

ROYAL SPEECH PREVENTS CRISIS QUEEN ELIZABETH'S SPEECH ON THE DEATH OF PRINCESS DIANA

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Abstract: The approach I have adopted in analyzing the queen's speech on the death of Princess Diana focuses on two aspects: critical discourse analysis (or CDA) and strategies of televised communication. The analytical framework of this investigation is based on Norman Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995, 2000) Lillie Chouliaraki and Norman Fairclough (1999) and Patrick Charaudeau (1995, 1997). CDA emphasizes the importance of language for understanding issues of social concern. Strategies of televised communication aim to project a certain image to get a certain response from the public. The royal family had to carefully handle the public's reaction in order to avoid a crisis.

Key-words: critical discourse, media communication contract, monarchy, royal speech

1. Introduction

The car crash in which the Princess of Wales lost her life triggered a royal crisis of unprecedented consequences for the Crown and the royal family. It was perhaps as serious as the abdication crisis. The abdication of King Edward VIII brought about a constitutional crisis, the outcome of which was considered catastrophic by many members of the royal family. Fortunately, it all ended well and King George VI and his wife, Queen Elizabeth, together with their two daughters, managed to win the people's hearts and quickly filled the emotional vacuum that King Edward VIII might have left behind. The crisis brought about by Princess Diana's death went deeper and penetrated the social on such a scale that it took everyone by surprise. The country's outpouring of grief represented the climax of a long-lasting and camouflaged clash between two sets of values. On the one hand, the traditional British values and ways of conduct: conservatism, self-sufficiency, the stiff-upper lip, held-in-check emotions that the queen and the royal family stood for. On the other hand, the post-modern values that a newly-emerging Britain embraced and that Princess Diana embodied: a stronger emphasis on genuine feelings, a better understanding of the common individual and their beliefs and aspirations. In spite of her sometimes miscalculated conduct, Princess Diana was able to reach the public and touch their hearts in a unique way. Her authenticity and ease in connecting with people from all walks of life made her be regarded as one of their own. That explains the deep sense of loss that many experienced at the news of her death.

2. The Queen and Her People

At times of national crisis it is only natural for people to turn to their leaders, asking for support and guidance. On August 31st 1997, the BBC interrupted all their

programs to make the tragic announcement: a mass hysteria hit Britain and reverberated abroad. The first public figure to make a speech to commemorate the princess was the newly-appointed Prime Minister, Tony Blair. His words successfully managed to capture the national mood and ingeniously worked as a valve for an increasing public anger. But people wanted the queen to come to London and take charge of whatever needed to be done in such circumstances. Almost five days passed before the sovereign's arrival in London one day before the funeral. Meanwhile, the public began to fiercely criticize the monarch and the royal family for their aloof attitude at the news of Princess Diana's death. Newspaper headlines were rhetorically asking: "Where is the Queen?" or "Show us you care!" How was it possible that such a dutiful sovereign like Elizabeth II, whose commitment to her people had never been questioned, lost public support?

Although largely admired for her work and effort, the queen was often criticized for her distant and often too formal and rigid manner. The queen has always been of a very conservative nature and her reigning style much resembles her father's and grandfather's. An almost Victorian sense of formality still underlines her rule. The Queen Mother's formula for dealing with a sensitive situation, "Never explain, never complain, be a royal" was no longer useful. A tension between the way in which the queen understood the performance of her role as sovereign and the way in which the public at large needed and expected the queen to assume her duties and responsibilities was slowly but surely growing. As people were becoming more anxious to receive a sign from their monarch, it was obvious that the queen had to leave Balmoral and its protective surroundings, come to London and face the crowds.

3. The Queen's Speech as a Media Event

In analyzing this televised event I use Patrick Charaudeau's concepts of "contrat de communication" (communication contract) and "communication médiatique" (media communication)(Charaudeau, 1995, 1997). According to Patrick Charaudeau (1995) the communication contract is based upon a negotiation of the representations of the world around among those involved in the communication process. In order to be part of the communication process, the subjects need to be considered interlocutors, communicating in a given framework at a certain time. They must be part of an activity that focuses on language and the relationship they establish among themselves transforms into a relationship of mutual influence, their common purpose being the construction of meaning. And every relationship implies a transaction: a negotiation of meaning. Charaudeau (1995) adds that the meaning is the outcome of a process of *transformation* and a process of *transaction*.

