Linguistic analysis on a Tony Blair’s Speech

Introduction

This is a political speech pronounced on August 31st 1997 by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair. The reason of the elegiac tone of this particular speech was the violent death of Princess Diana that shocked not only Britain but also the whole world. That is why any political issue is evoked. The Prime Minister wanted to deeply lament Diana’s dead not only personally but also in the name of the people and of the government. From this viewpoint, he addressed at the same time the princess’ family and everyone who felt concerned with that tragic day.

Linguistically, what is behind Tony Blair’s constant shifting from his personal voice to a more general voice in this extract?

Analysis

When a politician speaks either in his own name or in the name of the people he represents he can use the personals pronouns I or We, or he can use an indirect reference like for example “the nation” or “the government”. In this way, in the sentence of the beginning of the Tony Blair’s speech: “I am utterly devastated”, the subject I may be modified: “The nation is utterly devastated”. In a certain way, that is what he does in the following sentences. He plays with the possibilities of the paradigmatic axis to express the idea of devastation and general mourning: “The whole of our country, all of us, will be in a state of shock and mourning” (l.1).

The politician also addresses to someone else, to a you that can be more or less abstract, for example MPs or members of his political party. In this speech, Tony Blair particularly addresses to an abstract you that can be at the same time MPs, the nation and the whole world. When he says “Thank you” (l.21) at the end of the speech, this you, can be not only those who were present when he delivered the speech, but also those who directly or indirectly listened at his speech, in other words the whole nation and the whole world.

Traditionally called personal pronouns, I and you are also called shifters because they refer to the person who is speaking or the person someone else is speaking with. Thus, the speaker is always within the enunciative triad integrated by the person who is speaking (I), the time (now) and the place (here) he is speaking. These deictics are called shifters because since the roles of the speaker and the addressee can be interchangeable, the time and the place also change when the new speaker begins to talk. It is not a fixed process.

In this speech, Tony Blair incessantly moves back and forth from the first personal singular (I) to the first personal plural (We) and its other forms the possessive Our and the complement pronoun Us. “I feel like everyone else in this country –utterly devastated. Our thoughts and prayers are with Princess Diana’s family (…). We are today a nation, in Britain, in state of
shock, in mourning, in grief that is so deeply painful for us.” (l. 6-8). It would have been unconceivable that the Prime Minister had continued the phrase in first person: “My thoughts and prayers are with Princess Diana’s family...”. It is true that as the head of the government he represented a nation but in that tragic date, he was as deeply shocked as everybody in Britain and in the world. In other words, an extra-linguistic situation –the deep sadness because of Diana’s sudden death– ended temporarily any socio-political hierarchy, which is reflected in the speech. Everybody was equal and equally affected in that tragic day. That is why the *I* becomes a global *we* (*I+you+he+she+them*), that expresses this general shock.

The two other terms of the enunciative triad are also expressed in the speech: “this country” (l.6) or “here in Britain” (l.15) and “today” (l.6). The notion of *now* is also expressed in the present tense used by the speaker. But soon a breaking of this triad comes in the speech when the speaker begins to speak about Diana, identified with the third person, *She* (for example in lines l.9 and 13). In fact she is the object of the speech and that explains the fact that she is outside this triad. Besides, the speaker uses the past tense when he recalls her, when he evokes the great importance of this person for the whole world and the consequent sense of loss after her death.

There is a certain balance between the uses of *I* and *We* in the speech. *I* is used four times (l. 1,6 and 19). As for the *We*, it is used three times (l. 7,11 and 14). This balance gives to the speech a tone that is at the same time personal and general. He is speaking with his own feelings “I will remember her personally with very great affection” (l.19) but at the same time he speaks as a part of a greater entity, the people, and the nation of Britain. This double tone in which the speaker and the nation share their feelings is what brings about the notion of union of the whole country in that tragic date. In other words, any kind of social hierarchy is abandoned because of this double tone. In this particular case, *we* is not a plural of *I*. The pronoun *we* expresses the fact that the speaker, no matter the socio-political differences, is as deeply shocked as any one else. There is a common mourning, a sense of loss that is shared by everybody in Britain. This may explain the great frequency of the determinant *Our* in the speech. It is used seven times in the speech (l. 1,3,6,7,17 and 20).

The ideas of shared feelings, of common solidarity, of union appear throughout the text and find its expression in a melting of voices, of grammatical persons into one single voice, one single entity represented by the determinant *Our*, possessive form of *We*. Consequently, if the first personal pronoun that appears in the speech is the pronoun *I* (“I am utterly devastated” (l.1), the ending of the speech eventually shifts to the determinant *Our*: “that is why our grief is so deep today” (l.20-21). Thus the *We* of the speech is inclusive, because it includes the addressee. But the length of the ouverture of the pronoun *We* changes depending on who is the addressee. After saying that he and his country were in state of mourning because of Diana’s death, Tony Blair adds: “[She was a] compassionate person who people, not just in Britain, but throughout the world loved and will mourn as a friend” (l.2-3). The community of people sharing their sadness may be even bigger that the one living in Britain because Diana was known and loved all over the world. Her death concerned not only the English People, (including the speaker, the direct addressee, the general audience in Britain), but also the rest of the world.
Conclusion

In this speech Tony Blair spoke not only like a British Prime Minister but also like a single person who was as shocked and sad with Diana’s death as the rest of the people in Great Britain and in the world. Personal and general feelings and voices alternate through the presence of the shifter I and the pronoun We, which creates a sense of union and general shock in that tragic day.

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