

Listening activity: Play the audio of the ad for students, but do not show them the video. As they listen, have them write down the words or phrases that stand out to them (these may be slightly different than the phrases they noted in the transcript). Ask students to pay attention to all of the sounds in this ad.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What words do you remember most clearly now? Are they the same? Different? Why?
- What words or phrases seem least important or memorable now? Why?
- Did the ad sound the way you expected it to? Why or why not?
- How do you feel about the candidate after listening to the ad? Why?
- What element contributes most to the mood of the ad: words, music, or the voice of the narrator? Why?
- To whom is this ad directed? How do you know?

Prediction activity: Ask students to work with a partner to brainstorm about images that could go with the text. Have each group share its ideas.

Viewing activity: Screen the ad and ask students to take notes on any images that stand out to them.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What are the images you remember most clearly? Why?
- What words do you remember most clearly now? Are they the same? Different? Why?
- What words or phrases seem less important or memorable now? Why?
- Did the ad look the way you expected it to? Why or why not?
- How do you feel about the candidate after watching the ad? Why?
- What element contributes most to the mood of the ad: images, words, music, or the voice of narrator? Why?
- Would this ad be as effective on the radio? Why or why not?
- To whom is the ad directed? How do you know?
- How should the words/images differ for a more targeted audience, such as, for example, an audience of women? Teens?

After completing this activity with “Prouder, Stronger, Better,” you may wish to repeat it with “Pessimism” (Bush, 2004).

Transcript:

BUSH: I’m George W. Bush and I approve this message. I’m optimistic about America because I believe in the people of America.

NARRATOR: After recession, 9/11 and war...Now our economy has been growing for ten straight months. The largest tax relief in history. 1.4 million jobs added since August. Inflation, interest and mortgage rates low. Record home ownership. John Kerry’s response? He’s talking about the Great Depression. One thing’s sure... Pessimism never created a job.

ASSESSMENT

Students should have learned that language in political advertisements is carefully chosen and works with all of the other elements of an ad to convey a message. The candidate’s intent determines his or her 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. Students write and record a radio ad for a political candidate. Afterwards, students exchange their ads and create storyboards for each other’s ads.
2. Students generate a list of words or phrases that would create a positive feeling towards a candidate or a list of negative words and phrases. Students can then identify ads on *The Living Room Candidate* that feature these words and phrases. Students could compare their lists with Newt Gingrich’s list. (See Lesson Appendix One.) What vision of the country is suggested by the students’ choice of the words they see as positive and negative? Would students change their lists in order to influence a specific audience?
3. Students create a “found poem” from the text of an ad. Give students transcripts of a number of ads, and ask them to cut out memorable words and phrases and rearrange them on a blank sheet of paper to make a poem “found” from the existing text.

CURRICULUM STANDARDS ADDRESSED

Common Core English Language Arts: 4, 7, 9

New York State Social Studies: 5

NOTES

Appendix One

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
- 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

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