

Fiche

Language is a double-edged weapon. It can enable people to be understood, to convince, persuade and to bring the audience along with them as shown by many speeches we are going to refer to later on. At the same time, language can also be used as a mass destruction weapon or as a means to manipulate opinions or spread propaganda. Hence, we need to pay attention to the way we use words and the way we express our ideas. A message can be very different and can convey two distinctive versions. Thus, the rhetoric, the choice of our words, the level of language level and the tone used by any spokesperson are important elements in sharing our ideas and informing the audience about a specific way of thinking.

The power of rhetoric

Some great speeches were delivered throughout History. They still remain in the memory of people and are still quoted as great references since they made society move forward. We all have in mind the speech by Martin Luther King, *I have a dream* that he gave in August 1963. This speech and the way it was given revolutionized the Civil Rights movement and is still considered as a landmark in American history. Martin Luther King managed to find the right words using **anaphora, repetitions and gimmicks** which were the right ingredients to compose the message he wanted to send. He wanted to tell the world that it was time for all to be free and equal. They sound like simple facts but the way he expressed the words, the way he tried to convince his audience, the way he stressed on every important word, the way he lived every single word made the simplicity of his speech more effective than ever.

A double-edged weapon

Such speeches may not be real pieces of literature but they were so meaningful and eventful that they have become true testimonies of the world and are taught as such. However, we need to be careful, because words can worm into people's minds and they can have a destructive power if they are not used in a positive way. They can indoctrinate and brainwash people like in the movie *the Manchurian Candidate* in which a US soldier was brainwashed by the communists during the Korean War. Once back in his homeland, every time he heard a special word, his mind was intent upon assassinating the president.

So, words have invaluable power and if they are delivered by someone, a real or fictitious character, having a hidden plan, it can have tremendous and dangerous consequences: people may indeed be taught different perceptions of the world. The aim of such speeches is to manipulate people, to pull the strings so that the audience will follow them and propagate their ideas around them: this is a real propaganda. The most obvious examples are the speeches by Hitler or other dictators who managed to make people believe in their ideas just through their voice and we cannot blame the people who were manipulated.

Satire, parodies, allegories

Literature, through satire, parody or allegories, is also a means to help one to be more clear-sighted, to make readers aware of manipulation and to prevent them from falling into this trap. As mentioned before, dictators and totalitarian regimes often use words and language to deviate the mind of their people – and are often mocked at in art. It is a way to minimize the power of their words by showing the ropes to the readers and to educate them by offering them the opportunity to fight against any form of propaganda. This is what Chaplin did when he mimicked The Berman tyrant in his movie *The Great Dictator* by ridiculing him and by deconstructing and laying bare all the techniques used to indoctrinate people. In *Animal farm*, Orwell used old Major's speech to highlight the way one can act on the others' brains to convince them of the validity of their ideas and to make them change their minds.

However, it can sometimes lead to misunderstandings. In *American History X*, for instance, the main character tells an anti-Semitic monologue but the purpose of the filmmaker was to criticize those who hate Jews by exposing the stupidity of their arguments. However, it had the opposite effect because some spectators were shocked and the film was accused of serving racist views, hence the necessity to have an intelligent and unbiased audience.

Plays on words

Exchanging, sharing, discussing, debating is a true art with its codes, its rituals and when it is mastered, it is like a game, hence the numerous puns and plays on words that are possible. It is important to see the authors play with language. Some authors are known for their verbal duels full of wit, which is the case in Jane Austen's novels like *Sense and Sensibility* or *Pride and Prejudice* and more specifically *Emma*. In her novels, the British author resorts to the fine art of discussion to transcend the social classes and to create the perfect match which is exactly what Emma is doing all along the eponymous novel.

The art of discussion is a trademark of filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino or Woody Allen. Their movies are full of dialogues in which the main character uses language to charm, subdue or convince the others and it creates a very interesting atmosphere that seems at first slow and quite long to give its outcome. However, eventually at one point, events go faster and we understand the way the

directors stage their actors and choose to make them talk. Remember the scene in *Pulp Fiction* when the two men are talking about burgers while getting ready to kill someone. We can also refer to the first scene of *Inglorious Bastards* when the German soldier is literally using several languages before finding out that the French farmer was hiding Jews: this conversation was exasperating for him and all along the scene, we can feel the tension and the pressure that is growing in the French farmer.

All these examples show that verbal virtuosity enables one to defeat any adversity. This is a power, this is a force because the one who controls language can control the world. This art of convincing is at the core of hip-hop battles where the aim is to be wittier, funnier and brighter than the rival is. We can see how codified it is in *8 Miles* about Eminem's youth and it is at the core of the debating societies that we can see flourishing in American schools and universities. It is the ultimate proof that language has a powerful educational dimension.

A therapy

Speaking is indeed the best therapy ever to know who we are after having seen what we are capable of. Sometimes people do not feel comfortable when communicating through words and they give the image that other people reflect and they cannot manage to go beyond this appearance. Thus, studying a movie like *The King's Speech* is of great importance because it can help people who do not feel at ease when they speak in public become more self-confident. This film is based on the true story of King Georges who stammered and who was scared of speaking in public but with the help of a speech therapist, he managed to become one of the favorite sovereigns of the British population. He indeed did his best to master his stammering and when he had to deliver his speech before the outbreak of WW2, his voice was no longer trembling. He embodied the strength of the British nation and he became the king that the citizens wished to honour and respect.