

## BOOSTERS AND HEDGES AS PERSUASIVE DEVICES IN GEORGE RIDPATH'S POLITICAL LANGUAGE

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The main goal of this paper is to get an insight into some of the most common devices used by George Ridpath –a very influential Scottish journalist and pamphleteer during the Stuart period– in the construction of rhetorical style: boosters and hedges. To this end, following the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, we analyse a representative sample of Ridpath's political writings excerpted from one of the Whig leading journals at that time, *The Observer*, and draw attention to boosters and hedges as verbal strategies Ridpath resorted to in his attempt to exert power, shape belief and defend his views. The results obtained demonstrate that in Ridpath's political writings boosters and hedges play a crucial role in shaping public opinion, moving hearts and minds, at a time when the spreading of ideas and information relied heavily on pamphlets, periodicals and newspapers.

*Keywords:* persuasive discourse, boosters, hedges, political language, Critical Discourse Analysis, George Ridpath

### 1. Introduction

Persuasion arises in a wide range of discourse forms (advertising, media discourse, academese, etc.) and can be approached from nearly all social sciences (communication, sociology or history). It is, however, in the field of politics that persuasive discourse becomes more prominent: one can hardly think of any political action which does not involve using language with a persuasive purpose. As Partington notes, persuasion through language is an integral part of politics: "Politics is persuasion, and persuasion is conducted predominantly through language" (2001: 116).

The main concern of this paper is to explore some of the most salient rhetorical strategies used by George Ridpath, a very influential, though little known, Whig journalist and pamphleteer during the late Stuart period (1702-1714), when the press was recognized as an organ of political influence and, therefore, printed materials were used to spread ideas and influence public opinion. To this end, we will analyze boosters and hedges as persuasive devices in a sample of Ridpath's writings excerpted from the political journal *The Observer*. This seems to be a worthy enterprise, because while boosters and hedges have been thoroughly studied, especially in academic discourse (Hyland 1998; Vázquez and Giner 2009; Markannen and Schröder 2010) and the persuasive nature of political writings in Stuart England has been recently dealt with by McKim (2008), to the best of our knowledge no study so far has been devoted to these rhetorical devices during the Stuart period.

This study is structured as follows. After presenting George Ridpath and his time, we move on to the theoretical framework this study is embedded into and the corpus data on which it is based. Then, we analyze the boosters and hedges encountered in Ridpath's writings, which constitute the main aim of this paper. A summary of the results obtained will bring this study to an end.

## 2. George Ridpath and his time

No previous stage in the history of Britain had proved to be as controversial as the reign of Anne Stuart (1702-1714), where matters of utmost national and international importance such as the monarchy, the Church and foreign policy were at stake and therefore party activity was unusually intense. There were many substantial issues for Whigs and Tories to feed on: the problem of the British succession, the explosive issue of religious toleration, the question of Britain's place in the world and the conduct of her foreign policy during the War of the Spanish Succession (López-Campillo 2008); and these parliamentary parties appealed to the electorate for support. Although the majority of the electors were firmly committed to the Tory or Whig side, a significant minority shifted sides as they were persuaded by the press and other agents to look favourably on one party and unfavourably on the other.

George Ridpath (1660?-1726) was a radical Whig journalist and pamphleteer who held strong anti-Catholic and Presbyterian views. He contributed to the great political debates of the reign of Queen Anne from 1688 to 1714 and showed his versatility writing on important issues of his time such as the Darien scheme, the Scottish succession, the Union of Scotland and England and the War of the Spanish Succession, among others.

As a champion of Whig views Ridpath awoke both philia and phobia. He provoked the rage and resentment not only of literary opponents but also of powerful politicians, military and the government itself, which earned him prosecution, fines and even imprisonment for what were considered to be seditious libels.

Prior to analyzing boosters and hedges in the pages of *The Observer*, we will refer to the theoretical framework and the corpus used in the present piece of research.

## 3. Theoretical framework and corpus

As politics is concerned with power, i.e., power to control other people's behaviors and their thoughts and beliefs, we follow Critical Discourse Analysis as a theoretical framework (Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Fairclough 2005) to explore how the relationship between discursive practices and the social and cultural background contributes to secure power and hegemony. In this vein, starting from a micro-level of language, we relate the details of linguistic behavior detected in Ridpath's political writings to political behavior, trying to analyze which strategic functions specific structures (namely boosters and hedges) fulfill.

