

Ch. 04: Persuasion through Rhetoric

I. Rhetoric affects its audience's beliefs without offering reasons for a claim.

A. Speaking most generally about nonargumentative persuasion, we will call words or phrases that manipulate their emotive force **rhetorical devices and techniques**.

- i. **Rhetorical devices**, or **slanters**, come in a variety of forms: They laud, censure, excuse, or change the subject. In general, they can dispose us to take a certain perspective on some subject.

II. Rhetoric tends to either strengthen or weaken a claim, or to either elevate or disparage its subject.

A. **Euphemisms**¹ and **dysphemisms**² replace one expression with another that carries, respectively, more positive or more negative associations.

- i. "Escort" is a euphemism for "bodyguard"; "thug" is a dysphemism.
- ii. Entirely neutral language can function as a euphemism or dysphemism, if it replaces a more common term that carries associations.
 1. "Delivery system," neutral as it sounds, is a euphemism for "missile."
 2. Likewise, the neutral language of "payment for nonwork" does not stop it from being a dysphemism for "welfare."
- iii. Euphemisms can have acceptable uses, when they foster civility and diplomacy.

B. **Emotional associations**, usually negative ones, connect to a person or thing described with a stereotype, a popularly held image of a group that rests on little or no evidence.

- i. Stereotypes are often involved when someone lumps people under one name or description, especially when it begins with "the": the conservative, the Asian.

¹ Euphemism n. – An act or example of the substitution of an inoffensive term for one considered offensive.

² Dysphemism

- ii. Many times a stereotype arises because it serves an interest, as when one nation goes to war with another.
- C. **Innuendo** belongs among those techniques that employ not certain words but ordinary features of linguistic communication. An innuendo works by implying what it does not say.
- i. Sometimes an innuendo suggests while pretending or even claiming not to: "Far be it from me to call my opponents liars."
 - ii. Along the same lines, one may condemn with faint praise. Imagine a letter of recommendation that says only, "Richard was very seldom tardy."
- D. A **loaded question** follows the logic of innuendo, illegitimately suggesting something through the very existence of the question.
- i. Whereas every question rests on assumptions, a loaded question rests on unwarranted or unjustified assumptions.
- E. **Weaseler**: When the persuasive device aims at shielding a claim from criticism by qualifying it, we may call that device a weaseler.
- i. Words like "perhaps" and "possibly," and qualifying phrases like "as far as we know" or "within reasonable limits," most commonly signal the work of weasellers.
- F. A **downplayer** is a rhetorical move to make something seem less important than it really is.
- i. We also find downplaying at work in the use of words like "mere," "merely," and "so-called," or the placement of a word in quotation marks:
 - a. "Evolution is merely a theory."
 - b. "Professor Economou has a new 'method' for measuring inflation."
 - ii. More complex downplaying happens when a speaker uses conjunctions like "however" and "although" to diminish one claim in favor of another.

- G. **The horse laugh, ridicule, or sarcasm** is a way to avoid arguing about a position by laughing at it.
- H. **Hyperbole** means exaggeration.