In social life, a communication contract as a linguistic construction may be concluded on the occasion of public debates, focus groups' meetings, TV or radio shows. In such circumstances, the interlocutors, the subjects of the communication contract, find themselves in a face-to-face situation. It is often rather uncommon for a royal figure, and mainly a monarch, to find oneself in a face-to-face communication situation. This rarely happens and when it does, for example on the occasion of royal

walkabouts or garden parties, the exchanges are too limited in time to allow for the transformation and transaction of meaning between the sovereign and the audience. Then how can a British monarch communicate with the public or the nation? It is important to understand that such a communication (in which the sovereign is both sender and receiver) is always mediated. When the queen (as sender) wants to inform the public opinion on a certain aspect of her life and activity, the Buckingham Palace administration, through the office of the Press Secretary, issues royal statements or press releases (these documents have an intermediary function). The queen may also send a certain message through the interviews that different members of her family give (the royals playing the role of spokesperson). When the queen (as receiver) wants to collect information, because of her extraordinary position in the state, she cannot simply go out into the street and ask the passers-by. In this case, too, communication is mediated, taking place indirectly via two sets of intermediaries: the first one includes the royal advisors, the Prime Minister, the courtiers, individuals whose duty it is to keep the queen informed. The second set includes the media (the newspapers the queen may read, the radio programs she may listen to or the TV programs she may choose to watch). These are the mediators that are supposed to facilitate public opinion reaching the queen. The communication between a monarch and the nation is a fact that goes unstated, a tacit promise that the two parties are expected to keep.

Sometimes, this implicit relationship may experience short circuits. After the public announcement of the divorce of the Prince and the Princess of Wales, the queen withdrew the title of "Royal Highness" from Diana. From that moment on, the queen and many members of her family no longer considered her a royal, one of their own. Contrary to the queen's view, the nation still considered Diana some kind of a royal. In fact, she was the mother of the future king, she was allowed to wear the official title of "Princess of Wales" and she was an aristocrat. In the public's mind, she was perceived as someone still connected to the world of royalty.

These opposing viewpoints explain the royal family's initial lack of reaction at the news of the princess's death and the public's demand to have the queen in London. In the particular circumstances triggered by Diana's death, the communication between the monarch and the nation was null. Gradually, under the public's pressure and on the strong advice of the Prime Minister and also on Prince Charles's insistence, a channel of communication was opened. Against the background of a socially generalized emotional turmoil, it was now paramount that the queen went public. Television was the best option to connect the sovereign with the rest of the country since it gives one, at least theoretically, the chance to be seen and listened to by almost everybody. A live speech was the most efficient formula the queen could use in order to show that she joined the crowds in their public mourning of Diana, and regain their support. What is unprecedented about this speech is not only its dramatic circumstance, but its very nature: a live TV broadcast. Unlike many other royal speeches that the queen gives and which are recorded in advance and broadcast at a certain time, like the Christmas speeches, for instance, this one was a live speech, which made it even more intense. As Pierre Bourdieu (1998) underlines, television has monopolized the role of facilitating the access to social and political existence. A sovereign is not only a historical construction but also a social and political one. This construction must be seen,

perceived and experienced by the public as a live organism. Television, via its use of images, facilitates this process and a live broadcast makes it possible in real time terms, as the fresh event unfolds.

The hiatus between the royal family and the nation's intense reaction to the death of the Princess of Wales, a reaction rendered even more intense by the media, represents the framework within which the sovereign and the public became "the signatories" of a communication contract. Between the British people who no longer regarded the royal family as a national symbol and the royal family who treated the nation with characteristic aloofness, some kind of deliberation was needed in order to create a new social cohesion, based on a refreshed and commonly accepted set of values. The public immediately assumed the role of interlocutor expressing their points of view through the media. Challenged by the public pressure, the queen responded and assumed the role of interlocutor, too, thus allowing the communication contract to become operative. Since the queen's answer came in the form of a live speech, the communication contract turned into a media communication contract, which makes communication possible via a technological support: paper, image, sound.

Any type of media communication is a social phenomenon of paramount importance, the purpose of which is the construction of social meaning. According to Charaudeau (1995), the constructor of the social meaning is the social actor, any "I", in the discourse, with their own representations of the world around. The media makes these representations circulate and, in their turn, influence the constructor. The media communication contract assumes the following functions:

1. *The informative function*: it informs the public about the latest events.
2. *The explanatory function*: it provides the public with explanations of the events.
3. *The emotional function*: it aims to create strong emotions among public members.
4. *The factitive function*: it finally aims to determine the public's attitude, a public able to develop their own opinions and determine, in their turn, a settlement of the social and political processes.

