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**Why *They* were in the Gulf: A  
Discourse Analysis of Bush's  
*Newsweek* Letter**

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# **Why *They* Were in the Gulf: a Discourse-Stylistics Analysis of Bush's *Newsweek* Letter**

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## **1. Introduction**

On the 26th of November 1990, the American weekly *Newsweek* published an open letter from the president of the United States of America, George Bush. In this letter, the White House was trying to explain and justify American intervention policy in the Persian Gulf crisis. The letter is an extremely carefully designed rhetorical artefact: its aim is to persuade both the American citizen and the governments and peoples of other developed countries of the need to take military action against the Iraqi army in occupied Kuwait.

In order to be successful, political discourse has to orient towards two conflicting communicative goals. On the one hand it has to get its message across; on the other, it has to persuade, to convince its audience of the truth-value of its message. In order to get its message across, political discourse has to state ideas in as clear a fashion as possible, given that it is usually targeted for a wide, non-specialised audience; but in order to persuade, political discourse often has to make use of a well-known rhetorical device: ambiguity.

In this paper, I would like to confine my analysis of this letter to a single rhetorical device: the vague, ambiguous meaning which the text constructs for the pronoun *we*. Given constraints of time and space I will not attempt to prove here my earlier claim that this letter has been written by a very attentive mind and constitutes a powerful rhetorical artefact. However, just to give you an indication of what I have in mind, let me draw your attention to two stylistic features of this letter: one at the level of grammar, the other at the level of discourse. At the level of grammar, the abundance of parallel structures is noticeable:

'men, women and children' (para. 2)  
'Homes, buildings and factories' (para. 2).  
'violence, suffering and sacrifice' (para. 12)

'with little warning and even less mercy' (para. 1)  
'on the sand and along the shores' (para. 5)  
'our citizens and our diplomats' (para. 9)

'immediate and unwavering' (para. 4)  
'immediate and unconditional' (para. 11)  
'lasting and meaningful' (para. 13)

The effect of these parallelisms is to give the impression that the writer is fully in command, that his argumentation is carefully

considered and well-balanced.

At the level of discourse, the text displays several instances of carefully selected textual and interpersonal metadiscourse, particularly at the beginning of certain paragraphs:

Interpersonal

'Now, as I write this, ...' (para. 5)

'Let me make one more thing clear' (para. 12)

## Textual

'First, the world must not reward aggression' (para. 7)

'Second, our national security is at stake' (para. 8)

'Last, innocent lives are at stake' (para. 9)

It is evident then that this letter has been ,designed with the reader in mind and the writer has obviously taken the trouble to guide the reader through to the end. Yet when the reader, if he or she be of an inquisitive nature, tries to decide who or what is referred to by the use of the personal pronoun *we*, he or she finds that the text doesn't have much to offer in the way of help. The text *seems* to be deliberately opaque; it contributes actively to create an ambiguous referent for the pronoun *we*.

The pronoun *we* reappears throughout the text but it does not do so at random. Its high rate of appearance is most noticeable in specific paragraphs. The pronoun repeatedly appears in paragraphs which are important for the global organization of the text: it appears twice in paragraph 6, the paragraph which establishes the topic of the text and it appears as many as seven times in paragraph 14 -- the final paragraph -- the paragraph in which all the persuasive force of the text must concentrate; the paragraph in which the writer must provide the reader with something to take home, and the paragraph which, like in a harangue, has to send off the troops cheering.

What we have here in paragraph 14 is the combined use of two well-known rhetorical figures: **anaphora**, or the repetition of the same word at the beginning of sentences, and **parallelism**, also known as **parison**, which is the repetition of the same structural pattern:

When we succeed, we will have returned a country to its people. We will have shown that aggression will not be tolerated. We will have invigorated a United Nations that contributes as its founders dreamed. We will have established principles for acceptable international conduct and the means to enforce them.

(*Newsweek*, November 26, 1990,  
p.31)

In the example above, the repetition of *we* in initial position constitutes an anaphora and the repetition of the pattern *we + will have + past participle* is a parison. Both anaphora and parison, as K. Wales has noted (1989, 23 and 335), are common features of public oratory and they are frequently found in political discourse. Their function is to stress a point, to add emphasis and they might also be seen to contribute to Mrs. Thatcher's hammering style:

*We are fighting* for the rights of the little man... *We are fighting*, as we have always fought, for the weak as well as the strong. *We are fighting* for great and good causes...

quoted in (The Guardian, 13 October 1984,  
Wales 1989, 23 -- emphasis mine)

In Shakespeare's play *Henry V*, the king also makes use of the same rhetorical figure in his famous speech before the battle of Agincourt: 'We few, we happy few, we band of brothers' (Iv, iii, 60).

These three examples have something else in common: they leave it up to the reader to decide between competing referents for *we*. In other words, the reader or hearer has to decide what is meant by 'we', who or what is 'we'.

