

Choose the Right Word – Persuasion

By Brigitte Battat

“... and dark storms and it’s a bit of like terror, or not terror. A bit of you know, um, beautiful but also of dark. What a great description! I don’t feel like this, I don’t really have any words because I haven’t spoken with anybody so I haven’t had to form any words today.”

Loving to be Alone by Cecilia Blomdahl

/ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WoRrzUnOGBw>

“Ignorance silences knowledge.”

Thomas Sowell

Decades ago, I discovered a book entitled “*Choose the Right Word – A Contemporary Guide to Selecting the Precise Word for Every Situation*.” It was buried in a corner on the top shelf of a library in New York State. I had the good fortune to find this book with each visit to the public library. The author - Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa - was a Canadian-born American academic and politician of Japanese ancestry. A professor of English, he served as president of San Francisco State University and then as U.S. Senator from California from 1977 to 1983. Hayakawa wrote various linguistics books, which inspired me to appreciate the English language as a tool of effective communication, and use it in a manner that would be *accurate and persuasive*. Hayakawa died in 1992, before the birth of the social media, the Internet, the Artificial Intelligence, and various other high-tech products that annihilated the face-to-face mode of communication.

In the twenty-first century, people communicate almost exclusively via WhatsApp. I have forgotten what my fellow humans look like, neither am I acquainted with the inflexion of their voices. How am I going to converse with invisible creatures? How can I know what they think of my ideas when I cannot read their expressions? Can I still persuade people to acknowledge and respect my opinions when persuasion is conducted via social media or a cell phone?

A few weeks ago, I decided to examine the meaning of the word “*persuade*” as an example of Hayakawa’s approach to the mode of selecting the precise word for every situation. The reason for my choice is the belief that the power of

persuasion is often at the basis of one's success in life, the ability to be an active member of the human race, and sometimes, the facilitator of leadership.

The list of synonyms for the word "persuade" include *induce*, *cajole*, *coax*, *urge*, *wheedle*. Based on Hayakawa's approach, one would have to choose the precise word according to the situation one finds himself/herself in. These verbs entail the imposition of one's will or views over those of another. Brief descriptions of these synonyms from Hayakawa's book are listed below. I included them here since I consider that they provide complementary explanations to the power of persuasion. After all, the approach to persuasion can be an individually based matter.

***“Induce** means get another to do something by appealing to reason: to induce a person to stop drinking; to induce a young driver to obey the traffic laws.*

***Urge** is the strongest term and means to induce or persuade insistently and vigorously, usually with a strong intention of accomplishing one's goal: to urge a student to study harder; to urge an overworked individual to take a vacation.*

***Coax, cajole, and wheedle** all mean persuade using a gentle, tactful, even artful approach. Coax implies the use of kindness and patience: to coax a sick child to eat by playing a game of feeding; to coax a blind person to learn how to cross a busy street. In slightly older English, cajole meant coax or persuade by false promises and excessive flattery, but it now suggests more the idea of being agreeable and winning in order to get a person to do something: My outgoing friends were able to cajole the shy newcomer into attending the party. Wheedle implies the use of blandishments and wiles to obtain what one wants: They always wheedle money out of their father by hugging him and telling him how generous he is.”*

The focus of this essay is on the power of persuasion, a word that is most comprehensive in terms of its capacity to describe the impact of a speaker or a writer on listeners or readers.

As an individual who has survived living among citizens in five different countries, I was convinced that the application of a polite tone combined with a logical argument (at least logical in my opinion) would persuade the other side to cooperate with me. I have often tried this approach with my children at an age when rational thinking was not a component of their makeup.

My approach to persuasion has changed with age and the country that I have lived in.

According to **Hayakawa**, the word *persuade* is the most general verb and may be substituted for any of its synonyms. Nevertheless, in its most specific sense, is the attempt to produce a desired action by appealing to the emotions or the will of the other side.

The three modes of persuasion include Ethos, Pathos, and Logos. These are approaches of persuasion used to convince others of one's position, argument, or vision.

Ethos

Ethos is the equivalent of character, ethics, and credibility; it uses persuasion by appealing to moral principles. The use of ethos in a speech increases the likelihood that listeners will accept the speaker's arguments and act on the recommendations.

Throughout history, ethos has been a quality endorsed by various societies. Warrior ethos emerged in the modern Western world and has its origins in the warrior myth as embodied by Achilles, the hero of the Trojan War in the *Iliad*.

A classic case symbolizing the power of warrior ethos, is the example which was prevalent in Sparta:

"The Warrior Ethos embodies certain virtues – courage, honor, loyalty, integrity, selflessness and others – that most warrior societies believe must be inculcated from birth. In Sparta, every newborn boy was brought before the magistrates to be examined for physical hardiness. If a child was judged unfit, he was taken to a wild gorge on Mount Taygetos, the mountain overlooking the city, and left for the wolves.

We have no reports of a mother weeping or protesting."

