Can Linguistic Creativity be used for Political Purposes?

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The assertion that ‘Creative acts are shaped and inspired by a combination of political, social and economic forces’ is closely related to the idea that ‘Language is never neutral’ (Hann, 2017, p. 19). Hann sees language as reflecting an underlying ideology. Ideology in this context is ‘the world view or beliefs of a social group’ (ibid, p. 22) and ‘not necessarily a consciously held political belief system’ (Morris, 1994, quoted in Hann, 2017, p. 21). Consequently, as language choice within a discourse is never neutral, it follows that the chosen language must also be political. What is deemed to be political however depends to some extent on who is providing the definition of politics. Allen gives politics a narrow interpretation: ‘the art and science of government, public life, as involving authority and government’ (Allen, 1990, cited in Hann, 2017, p. 22), while Hann views it more generally as ‘activities pertaining to the struggle by different social groups and institutions to communicate their views and beliefs’ (Hann, 2017, p. 22). Such come from political forces originating in individuals or groups such as political parties or pressure groups. The creative use of language is thus a key part of the political processes of persuasion, coercion and manoeuvring of these groupings. Different groups with therefore choose different linguistic techniques, tones, vocabularies on so on in expressing their particular politics.

What then is a linguistically creative act and how can it be shaped by political considerations? The origins of the word ‘create’ lie in the belief that God created everything when bringing the world into being (Pope, 2017, p. 327). Subsequently, the possibility of human creativity was acknowledged when Philip Sidney [1554–86] said that God also ‘allowed man to imagine and make things beyond Nature’ (Sidney, quoted in Pope, 2017, p. 327). More recently, ‘creativity started being defined more or less consistently in terms of

novelty/originality and value/appropriateness' (Glăveanu and Kaufman, 2019). Creativity is now seen to be expressed in all types of discourse, from newspapers to graffiti, from classical opera to punk, across all forms of media, including TV, film, social media, TikTok and YouTube. This might be thought to offer a corresponding opportunity for increased linguistic creativity. However, Cameron states that 'Judgements on creativity are not based primarily on linguistic criteria, but on values which are ultimately social, cultural and political (2017, p. 198). Evidence presented below will contest this view, by showing how creativity continues to reside in linguistic content (as in Obama's acceptance speech or the DOE 'Clunk-Click' campaign).

The definition of a politically creative linguistic act must also consider that 'what comes to be regarded as creative is itself not a politically neutral process' (Hann, 2017, p. 18). Creativity is thus both a means to a political end and a political act in itself. In the past, the scope of linguistic creativity was rather narrowly defined - 'it was mostly the language of literature that could be creative' (Demjén, 2017, p. 22). Those judged on what was admirable, worthy, prestigious and novel were just a small part of society concerned largely with the established literary canon (Carter, 2004, Pope, 2005, Swann et al., 2011, all cited in Lillis, 2017, p. 70). This position has been challenged in the last few decades, extending the idea of creativity to 'a notion is increasingly being used in sociolinguistics and studies of communication to characterise a wide range of everyday linguistic practice, the considerable productive activity taking place using new technologies and the mixing and meshing of languages and modes' (Lillis, 2017, p. 70). This leads to the view that all language use is creative in some sense or another. Given Hann's view that language is never neutral, it follows that all language contains aspects of creativity and political expression.

Is political discourse special compared to other discourse types? The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics* defines discourse as 'a coherent succession of sentences, spoken or

(in most usage) written' (Matthews, 2014). Lillis describes political discourse as a composition of three elements: the act of production, the intended purpose of the discourse, and a potential impact or outcome (Lillis, p. 70). The characteristics of language that Lillis focuses on in her analysis of political discourse (including social semiotics, rhetoric, stylistics, aesthetics, multimodality, ibid., pp. 71-72) can be found in many non-political discourses. What then is it that makes a discourse political? While the broad and narrow definitions of politics of Allen and Hann have been discussed above, a more general definition is given by Heywood when he suggests that politics is the 'activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live' (Heywood, 2013, p. 2). He sees it as the process by which the search for a resolution of rival interests is carried out, independent of whether or not such a resolution is achieved. Others, such as Lillis, characterise political discourses as those that 'reflect an engagement with social concerns and offer a particular position on these' (Lillis, 2017, p. 67).

