In this chapter I will illustrate a method known as comparative keyword analysis by demonstrating how it can be used to compare the rhetorical style of the British politician Tony Blair with other British politicians through the identification and analysis of high-frequency lexis. My understanding of rhetorical style goes back to how the term was employed in classical rhetoric where style was very closely related to lexical choice. Comparative keyword analysis is a method for the conjoint qualitative and quantitative analysis of large amounts of text or corpora, adapted for social research purposes from the discipline of corpus linguistics. The purpose of the analysis is to identify the rhetorical features of Tony Blair’s style of communication. I will first outline the relationship between leadership and communication before considering how it is that leaders are able to persuade through a command of rhetoric. I will then go on to outline the method of comparative keyword analysis and demonstrate how this can be applied to identify the rhetorical style of Tony Blair.

Leadership and communication

Two major theories of leadership are known as the ‘trait’ and ‘process’ approaches to leadership (Northouse 2004, 3). The trait approach focuses on a set of characteristics, or traits, possessed by leaders, while the process approach focuses on the interactive nature of the relationship between leaders and followers. Trait approaches originate in ‘great man’
theories of leadership and accommodate the popular view of leaders as people who possess exceptional characteristics. Based on an extensive survey of the early literature, Stogdill (1948) identified intelligence, alertness, insight, responsibility, initiative, persistence, self-confidence, and sociability as the characteristics of great leaders. A surprising omission here is any explicit reference to skill in communication. Process approaches emphasize the interactive nature of leadership and claim that leaders and followers emerge through joint interaction. They include approaches such as the situational, the path-goal, and contingency theory; in varying ways they integrate motivation theory and recognize the dynamic nature of leadership. Process approaches accept that leaders' behaviours can be modified and learned, whereas the trait approach treats leadership as something that, like charisma, is a gift from God (Charteris-Black 2007). However, there is a lack of research into how rhetorical style influences the process of interaction between leaders and followers.

When researching interaction it is necessary to distinguish between active and passive roles in leadership communication. The leader's role is by definition proactive; a leader necessarily has underlying intentions and must have the ability to communicate these through effective use of rhetoric. The followers' role is primarily passive; however, in direct interactive contexts we will know initially when a political leader has persuaded an audience through a response such as clapping, chanting, or cheering. In mediated contexts followers may respond with only a short time delay via various forms of electronic media such as blogs, Twitter, or other social networking sites. Eventually – and with more long-term political outcome, followers will respond through opinion polls and by voting behaviour at elections.

The style approach integrates aspects of the trait and process approaches and proposes that the key feature of leadership is the modification of behaviour. It distinguishes between two types of leadership behaviour: ‘task’ behaviours that relate to the organization and planning of work-related tasks and ‘relationship’ behaviours that relate to developing trust, commitment, and mutual respect among followers. The style approach proposes that a leader needs to find an appropriate balance between task and relationship behaviours for a particular group of followers. The value of the style approach is that it recognizes that personality traits are not in themselves sufficient. In keeping with process approaches, it recognizes that the particular blend of task and relationship behaviours varies according to the situation.