We consider here the political periodical as a text with a social and political purpose, as an instance of functional language, i.e., language that is doing some job in some context (Halliday 1985). Indeed, some of the verbal devices detected in our corpus perform a particular function, and their purpose is likely to be deciphered by exploring their observable elements and patterns. From this perspective, the political journal can be considered as a "socially-oriented" practice within Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar.

The corpus samples texts excerpted from the eighth volume of *The Observer* (from February 2 to June 18, 1709), a twice-weekly political journal primarily devoted to denounce fraud and abuse within the government founded in London in 1702,

although not overtaken by Ridpath until 1707 after the untimely death of John Tutchin, its previous editor. The choice for political texts excerpted from *The Observer* is not at random: on the one hand, political texts are a breeding ground for different communicative resources to construe and attain persuasion; on the other hand, *The Observer* was one of the leading journals in the Stuart period, when political periodicals played a crucial role in forming public opinion.

#### 4. Boosters and hedges in Ridpath's writings

The structure of the issues of *The Observer* contributes to Ridpath's persuasive purpose. He touches on different topics in the form of a dialogue between two interlocutors: an ordinary countryman, Roger, and his master, the observer, a cultivated gentleman who represents Ridpath's opinions. The unequal status of the participants in the dialogues reinforces the master's views and contributes to fulfilling the writer's purpose. In what follows we will analyse the boosters and hedges detected in the verbal exchanges between both interlocutors.

Boosters and hedges are effective persuasive strategies in Ridpath's writings. These devices increase or reduce the force of the statement and, by doing so, convey an attitude to the audience. According to Hyland (1998: 350-51), *boosting* reinforces "group membership and direct engagement with readers", whereas *hedging* conveys "deference, humility and respect". Both devices show the writer's commitment to the truth of the statement and are indicative of different degrees of strength, ranging from weak statements to very assertive ones.

Boosters are used to instil trust and confidence in readers due to the impression of certainty and conviction they create. Boosting is by far the rhetorical device most frequently used in the samples of the corpus. We find the adverbs *certainly* and *indeed* and the expressions *I make no question, there's too much truth in it* or *we have no reason to doubt*, among many others. The assertiveness of this device fits Ridpath's purpose of attacking the French King Louis XIV and his tyrannical power particularly well. In the example below the observer employs three boosters (*I don't wonder, certainly* and *we need no doubt*) to convince readers of the fact that French people cannot stand their King's tyrannical power:

- (1) *I don't wonder*<sup>1</sup> that the French King should talk so, Roger; for, to put 'em in hopes of Peace abroad, is the best way to prevent their making War upon his tyranny at home, of which his people are *certainly* weary and *we need no doubt*, that they would soon cast off the Yoke of his absolute power, could they once attempt it with safety. (April 2-6. Numb.19)

In the same vein, the observer employs *we are not to doubt* to assure his interlocutor (and, by extension, the readership) that measures will be taken by the Parliament if the expenditure of public money does not serve a public purpose:

- (2) *We are not to doubt*, but the Parliament, who gives the money, will enquire how it is laid out, whether there be such number of troops in Catalonia and Portugal as we pay for (March 5-9. Numb. 11)

Boosters are not only used by the observer. Roger uses them to agree on his master's opinion and reinforce his views. To this purpose, the countryman resorts to the expressions *you have said enough to prove* in (3) and *I am wholly of your mind* in (4):

- (3) *You have said enough to prove* that the House of Bourbon is now more addicted to Bigotry than the House of Austria. (March 23-26. Numb.17)
- (4) *I am wholly of your mind*, Master, and wish that we may follow Her Majesty's glorious example. (June 11-15. Numb.39)

Likewise, Roger employs the expression *certainly, you are in the right* to agree on his master's opinion concerning a possible invasion of the French Army and, by so doing, contributes to persuade the readers of the potential threat of the French King:

- (5) *Certainly, you are in the right*, Master: And whatever Arts some people may use to lessen our apprehensions of another Invasion, I am of Opinion, that the French King and the Pretender have too much Encouragement for it. (February 2-5. Numb.3)