Lillis uses President Obama's acceptance speech to illustrate creativity in political discourse (Lillis, 2017, p. 73). Such use of rhetoric and stylistics for political purpose is not new, however. For example, the rhetorical techniques of logos, ethos and pathos, together with the rule of three discussed by Lillis and Crystal in Obama's speech, can also be found in Elizabeth I's speech to her troops at Tilbury (Green, 1997 [1654], p. 443). Elizabeth, like Obama, includes several examples of the rule of three, e.g. 'enemies of my God, of my kingdom, and of my people' (ibid). Elizabeth also uses a range of rhetoric techniques, i.e.: logos (the appeal to reason) as in 'not doubting but by your obedience to my general, by your concord in the camp, and your valour in the field, we shall shortly have a famous victory over these enemies of my God', pathos (the appeal to emotion) as in 'by your obedience to my General, by your Concord in the Camp, and your valour in the field, we shall shortly have a famous victorie …' and ethos (the appeal to the reputation of the speaker) as in 'but I have

the heart and Stomach of a King, and of a King of England too' (ibid). Five hundred years later, Obama uses similar linguistic techniques. Why then is Obama's speech creative, given that many of his linguistic techniques have been used numerous times before? Bakhtin argues that language is a battleground in which two forces, 'the centripetal, which pulls towards the standardisation of language, and the centrifugal, which pushes towards diversification and change (Bakhtin, 1981, cited in Hann, 2017, p. 22). So, in Obama's speech, we should expect a mix of the innovative or centrifugal and the familiar or centripetal. It is the tension between these two opposing forces that gives impetus and impact to the content of the speech. Obama's speech is also dialogical (in the sense that it interacts with past political discourse and with the context it is presented in (Hann, 2017, p. 34). There are stylistic echoes of Lincoln's ('of the people, by the people, for the people', (Gard and Lincoln, 2012)) in Obama's use of the rule of three. More directly, Obama says, '"We cannot walk alone," the preacher cried. "And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead"' quoting directly from Martin Luther King's 1963 speech 'I Have a Dream' (BBC, 2003). Here Obama, a black politician, has used the technique of recontextualization (Hann, 2017, p. 24) to reuse, in a new context, the words of a black civil rights leader, to give both impact and legitimacy to his speech.

Turning to commercial political discourse, it has been suggested that 'The overriding purpose of advertising to make a profit closes it off from the multiple interpretations of that literary texts … encourage' (Cook, 2017, p. 119). In some ways, this is a questionable proposition. Not all advertising is driven by profit motives - given that advertising may be most generally defined as 'the techniques and practices used to bring products, services, opinions, or causes to public notice for the purpose of persuading the public to respond in a certain way toward what is advertised' (Britannica, 2025). Government ad campaigns such as the 'Clunk-Click' road safety campaign of the 1970s are neither profit-driven nor

promoted by a commercial organisation. Despite its lack of profit motive, the 'Clunk-Click' campaign can be argued to contain a similar richness of creativity to the creative literary works admired by Cook. The campaign developed the phrase 'Clunk, Click, every trip' as its key slogan (Central Office of Information, 2025; Weaver, 2016; DOE, 1974). This slogan is made up of two unlinked parallel nouns ('clunk, click') followed by a prepositional phrase acting as an adverbial 'every trip'. This grammatical division splits the slogan into two half-lines each of which have two major stresses, encouraging the speaker to pause between the halves. The halves are also contrasted, as the first half uses initial and final consonant alliteration in 'clunk' and 'click', while the second half does not. The half rhyme between 'click' and 'trip' using voiceless stops also emphasises the two equal half lines of the slogan. Despite consisting of just four words, the slogan is a rich use of creative linguistic content, just like a canonical literary text such as Seamus Heaney's 'Requiem for the Croppies' (Heaney, 1990 [1966], p. 12). Here Heaney, like the 'Clunk-Click' campaign, uses alliteration, internal rhyme across half-lines, e.g. 'Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon,' and a split line, with contrasted halves, where the first half line is trochee, trochee terminated by a separating single stressed syllable ('terraced thousands died') and the second half line is trochee, trochee, trochee ('shaking scythes at cannon').

