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Devious Rhetoric[*]

Sometimes, the *way* an idea is expressed interferes with good thinking. Word-choice, emphasis, and other factors can cause biases or discourages sincere discussion, which lead to unwarranted judgments. There are many ways in which communication can divert us like this; the following is a list of some of the most common.

Take heed: The following rhetorical phenomena are not even *arguments*, much less bad arguments. After all, they do not present any reasons (good or bad) for a conclusion. Rather, they are simply linguistic tactics for provoking biases or shutting down the opposition.

1. *Conversation Stoppers*

Obscuritanism

Obscuratanism is speaking a convoluted, unclear manner in order to seem smart and to make criticism difficult.

Postmodernist: A capitalist system exercises tarrying with the negative.

Note this is not just a case of dishonest imprecision due to exaggeration or ordinary vagueness. Rather, the words lack a determinate meaning of any sort. (Even a term like 'tall' has an identifiable meaning, even though the term is vague.)

Often, an obscuritanist will respond to critics by saying that they fail to understand the point. A special case of this is "terrorist obscuritanism," where the speaker implies that doubters must be stupid.

Natalia, in response to the previous: Huh?
Postmodernist: You've been well-trained in neo-liberal anti-thought.

That said, a speaker can be obscure without committing *obscuritanism*. Sure, if a statement can be made less obscure, that is better. But not every passage written in difficult prose is a case of *devious* rhetoric.

How can you tell the difference? The key question is whether the author is using unclarity *to hide a weakness* in their position. Unfortunately, however, unclarity means it difficult to discern what the author's "position" is. Although, if a person seems *evasive* or *defensive* when asked to clarify their view, this is evidence that obscuritanism is at work.

Even so, people sometimes commit obscuritanism *unintentionally*. Thus, a person can be completely sincere in trying to give the best argument they can, and yet cover over a weakness

[*] Much of this handout is lifted directly from chapters 4 and 5 of Lewis Vaughn, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, 6th edition. New York: Oxford University Press. Also, coverage of leading questions and of affective medium/voice are partly from chapters 7 and 10 (respectively) of Galen Forseman et al., *The Critical Thinking Toolkit*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

with unclear language. And this applies to *you.* So it is wise to *ask yourself* whether your writing or speaking indulges in obscuritanism, even when you are sincerely giving your best efforts.

Something similar to obscuritanism is “corporate jargon”. Here, a speaker uses unclear language to convey a certain attitude without conveying any real information. The speaker is “saying something without saying something.”

CEO: We can boast that our leverage with the customer is transparent.

Superficially, this sounds positive, and which is what the CEO wants. But what information does it convey? The CEO probably won’t elaborate, since her/his only purpose was to sound upbeat, not to convey information.

This kind of corporate-speak is different from prototypical obscuritanism. Usually, obscuritanism uses opaque buzzwords in order to sound “deep” and highly educated, whereas corporate-speak consists more of empty phrases, with the aim of avoiding saying anything concrete. But since this kind of rhetoric can still have an emotional affect, it can still sway audiences in ways that elude proper critical scrutiny.

Domination Rhetoric

Domination rhetoric consists of insistent remarks against (/in favor) of an idea, presented as if the conclusions were obvious, in a manner that discourages further discussion.

Trust the New York Times *to report the news fairly? Right, just like I trust the airlines to be always on time.*

You think Fox News is fair and balanced? Ha!

The brusque manner in which the opposition is dismissed suggests that the opposing view is obviously mistaken. This is a minimal kind of intimidation tactic, meant to preclude serious discussion without giving any reasons for this.

Terrorist obscuritanism, covered under the previous heading, is basically a case of obscurantism where domination rhetoric is also used. But domination rhetoric can still be used even when there is no obscurity.

2. Prejudicial Rhetoric

Euphemisms and Dysphemisms

Euphemisms (/dysphemisms) are words that have relatively positive (/negative) connotations, used to influence audiences independently of evidence and reasons.

The U.S. occupation of Afghanistan was a peacekeeping mission.

‘Peacekeeping’ has positive connotations which might sway the audience into looking favorably on the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan. (‘Occupation’ is probably another euphemism.) Someone less supportive might instead call it an “invasion” or a case of American “imperialism.”

Regardless, euphemisms often perform a useful social function by allowing us to discuss sensitive subjects in a less emotional way. We may spare people’s feelings by saying that their loved ones “have passed on” rather than that they “have died.” But as critical thinkers, we should still be on guard against the deceptive use of connotations.

Dishonest Imprecision

A person engages in dishonest imprecision when they exaggerate or are unnecessarily vague on details that matter, in order to influence judgment.

An example of exaggeration:

I did everything I could, but I still got a ‘D’ on that exam.

Perhaps you studied three nights in a row, so you gave a sincere effort. But suppose you never you missed several classes. Then, it is an exaggeration to say that you did *everything* you could…

But as a contrast, suppose you say instead:

I tried really hard, but I still got a ‘D’ on that exam.