In America, the warrior ethos evolved into a covenant that binds warriors to one another and to the citizens in whose name they fight and serve. It is grounded in values such as courage, honor, and self-sacrifice. The ethos reminds warriors of what society expects of them and what they expect of themselves. The U.S. Army Ethos states, *"I will always place the mission first, I will never accept defeat, I will never quit, and I will never leave a fallen comrade."*

In essence, the Warrior Ethos is a set of principles by which every soldier lives. In a broader sense, the Warrior Ethos applies to one's personal and professional life as well. It defines that person in terms of aspirations and ability to achieve.

Ethos can be used as a neutral mediator to resolve conflicts between individuals and groups. Ethos is most effective here because it is secular and based on logic and reason, and thus universal to all people in all cultures.

The [case below](#) describes how ethos becomes the main ingredient in a debate:

“Two speakers try to convince a group of high school students not to smoke cigarettes. The first speaker says: ‘As a doctor with ten years of experience treating the horrible effects of lung cancer, I have seen firsthand how smoking destroys lives.’ The second speaker says: ‘Although I’ve never seen the effects of smoking, I hear they are pretty bad.’”

The first speaker makes a stronger argument because he seems more knowledgeable about the subject. He comes across as credible because he uses ethos to highlight his credentials.”

An interesting example is provided by a textbook on [teachers’ ethos](#):

“The morality of the teacher may have a considerable impact on the morality of the student. The teacher is a model for the students, such that the particular and concrete meaning of such traits as honesty, fair play, consideration of others, tolerance, and sharing, are picked up, as it were, by observing, imitating, and discussing what teachers do in classrooms.”

One should differentiate between rhetoric ethos and pathos. The former expresses personal speaker or writer’s emotions applied to persuade an audience; the latter is an emotion which the speaker or writer is hoping to induce in others. One example of ethos applied in writing is “*Fahrenheit 451*” by Ray Bradbury, who made a poignant statement related to his book. Ray Bradbury was a lover of books and libraries. After graduating from high school, he was not able to afford to go to college.

“I am a preventer of futures, not a predictor of them. I wrote Fahrenheit 451 to prevent book-burnings, not to induce that future into happening, or even to say that it was inevitable.”

Pathos

Pathos symbolizes the emotional content of a presentation and is likely the most important element in the speech. The terms sympathy, pathetic, and empathy are derived from it. Listeners become motivated to change their thinking and take a particular action when the speaker or author demonstrates agreement with an underlying value of the reader or listener. Pathos may also be used by

appealing to the imagination and hopes of an audience. This can be achieved by describing a scenario of a better future based on a suggested course of action.

The thirty-six-year-old former Congressman from Nebraska [William Jennings Bryan](#) used pathos in his Cross of Gold speech (July 9, 1896). In this case, the issue was whether to endorse the free coinage of silver at a ratio of silver to gold of 16 to 1. (This inflationary measure would have increased the amount of money in circulation and aided cash-poor and debt-burdened farmers.)

“I would be presumptuous, indeed, to present myself against the distinguished gentlemen to whom you have listened if this were but a measuring of ability; but this is not a contest among persons. The humblest citizen in all the land when clad in the armor of a righteous cause is stronger than all the whole hosts of error that they can bring. I come to speak to you in defense of a cause as holy as the cause of liberty—the cause of humanity.

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If they dare to come out in the open field and defend the gold standard as a good thing, we shall fight them to the uttermost, having behind us the producing masses of the nation and the world. Having behind us the commercial interests and the laboring interests and all the toiling masses, we shall answer their demands for a gold standard by saying to them, you shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.”

Examples of Pathos

[Advertising](#) is an especially common tool using pathos as a form of persuasion. Since emotions influence people’s decision-making, pathos is well-suited to the task of persuading customers to buy products ([Ho & Siu, 2012](#)).

As an example, animal welfare organizations like the SPCA, for instance, may appeal to people’s empathy by using pictures of stray dogs accompanied by sad music.

In this case, the power of pathos may induce the listener/reader to donate funds to the organization. It can also instill a sense of empathy and compassion in the perception of the organization’s mission.

[Art objects in general and political cartoons](#) in particular often apply pathos to generate empathy or outrage, thus persuading viewers to consider the artist’s

perspective on social or political issues, or arouse feelings of sorrow, compassion, or introspection.

[Political rhetoric](#) uses pathos to influence audiences. For example, in an attempt to appeal to people's emotions, politicians may use conflicting terms such as "unborn life" and "fetus" in debates related to women's reproductive rights. Whereas the former would appeal to the emotion of saving life, the latter would induce emotions in those believing in bodily autonomy.

Thus, pathos is a necessary ingredient in political speeches. The success of a politician's campaign depends to a large extent on how skillfully a politician appeals to the emotions of the voters.

[Social media campaigns](#) use images, videos, and narratives that target the emotional level of audiences with the view to persuade them to purchase a specific product or adhere to a certain cause.