Both Heaney and the writers of 'Clunk, Click, every trip' show a high level of linguistic and literary competence in their deployment of language. There is, however, a difference in the political intentions of the two authors. Lillis (2017, p. 90) sees Heaney's work as 'overtly political in the sense of aligning himself with a particular group or voice'. The 'Requiem for the Croppies' makes political statements in that it emphasises the brutal nature of the British suppression of the Croppies' 1798 rising, and the Croppies as courageous, untrained, yet still willing to pursue their rebellious and romantic ideals of independence. Such a poem is a statement of Nationalistic aims and idealisms. Heaney sees the poet's responsibility not as a

proselytiser for a given ideology but instead he describes his political position by saying ‘I think it was perfectly in order to have a disposition, but not a propagandist position’ (Heaney, 2012, quoted in Lillis, 2017, p. 91). The writers of ‘Clunk, Click, every trip’, however, are also producing political material but within a specific ideology - that of a voluntary change of public behaviour for personal safety and does not promote an overt party-political position. This fits more closely to Allen’s narrower definition of a political act, while Heaney’s persuasion is more aimed at ‘hearts and minds’ and thus aligns more closely with Hann’s broader definition.

For many people, using language ‘creatively’ is less important than using it ‘correctly’, ‘appropriately’ or ‘intelligibly’ (Cameron, 2017, p. 197). Cameron says that in the real world, not all forms of creative language use are considered to be equal, arguing that ‘judgements on creativity are not based primarily on linguistic criteria, but on values which are ultimately social, cultural and political’ (ibid). As an example, consider Keen’s views on political discourse in a digital environment (Keen, cited in The Open University, 2025a). Keen suggests that YouTube is a ‘negative [cultural] force, neither formally developed nor curated, nor the recipient of investment from cultural institutions’ (ibid). He argues that the unmediated nature of YouTube), combined with the sheer volume of contributions, overwhelms any underlying creativity. He also asserts, ‘…fewer and fewer people are able to make a living creating videos, making records, writing books. The internet has been a very, very bad thing for the professional creative community’ (ibid). While digital publishing certainly threatens the viability of traditional publishing routes, authors are not bound to stay with tradition (Bingham, 2025) and, in fact, they now have access to more rather less channels of consumption of their works than ever before (Galer, 2025). Keen’s assertion that the internet is a bad thing financially for authors also seems somewhat flawed. In 2019, approximately $8.25 billion of Google’s advertisement revenue of $15 billion was distributed

to more than 150,000 different channels and thus to the creatives making the content on those channels. 153,770 channels each received an average of $16,346, while 517 received an average of $1,707,446 (Rieder, 2020, quoted in Rieder et al, 2023, p. 4, Table 1).

Establishing criteria for creative value is a difficult task that even professional evaluators such as the critic Mark Lawson struggle with. Lawson states 'academic snobbery, which is then endorsed by literary critics and newspapers', thereby acknowledging that the traditional establishment has long seen itself as the key arbiter of creative value (The Open University, 2025b). He nevertheless still endorses the professional critic role, saying that 'expertise will eventually win out' and argues that 'wouldn't you rather hear … from a professional critic rather than a citizen critic because citizen critics generally have no training'. This may still be true in the traditional arts of theatre, TV, film and literature, however the huge flood of new media creativity on social media and the internet (e.g. YouTube, TikTok, personal websites, self-published novels, poetry, graphic novels, fan fiction, blogs, vlogs, games, artwork, zines) no longer look to the traditional critics for approval or customer guidance. The traditional critic or academic is no longer be the sole arbiter of what is good, creative or valuable. Social media, peer reviews and simple commercial pressures (e.g. digital sales) now add a strong voice to the debate. While this may have some disadvantages, e.g. 'rather a lot of these so-called reader reviews in newspapers are written by people with a quite astonishing conflict of interest' (Lawson, quoted in The Open University, 2025b) it now seems impossible reverse this democratisation of critical evaluation and to put the technology of the internet genie back into its bottle.

