Metaphor and Political Communication

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Introduction

This chapter summarizes and develops further a view of the role of metaphor in political communication that has been introduced in some earlier research (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2005, 2007), in particular the idea that metaphors contribute to the design of a leadership style through appealing to followers to share in a particular representation or construal of social reality. Successful and charismatic leaders create metaphors onto which followers project their own meanings and in doing so find a degree of socio-psychological and emotional gratification. I will first outline the classical view of the role of metaphor in rhetorical persuasion and then analyse metaphor uses by two contemporary politicians – Fidel Castro and Tony Blair. This will lead towards a proposal for a view of metaphor in political communication in which myth and ideology are integrated with the classical role of metaphor.

In a diachronic analysis of the ‘body politic’ metaphor, Musolff (2007) summarizes Susan Sontag’s view on how the rhetorical effect of this metaphor has shifted over time, i.e. ‘that there is a qualitative difference between “modern” and “classical” uses’ : whereas the latter, ‘which analogize a political disorder to an illness […] presuppose the classical medical (and political) idea of balance’, modern (i.e. post-Renaissance) Western culture ‘has seen the emergence of fatalistic diagnoses of diseases in the body politic, which culminated in totalitarian ideologies that favoured images of all-powerful “master illnesses” ‘ (Musolff, 2007: 5). My suggestion is that the classical view of rhetoric – while providing a robust account of how persuasion works through identifying the elements of rhetoric and the figures of speech
which serve to verbalize persuasion – also needs to be modified, so as to accommodate explicitly the roles of ideology and of myth and thus provide a more comprehensive and explanatory account of metaphor in political communication. Power as being an end in itself arose from the political theories of Machiavelli and has become established in the notion of claims to legitimacy as constituting essential components of political rhetoric. The diagnosis of disease in the body politic is precisely such a legitimacy claim, since the elimination of a disease may be taken as something that is inherently ‘right’ and legal. It is this mythic dimension of metaphor that is so persuasive in the communication of ideologies.