In the case of Henry V's speech, the referent is clearly identified with the help of the context of situation: a 'king is addressing his army before a battle, so *we* means 'you and me'. In the case of Mrs. Thatcher, we could choose between the Tory Party or the Government or if we assumed she is using a *royal we* - a device she is extremely fond of - we could take *we* to mean Mrs. Thatcher herself. Whichever of these three referents we were to choose makes little real difference. In the case of the *Newsweek* letter, however, it is not as easy to unmask the participant hiding behind the pronoun *we*. In fact, the first thing we ought to consider is if there could not be several meanings of *we* in this letter: that is, if the referent of *we* remains one and the same throughout the text or if, as I feel inclined to suspect, there are different participants in different parts of this letter which are conveniently and ambiguously referred to by the use of *we*.

## 2. The meanings of *we*

The first time that the pronoun *we* appears in the text is in the title: 'Why we are in the Gulf'. But, presumably, the title was put in by a *Newsweek* editor and not by the writer of the letter, so we can assume that this *we* is referring cataphorically to a participant which will be made explicit later in the text.

The next time *we* appears in the text is in paragraph 6:

But why are we there? Why *should we*  
be there'?

(*Newsweek*, November 26, 1990,  
p.30;  
original emphasis)

This is a crucial paragraph in the textual organization of the letter. Its function is to mark the boundary between two well-defined sections in the text: it divides the narration of past events from the suggestion of actions which should take place in the future. It is also an important paragraph from the point of view of the

ideational content of the letter: it establishes and focuses the topic, it narrows down the subject-matter of the letter. Finally, it is also an interesting paragraph if we attend to its form: it is unusually short for a paragraph - it only has one line - and it consists of two consecutive questions, both of which have *we* as their grammatical subject.

If we want to discover who or what is the participant referred to by this pronoun, we have to look for its referent in previous paragraphs. If we do so, we could choose between: a) *we*, the international community; b) *we*, the coalition of nations; c) *we*, the United States. Interestingly enough, none of these bodies are actually there in the Gulf. It is 'the 200,000 men and women wearing the uniforms of the U.S. armed forces' who are 'on the sand and along the shores of the Arabian peninsula' (*Newsweek*, November 26, 1990, p.30). It would have been logical to expect then a third-person plural pronoun - *they* - instead of a first-person pronoun. However, the rhetorical, persuasive force of the pronoun *we* is not matched by the pronoun *they*: in a written text, *we* can always be interpreted as 'you-reader and me-writer'. This exophoric meaning of *we* would bring president Bush to a position close to that of Henry V: Bush could be seen as addressing American and international public opinion, harangue-style, before the battle.

The meaning of *we* is then deliberately ambiguous here: the writer is forcing upon the reader a reality which the reader may not construe in the same way. The writer is assuming that the international community, the people of the United States, the U.S. armed forces, president Bush and the reader all agree and share the same views on the Gulf crisis.

In paragraph 7 we find again two other instances of *we*:

First, the world must not reward aggression. Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait is not just a case of petty aggression. We stand now at a singular moment. The civilised world is now in the process of fashioning the rules that will govern the new world order beginning to emerge in the aftermath of the Cold War. The history of this century shows clearly that rewarding aggression encourages more aggression. If the world looks the other way in this first crisis of the Post Cold War era, other would-be-Saddams will conclude, correctly, that aggression pays. We must either be prepared to respond now or face a much greater set of challenges down the road.

(*Newsweek*, November 26, 1990, p.31)

In this paragraph, the writer is again using the pronoun *we* to refer to a participant which would normally be referred to with a third-

person pronoun: 'the world', 'the civilised world'. The writer is here presenting the world as a homogeneous entity, which includes everybody except 'he', President Saddam Hussein.

Paragraph 8, like paragraph 7, contains the writer's answer to the questions posed in paragraph 6. Not surprisingly, the pronoun *we* reappears:

Second, our national security *is* at stake. Can the world afford to allow Saddam Hussein a stranglehold around the world's economic lifeline? That is exactly what would happen if we failed. Armed with thousands of tanks and aircraft, not to mention chemical, biological and perhaps even nuclear weapons, Saddam would dominate the Gulf and the bulk of the world's petroleum reserves. Even now, without an actual shortage of oil, Saddam's aggression has almost doubled oil prices. Fledgling democracies are at particular risk; the poorest nations are hit hardest. The potential for much greater suffering is real. We cannot allow any tyrant to practice economic blackmail. Energy security is *national* security, and we must be prepared to act accordingly.

(*Newsweek*, November 26, 1990,  
p.31;  
original emphasis)

In this paragraph, the referent of the possessive pronoun *our* is clearly the U.S. Two sentences down, in the third sentence of this paragraph, we find the pronoun *we* again: 'That is exactly what would happen if we failed'. Who is this *we*? *The* United States as in the possessive pronoun of the first sentence of the paragraph, or 'the world', the grammatical subject of the second sentence? Later in the paragraph, when the writer says, 'We cannot allow any tyrant to practice economic blackmail', one could think that this *we* is 'we the world' again. But the next sentence brings another *we*: 'Energy security is *national* security, and we must be prepared to act accordingly'. The word *national*, in italics in the original text, suggests that this other *we* is 'we the United States' or 'we the U.S. government'.