Pathos has the potential to persuade targeted individuals or groups of people to adhere to a cause, vote for a candidate, or consume a product. Its weakness stems from its potential to become transparent when perceived to be manipulative and insincere. Manipulation exploits people's vulnerability; insincerity can be perceived by the targeted individuals as an attempt to mask the truth. Thus, the orator or writer should know the audience before resorting to pathos as a method of persuasion.

Logos

Logos entails reasoning, and it is a plea to logic. As an example, an elocution teacher uses the reasons in the argument, by making the following [suggestion](#):

"It is important that everything that you say fits together like links in a chain or pieces of a jigsaw puzzle to form a coherent statement or argument. When you think through and plan your talk, you organize your various points in a sequence from the general to the particular, from the start to the conclusion, with each point building on each previous point to form a persuasive argument."

Logos is applied in various situations. [The list below](#) summarizes a few case studies:

Politics: Political persuasion is the act of influencing voters to choose one's political platform over the oppositions through a series of tactics and practices. Depending upon how effective a candidate is, it can even bring strong non-supporters into one's camp and inspire them to vote for him/her.

Nevertheless, sometimes, it may be difficult to bring voters to the candidate's side, despite a seemingly perfect alignment of the candidate's platform with that of the voters. This may be attributable to the absence of a well-defined dividing line between the candidate's political ideologies and that of the opposition.

Example 1: A group of conservatives and liberals were presented with one of two messages that supported an increase in *military spending*.

One message focused on "national pride" and "unity at home and abroad."

The other stated that increased funding would help "the poor and disadvantaged achieve equal standing" through the military.

Conservatives tended to support an increase in military spending regardless of message, while liberals were more likely to support military spending if confronted with the second message.

Example 2: A test was conducted to assess whether moral reframing can influence conservatives' attitudes regarding same-sex marriage. An observation was made that the typical persuasion method to promote same-sex marriage tended to be grounded in the more liberal moral foundations, particularly fairness concerns that emphasize the immorality of denying equal rights to individuals because of their sexual orientation. In line with a more realistic moral reframing hypothesis, the team performing the test predicted that *grounding same-sex marriage support in loyalty-based moral concerns would be more persuasive to conservatives, leading them to be more supportive of legalizing same-sex marriage*.

Plays: Early Greek dramatists often structured entire plays around philosophical debates. *Antigone* by Sophocles is based around a debate between the king, Creon, and his niece Antigone over whether Antigone's brother should be afforded burial rites. Both characters display logos in their compelling arguments against one another.

Novels: In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the lawyer Atticus Finch argues logically and methodically for his client's innocence in the courtroom. His final speech is an impassioned plea to the jury.

Newspapers: Reporters and columnists may use logos to convey the logic of a story or persuade their readers. Examples of logos application are abundant in the newspaper editorials. An editorial may try to persuade the local government to hire additional policemen arguing that this may reduce the crime level in a specific town or city.

Poems: Shakespeare has written sonnets that may take the form of impassioned pleas on the part of a narrator who uses logos to justify love and seek reciprocation from the object of one's desire.

Ads: Advertisements often depend on logical arguments to persuade their target audience to use their product or service. An advertisement might provide statistical evidence for the effectiveness of the product. The media may target readers with the view to influence the voters' choice for a candidate by describing his/her personal achievements as a politician.

In his MasterClass, [Neil Gayman](#) makes the following statement:

No matter the medium, Logos is a hugely important part of strong writing. Building a logical case and arguing methodically can help craft a persuasive essay or give internal logic to the actions of a fictional character. For these reasons, logos is an essential concept for writers to study and employ.

Conclusion

The academic study of persuasion originated with the ancient Greeks, who emphasized rhetoric and elocution as the highest standard for a successful politician. Trials took place in front of the Assembly, and the likelihood of success of the prosecution versus the defense depended on the speaker's skill of persuasion.

A [Harvard Business Review](#) study claims that the art of persuasion has not changed in two thousand years. Nevertheless, the twenty-first century art of persuasion defines the degree of economic success:

“Some economists believe that persuasion is responsible for generating one-quarter or more of America’s total national income. As our economy has evolved from an agrarian to an industrial to a knowledge-based one, successful people in nearly every profession have become those capable of convincing others to take action on their ideas.”

As regards the art of persuasion applied by individuals in everyday discussions, the absence of face-to-face contact may have obliterated some of that innate skill.

The question remains as to the ability of individual's ability to persuade fellow human beings at a time when they universally hide behind screens of various sizes and have become strangers to each other. Or rather, why are humans so eager to adopt gadgets and forget about their fellow creatures? Even in a globally present digital age, the need for physical contact distinguishes Homo sapiens from other animals.

At a time when humans are relentlessly targeted by astute corporate marketing, shrewd politicians, and propaganda-flooded media, the skill of preserving a family, a community, a nation, is diluted and may disappear in the not-so-distant future.