In conclusion, the linguistics of political creativity is heteroglossic - using multiple voices or types of language to express different opinions within a single text. It may also be dialogic as it has relationships with what has already been said in the past and what will be said in the future. Today's producers of texts, speech and media not only re-use the creative linguistic

techniques of their predecessors in novel ways but also reconfigure and re-textualize those methods and texts in the evolving digital technologies of contemporary society. The division between the producers, consumers and evaluators of political discourse is becoming increasingly blurred as traditional methods of discourse are augmented or replaced by digital and networked channels of multimodality.

(2500 words)

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Appendix 1

This is a transcript of a Central Office of Information Road Safety film presented by Shaw Taylor in 1971. See: Central Office of Information Films (2025) 'Television Commercials: What was made 1960 to 1979', *Central Office of Information Films*.

Narrator (Shaw Taylor):

You know each of those cars carries a whole family.
Yes, even him.
He's probably got a wife and kids depending on his arriving home safely
What are his chances?
That much less if he doesn't snap into his seat belt.
There can be some pretty frightening results from accidents where people don't wear their seat belts, and they don't have to be fatal.
After all what's a family with Mom or Dad laid up in hospital?
I know that if you wear a seat belt you reduce your chances of being killed or seriously injured by half.
So, what I'm getting at is this - if you won't belt up for yourselves then please do it for them.
Because your seat belt is their security.
And I'm going to be around for quite a while punching that message across.
Right, here's my first problem:
The driver who takes all the trouble in the world to put a seat belt on for a long drive along the motorway but doesn't bother for just popping around the corner because it's that popping around the corner drive that's the most dangerous, just when you think it's not worth belting up.
Think about this one: over 60% of all traffic accidents happen in built up areas.
So, let's get into that seat belt habit and let's make it automatic as automatic as closing the car door.
After all you, wouldn't drive off without hearing this would you: the clank of the car door closing.
Right let's add another sound: the click of a seat belt being fastened.
Clunk, click - that makes sound sense, doesn't it?
Never clunk without your click.
You know we could become a nation of clunk clickers
Is it all worth it?
Well, if it's not for you surely it is for them?
Remember this seat belt is their security.
See you, clunkclicker!

Source: belfast jack (2017) 'Shaw Taylor 1960's Clunk Click Every Trip Vintage British TV Commercial', *YouTube,* available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQ-IvxZiZYk accessed on 19 April 2025.

Appendix 2:

This is a transcript of a Central Office of Information Road Safety film presented by Jimmy Savile in the early 1970s. See: Central Office of Information Films (2025) 'Television Commercials: What was made 1960 to 1979', *Central Office of Information Films*.

Narrator (Jimmy Savile):

You can put almost any frail object in a box and provided it's held firm you can
shake it about no end but if it's loose in the box that's another matter.
A car is a box a box on Wheels but a box just the same and it can still
get shaken about and if you're in it and not wearing a seat belt you're in trouble because
you're a loose object.
It doesn't matter who you are or what you are.
You can be the world's most experienced driver but to the law of gravity you're
the world's most experienced loose object and it can be very unfunny.
Now an egg hasn't got much in the way of brains, but you have
Wear a seat belt and if the box gets shaken up
you stand every chance of not getting broken no matter how short the journey.
Nag yourself to remember this drill:
Clunk the car door and click the seat belt
Clunk, click every trip!

Source: paulharris (2006) 'Clunk Click'', *YouTube,* available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddNr7rebaQo accessed on 19 April 2025.