Here, you are not necessarily saying something *false*—that’s because “tried really hard” is vague enough that it may apply to your three-night studying effort. But if you missed several classes, then you did not *try as hard as you should*, and your statement seems dishonest by insinuating otherwise.

A special case of dishonest imprecision is *stereotyping*, where members of a group are characterized in a uniform way, even though (at best) only some members of the group are that way.

We all know that pit bulls are really aggressive.

Liberals are just pro-taxes and anti-rich.

Such statements may be due more to laziness or lack of information rather than a desire to deceive. Regardless, the imprecision in such statements can mislead.

Skewed Tropes, Metaphors, and Allegories

Poetic or other rhetorical comparisons often oversimply the issues and lead to slanted assessments.

Justin Trudeau is a real-life Prince Charming.

As taught by the Song of Solomon*, God's relationship to us is like a lover to his beloved.*

We know that socialism is bound to fail. Just read Animal Farm *by Orwell.*

The first example uses the trope of Prince Charming to create a positive image of Trudeau (perhaps one that causes us to forget his controversial involvement with certain charities). The second example glosses over a very contentious idea in a poetic guise. The third uses a patently fictional allegory as weighty evidence against a certain form of government.

Critical thinkers ultimately might agree with the judgments suggested by these examples, but their rhetorical guise often stops people from examining them adequately. It was for this reason that Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher, thought that we should generally avoid the influence of art, music, and poetry. These often have a powerful sway on people without being subject to serious scrutiny.

(Be that as it may, one of the most famous allegories in Western civilization is Plato's "allegory of the cave." In that allegory, what controversial ideas are clothed in rhetoric in a way that discourages critical thought?)

Damning Implicature

In general, an implicature is something *insinuated* by a speaker rather than explicitly said. **A damning implicature is a contentious insinuation—yet since it is "unsaid," it may encourage hasty judgments that are not critically examined.**

Senator Johnson may have had problems with alcohol, marijuana, and crack cocaine, but I'm sure that these currently have no influence on her public service.

The damning implicature: Senator Johnson had substance abuse problems which probably affected her service in the past. Another example:

Dear Madam or Sir: My student would be an excellent choice for your law program; he has remarkably neat handwriting and perfect attendance in my class. Sincerely, H.P. Grice, Ph.D.

The damning implicature: The student is not impressive in more relevant matters, e.g., intelligence, academic ability, etc.

In both these examples, the implicature may be intentional or it may be unintentional. Regardless, such implicatures can influence our thinking in subtle and undesirable ways.

Leading Questions

Leading questions have damning implicatures, suggestive word choices, or other features which create partiality.

Lawyer, to domestic abuse defendant: When did you stop beating your wife?

If the defendant directly answers this question, he concedes that he *has* beaten his wife, thus implicating his own guilt. (Some logicians call this sort of thing the "fallacy of complex question.")

One important use of leading questions occurs in "push polls." Political campaigns often run such "polls" not to discovery voter attitudes—but to *shape* or *push* those attitudes. For instance, a smear campaign of John McCain, during the South Carolina Republican primary in 2000, took the form of a sham telephone survey. Voters were asked:

Would you be more or less likely to vote for John McCain if you knew he had fathered an illegitimate black child?

The campaign was not really interested in the answers; it was more interested to push voter attitudes against McCain.

Notably, some questions are not *leading* questions but are rather *unintentionally* phrased in ways that affect the answers. For instance, researchers have found that people answer differently if they are asked whether they do something "frequently" versus "habitually" versus "regularly" versus "often." The point: Word choice matters.

3. Advertising Tricks

Weasel Words

These are words or phrases that render a statement insubstantial, even though the statement may appear superficially striking. Examples:

You may have already won a new 2022 Tesla Model S!

Relieves up to 60 percent of headaches in chronic headache sufferers.

Many doctors recommend ginseng for sexual dysfunction.

Everyone agrees that in some sense, human life is sacred.

In the first example, the word 'may' renders the claim banal. *Of course* there is a *bare possibility* that you might have won! But the statement makes it sound like there is a good chance that you have won—and that's of course totally bogus.

RE: the second example. "Up to 60 percent" is weaseling—it sounds significant, but in fact, it is compatible with only a 3 percent result!

Similarly, in the third example, 'Many doctors' is disingenuously vague. Superficially, it sounds like there is a *consensus* that ginseng helps sexual disfunction. But what if only seven out of the

thousands of doctors count as "many"? Then, the *vast majority* of doctors might still *not* recommend ginseng for sexual disfunction!

In the final example, the phrase 'in some sense' waters down the statement into something nearly empty. If everyone agrees that killing innocent people is wrong, for example, then perhaps *in some sense*, everyone regards human life as "sacred." But it is probably not a sense that is *relevant* if the speaker wants to persuade you, e.g., that abortion should be illegal.