Apart from using boosters to agree with his master, Roger also employs them to show full commitment to his own statements. This happens in sample (6), in which *I am sure* is used to reinforce his opinion that the French King deserves being severely punished:

- (6) We have had a talk about town of his being smitten with Herod's Disease, which *I am sure* he justly deserves, for he has been guilty of his crime. But we must leave the Almighty to his own way of punishing him (May 28-30. Numb.35)

Let us now consider the presence of hedges in our corpus. Hedges –or *downtoners*– help the persuader communicate more precisely the degree of truth and accuracy in his statements. Hedging is a communicative strategy motivated by politeness and related to the writer's desire to maintain social relationships and gain the confidence of the readership. Hedges have a lowering effect on the illocutionary force of the statement and, by doing so, contribute to preserve the social prestige (i.e. *face*) of the interlocutor. Hedging responds to the speaker's need to soften potential social conflicts derived from his assertions which may alter his prestige, preserving thus the speaker's positive face.<sup>2</sup>

Hedges are important rhetorical devices: as the persuader does not dare to take full responsibility for the truth of the utterance, hedges convey an image of truthfulness, reflect the persuader's humility and confer deference to readers. Because of this, hedging contributes to assuring a positive interaction with readers, which is of key relevance in order to convince them. In the following passage, the observer employs two hedges, the adverb *perhaps* and the modal verb *may*, which lessen the impact of a previous conflictive statement: Roger's criticism "Country People say this is an odd way of paying Debts!":

- (7) But *perhaps*, Roger, this *may* be design'd for the ease of the Country, and to have them the Expence of a Muster, at a Time when other taxes are heavy. (February 2-5. Numb.2)

From a pragmatic perspective, these hedges indicate how the Maxim of Quality<sup>3</sup> proposed by Grice (1975) is maintained. Quality hedges, as Brown and Levinson (1987: 164) argue, provide sincerity conditions: by using the hedges *perhaps* and *may*, the writer does not totally commit himself to the truth of his statement and, in this way, he does not transmit information that might lead to false inferences.

Similarly, the countryman's criticism concerning the military operations of the French Army acquires a sense of objectivity insofar as he resorts to the clause *if I remember right* to refer to the number of French soldiers that invaded Port St. John:

- (8) I have seen Letters from Newfoundland, which give an Account that a small Numb. of French Men from Placentia, not above 50, *if I remember right*, have made themselves Masters of Port St. John in that country, by Treachery. (February 9-12. Numb.5)

Hedges in (7) and (8) contribute to creating an impression of objectivity attached to the interlocutor's statements; this objectivity is obviously an important factor in persuasive discourse.

## 5. Concluding remarks

The research carried out provides evidence for the fact that in the eighth volume of *The Observer* Ridpath attempted to influence public opinion through two persuasive devices such as boosters and hedges, which are very different in nature. The coexistence of these devices establishes a balance between the assertiveness the interlocutor wants to give to his opinions and the degree of uncertainty which is necessary as a means to be cautious and express deference to readers. In this respect, it is worth noting that Ridpath seems to be well aware of the need to engage with readers as a prerequisite to persuade them to adopt his views. To this end, he resorts to hedges as a way to ensure politeness.

Summing up, boosters and hedges are very important elements in the construction of Ridpath's rhetorical style. The coexistence of verbal devices of commitment and detachment contributes to convince his audience of the truth-value of his propositions while having more possibilities of being well-received and accepted by his readership.

## Notes

1. Hereafter, the terms and expressions that we want to highlight in the texts will appear in italics.
2. From this viewpoint, hedging can be considered as an effective euphemistic strategy to maintain the harmony in communicative exchanges, as Crespo-Fernández (2005) notes.
3. "Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence" (Grice 1975: 6).

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**THIS TEXT IS PART OF THE VOLUME:**

**Martín Alegre, Sara (coord. and ed.), Melissa Moyer (ed.), Elisabet Pladevall (ed.) & Susagna Tubau (ed.). *At a Time of Crisis: English and American Studies in Spain*. Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/AEDEAN, 2012. ISBN-10: 84-695-4273-7, ISBN-13: 978-84-695-4273-6. Available from [www.aedean.org](http://www.aedean.org)**