As part of the media communication contract, the queen's speech fulfils these functions. It informs the public of the position of the queen and her family regarding Diana's death (that it was going to be a public farewell). It tries to explain that the royal family, too, grieved over the death of the princess but in a different way from the public. By publicly acknowledging Diana as "an exceptional human being", the queen tries to produce a positive response from the public and regain some support. Finally, the speech tries to negotiate a new perspective on the members of the royal family and on the role of the monarchy.

For a televised event of such a scale, the temporal framework and the spatial framework within which it unfolds are essential for the meaning they intend to convey. *The temporal framework* is a strategy whereby reality is staged. The live broadcast is a particular way of staging an event because it forges the impression of taking part in that event. It also creates a strong feeling of intense contact and intimacy. The queen's speech was broadcast at 6p.m. on a Saturday evening, a prime time in TV terms,

which highlighted its importance. *The spatial framework* is another strategy of staging an event to serve a particular purpose. The queen addressed the nation from one of the state rooms in Buckingham Palace, the Chinese Room, situated in the West wing of the building, overlooking the Mall. The setting of the broadcast was symbolical and unprecedented: the queen was standing in front of a wide open French window, overlooking the front gates of the royal residence. In the background one could see the people cramming in front of Buckingham Palace and all along the Mall and listen to the humming of their voices. By overlapping the queen's image and that of the crowds in the streets, a strongly symbolical scene was created: the sovereign and the people united in paying tribute to a national icon. It might have been a skilful public relations strategy and it was carefully staged and worked well.

4. The Speech Analysis from a CDA Perspective

My next analysis of the tribute speech to Princess Diana focuses on language. The approach I have adopted in analyzing it is called Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA emphasizes the importance of language to the understanding of issues of social concern. According to Lilie Chouliaraki and Norman Fairclough (1999), in social life language figures in three ways: as discourse (a way of representing), genre (a way of interacting) and style (a way of being). My approach will focus on the concept of *style*.

4.1. The Style Approach

Styles, as ways of being, show how language figures in the identification of people involved in a social practice (e.g. in the construction of speaker and addressee identity). Royal styles are to do with national identities and values. They show how language figures in the identification of the queen as the country's first representative involved in the social practice of governing the country (since the queen reigns but does not rule). In other words, the style indicates how language helps create a leader identity fitting the queen's status and role in society. According to Norman Fairclough, "Leader identity in contemporary politics is built upon a tension between the public office and the private individual, the extraordinary position of leader and the ordinary person who holds it. In terms of language, this means a tension between the public language of politics and everyday life" (Fairclough, 2000: 97).

One way of noticing how this tension manifests in the text is to look at the use of personal pronouns. They help identify the queen's position in relation to her message and the addressee. There are two ways of using pronouns: an inclusive use (meaning the queen and the nation or the queen and the royal family) and an exclusive use (meaning the queen personally).

The use of the personal pronoun "we" has an inclusive meaning: it means the queen together with her family and the nation: "We have seen...an overwhelming expression of sadness", "We have all felt those emotions..." One use of "we" has a less inclusive meaning, referring only to the royal family: "This week at Balmoral, we have all been trying to help William and Harry..." This paragraph may be read if not as an indirect excuse that the queen makes for her long absence from London, at least as

a plausible explanation. Linguistically speaking, the use of the pronoun “we” throughout the speech helps build a sense of cohesion and unity in dealing with the death of the Princess of Wales.

The instances of the personal pronoun “I” seem to be slightly more numerous than those of its plural form. It highlights the queen’s direct involvement in the message. It adds agency and stronger focus. Whenever the queen mentions Diana, she uses the pronoun “I”: “I want to pay tribute to Diana myself”, “I admired and respected her...” This linguistic mechanism underlines the queen’s personal recognition of Diana and appreciation of the values the princess embraced. The queen also uses the pronoun “I” when stating her position regarding the consequences of Diana’s death: “I for one believe that there are lessons to be drawn from her life...” The phrase “I for one...” suggests that the queen speaks for herself and acknowledges the need to learn but does not mention who else should learn. This obscurity is preserved by the agentless passive “lessons to be drawn”. It is an oblique way of avoiding to speak in someone else’s name, which might have made the queen sound moralizing.