In paragraph 12 we find yet another instance of *we*:

Let me make one more thing clear. As I work to realize these goals, I will use every means at my disposal to reach a peaceful solution. We will continue the effective implementation of the United Nations sanctions. There already has been enough violence, suffering and sacrifice.

(*Newsweek*, November 26, 1990,  
p.31)

Here: again, the meaning of *we* is ambiguous. If we look for an referent in the preceding sentence, we can interpret this *we* as a

*royal we*. If we prefer to see this *we* as opposed to the *I* of the preceding sentence, then who is *we*? Who is the actor in the process 'will continue the effective implementation of the United Nations sanctions'? -- the U.S. government? -- the U.S. armed forces? -- or the international coalition? The reader can choose whichever referent he or she prefers.

In paragraph 14, the letter's final paragraph, the task of deciding amongst competing referents for the pronoun *we* becomes extremely difficult:

With unity and determination, and yes, patience, I am confident that these objectives are within reach. When we succeed, we will have returned a country to its people. We will have shown that aggression will not be tolerated. We will have invigorated a United Nations that contributes as its founders dreamed. We will have established principles for acceptable international conduct and the means to enforce them. In short, we will have taken a major step toward a community of nations bound by a common commitment to peace and restraint. This is something Americans and peace-loving peoples have long sought. Out of this difficult time of testing, we have the extraordinary opportunity to make this dream a reality.

(*Newsweek*, November 26, 1990,

p.3i)

By the time the reader is faced with paragraph 14 the pronoun *we* has been used in place of at least five distinct referents: a) the civilised world; b) the American people; c) the U.S. government; d) the U.S. armed forces and e) President Bush. If we try to substitute the *we* in paragraph 14 for some of these referents, we could end up with something like this:

With unity and determination, and yes, patience, I am confident that these objectives are within reach. When ***the U.S. armed forces*** succeed, ***the American people*** will have returned a count to its people. ***The U.S. Government*** will have shown that aggression will not be tolerated. The ***United States of America*** will have invigorated a United Nations that contributes as its founders dreamed. The ***United Nations Security Council*** will have established principles for acceptable international conduct and the means to enforce them. In short, ***the civilised world (i.e. the developed countries)*** will have taken a major step toward a community of nations bound by a common commitment to peace and restraint. This is something Americans and peace-loving peoples have long sought. Out of this difficult time of testing, ***I, George Bush, President of the United States of America,*** have the extraordinary opportunity to make this dream a reality.

In this new alternative version, however, the rhetorical strength of the final paragraph is significantly weakened. In the original, the pronoun *we* is not only part of the rhetorical figures anaphora and parison, it is also a word in which three linguistic functions are conflated. The pronoun *we* is operating, on at least four occasions, as the grammatical, logical and psychological subject of the sentence - or following Halliday (1985, pp. 32-37) - as Subject, Actor and Theme. This mapping of functions on to the pronoun *we* is no doubt contributing to the rhetorical effects achieved by its repetition in this final paragraph.

### **3. The uses of we**

We could then ask ourselves what are the rhetorical effects, the persuasive pay-offs achieved by the ambiguous referent of the pronoun *we* in this text.

First of all, an evident pay-off is that through the use of *we* the text constructs a unified ideological stance towards the Gulf crisis: the use of *we* as opposed to *he* - Saddam Hussein - implies that everybody, including every potential reader of this text, agrees as a matter of course with the intervention policy of the U.S. Government.

Second, the use of *we* contributes to play down the implications which the explicit mention of the real participants in the processes would have had. The U.S. armed forces or the U.S. government, for example, hardly ever feature as the Actor of the verbal process.

Third, the use of *we* is also aiming to keep all American readers happy. Those Americans who would like to see their country taking a role as the leading nation in the world can interpret *we* as meaning the U.S. government. Those other Americans who would feel disgust at the idea of watching the American eagle extending its imperialistic wing over an underdeveloped area of the planet once again are free to take *we* to mean not the U.S.A. but the world, the civilised world, represented by an international coalition of peace-loving countries fighting against 'insane Hussein'. Finally, this ambiguous use of *we* helps to address successfully both Americans at home and the peoples and governments of countries which are potential allies of the U.S. Government.

Around the same time the *Newsweek* letter was published, a cartoon appeared - first in *People's Daily World* and then in *Harper's Magazine* - in which President Bush was saying: 'We SHELL not EXXONerate Saddam Hussein for his actions. We will MOBILize to meet this threat to our vital interests in the Persian GULF until an AMOCObble solution is reached'. The pun on the names of these oil companies left no doubt about who the real referent of the pronoun *we* was supposed to be.

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