Plausibly, the use of weasel words is a special case of "dishonest imprecision," as described earlier. But what's distinctive about weaseling is that the statements in question are mostly devoid of information, even though they *seem* to be significant when you first read them.

Defective Comparisons

A defective comparison is where key details about the comparison are not made explicit. This allows someone to make a statement that sounds positive (or negative) without really saying anything definite. Examples:

Big sale! The SuperX CD Player is here for less than the suggested retail price!

BeSure Tampons are 30% more absorbent.

Simply better-tasting tacos. No question.

The claim in the first example may or may not be touting a true bargain. We would probably view the "Big sale" in a different light if we knew whether the store's *regular* prices are below the suggested retail prices or if *all* stores sell the CD player below the suggested retail.

The second example leaves open what the product's absorbency is being compared *to*. Are they 30% more absorbent than they used to be? 30% more absorbent than other brands? If the latter, which other brands are we talking about? The *30% more* may seem impressive—until we notice that nothing is really being compared.

Regarding the third example, the phrase "better-tasting tacos" also leaves unsaid what the tacos are being compared to. But more than that, it is highly subjective—a claim that *anyone* could make about his or her own gustatory experience. So the claim tells you nothing about whether *you* will like the tacos. The claim could even be stretched to "The best-tasting tacos on earth!" In the ad world, such exaggerations are known as *puffery*, which is regarded in advertising law as hype that few people take seriously.

Defective comparisons are probably also a special case of "dishonest imprecision," a specific type of imprecision involving a comparison. But note that there need not be any exaggeration. And unlike weaseling, a defective comparison is often not trivial. It is informative to know that the CD player is being sold at less than the retail price. But since some context is omitted, it is potentially misleading in how "big" the sale is.

Sloganeering

Slogans often have an odd, almost hypnotic effect in discouraging critical scrutiny, even though it is often readily seen on reflection that a slogan is bullshit. But slogans somehow discourage such reflection from occurring in the first place.

You can't win if you don't play! [Slogan for the Arizona lottery]

Granted, it is true that you can't win the lottery if you don't buy a ticket. But the insinuation is that you *should* buy a ticket, assuming you want to win. Yet that insinuation is *highly contentious*: It is reasonable buy a ticket only if this is more likely to benefit you than not. And it is *severely unlikely* that buying a ticket will benefit you, at least in financial terms. (Joke from David Letterman: Your odds of winning the lottery decrease only slightly—just slightly—if you don't buy a ticket.)

The "rhyme as reason" effect (cf. the handout on Cognitive Biases) often plays a role in slogans. Advertisers know that a snappy rhyme tends to make a statement seem more appealing.

Arby's: Good Mood Food

It is of course completely arbitrary that *Arby's* should be designated as "good mood food" rather than McDonalds or even just a nice home cooked meal.

Notice that, although slogans can engage in dishonest imprecision, slogans often have their hypnotic effect without such things. The Arizona lottery slogan is perfectly clear and precise, yet it still somehow conceals the fiscal irrationality of playing the lottery.

Affective Medium and Voice

Non-linguistic emotional triggers are often used to provoke attraction/aversion toward something. Examples:

-The voice of a wise old man explaining why you need life insurance;

-A credit card ad uses images of famous and attractive celebrities;

-Sad music playing while someone asks for donations for starving children;

-The nation's flag flying by a politician asking for your support;

-An indignant tone of voice dismissing a government policy;

-A brief, impersonal text telling your ex not to call anymore.

It may seem obvious *now* that these things are just emotionally manipulative. But the fact is that such things work, and so it is best to maintain awareness of how non-linguistic factors are used to influence your judgment.

N.B., since these are non-linguistic phenomena, affective medium and voice are not really *rhetorical* devices. But they seem similar enough to include them in this handout.

A special case of affective medium/voice is *false modesty*, or more broadly, *false congeniality*. This is when a speaker presents themselves as humble and co-operative—but their intention is *not* to engage in genuine dialogue. Rather, they have a pre-set agenda and are merely using a deferential demeanor to *manipulate you* into accepting their opinions.

I don't know, but my guess is that tax benefits for the wealthy ultimately benefit the entire economy.

I am certainly not the smartest person in the room, but it seems clear that no one has a right to an abortion.

Matters become unclear, however, since the speaker could be *genuinely* humble, reasonable, deferential, etc. And such things *are* virtues, insofar as they enable productive discussions on controversial topics (see the handout "What is the Ideal Setting for Inquiry?") It's just that sometimes people *feign* these virtues merely to give themselves credibility and/or persuasive power, without any intent of compromising or participating in a co-operative endeavor to find the truth.

There is a more general lesson here.
Although rhetorical tricks are usually devious, some can be used permissibly and even beneficially. For example, if you have a serious evidence-based case that your political candidate is the best choice, adding a snappy, rhyming slogan can help mobilize your audience. But the *evidence-based case* is a crucial prerequisite here. Without that, your rhetoric is empty, or worse, nefarious. Use your powers for good, not evil.