The queen also uses the “I” when she acknowledges the overwhelming public reaction to the loss of the princess and agrees to join in the people’s farewell: “I share in your determination to cherish her memory”. This is a very careful choice of words, the queen indirectly admitting that her determination in honouring Diana was, at least initially, not as solid as the nation’s, as the antithesis between the pronouns “I” and “your” suggests. The queen thus opts for the wiser “I share”, claiming the right to join the public opinion and signalling involvement.

The most intense use of the pronoun “I” appears in the third paragraph of the speech: “So what I say to you now, as your queen and as a grandmother, I say from my heart”. This is a linguistic construction that added momentum to the event. The conjunction “So” signals a change of focus. It points to the fact that the queen is preparing the ground for an important announcement. “So” is a disguised “Lend me your ears”, by which the queen tries to capture public attention. Between the first “I” and the second “I” of the sentence, the queen clearly establishes the position from which she makes the speech: “as your queen” (underlining her direct relationship with the people and her awareness of her constitutional role) and “as a grandmother”. Therefore, it is the official position which is fore-grounded and the private which is back-grounded. The queen identity and the grandmother identity are united in one person and what gives authenticity to this symbiosis is the reference to a very private (and most often inaccessible sphere), the queen’s private feelings: “...what I say to you now...I say from my heart...”

The final “I” in the text (“I hope that tomorrow we can all, wherever we are, join in expressing our grief at Diana’s loss, and gratitude for her all-too-short life”) points to the queen’s personal call for national unity and her attempt to bridge the gap between herself and her people, using the public’s grief over Diana’s death and respect for her achievements.

4.2. The Semiotics of Bodily Movement and of Visual Images

The Style, as a way of being, is also the result of the symbolism attached to these physical elements.

The setting of the live broadcast

The setting of the event was more extensively analyzed above. The queen's image projected over the image of the crowds packing the streets around the royal palace, the voice of the queen heard against a generalized vibration coming from outside are the ingredients of a highly symbolical image: the queen is represented here as the unifying force of a divided country, the long-awaited sovereign expected to fill the vacuum left by a sudden and useless death.

The Queen's Outfit

As is proper in such circumstances, the queen's outfit emphasizes her body politic. Only the queen's face and neck point to the body private. The queen was wearing a plain black dress ornate with a brooch, a white pearl necklace and a pair of pearl earrings. In the world of royalty, this is the standard mourning outfit. The sovereign's garb spelled out her regal sobriety and calm dignity that perfectly fitted the occasion and clearly marked her nature and style.

Indicators of the Queen's Anxiety as Expressions of the Private Individual

The Swinging

Anxiety shows on the face and in the gestures. Although the queen was filmed from her waist up, a closer look at the images reveals that she was swinging back and forth and sometimes slowly leaning forward. This is an indicator of the queen's attempt to control her feelings and strike a balance between her inner emotional state and her posture.

The Queen's Blink

The eye movement (or the blink) is another indicator of anxiety. On average, people blink 15 times per minute (women being reported to blink a bit more often than men). In his *Book of Tells-How to Read People's Minds from Their Actions*, Peter Collett (2005) quotes the common study of Robert Goldstein and John Stern (1992) from Washington University of Saint Louis and of Lance Robert (1992) from University of Connecticut. The study has indicated that the blinking rate of an individual and his emotional state are directly related. The more anxious people are, the more often they blink (Goldstein, R., Bauer L., Stern, J.A., 1992). When exposed to intense light or when in extreme weather conditions, individuals tend to blink more frequently trying to adapt their body to that particular circumstance.

The queen's speech lasts approximately 3 minutes and 7 seconds. Within this span of time she blinks approximately 118 times, which means that she blinks 39 times a minute. This reveals that the queen blinked 260 per cent more per minute than the average individual in an everyday situation. This is a clear symptom of the tremendous pressure that she had to manage. It is also an illustration of how the private individual, through self-control, anchors the public person, facilitating the exercise of different social roles.

5. Conclusion

The loss of Diana, Princess of Wales, called for reforms of the monarchy and for a revamping of the style in which the royal family understood the fulfilment of their responsibilities. And the only one that could make people believe that reform was not an empty word was the queen. Although she was not alone in this endeavour (the Prime Minister and Prince Charles substantially supported the sovereign), Queen Elizabeth II was the one the nation expected to take the lead. The queen's speech on Diana's death was the first stage of a long process. Though criticized for saying too little too late, the queen's speech struck a balance between what the public expected from the royal family and what the royal family was able to offer at the time. It was an unprecedented and singular statement. A more emotional approach (though much desired by the public) would have destroyed the fundamental equilibrium of the text and made the queen look counterfeit. The rhythm of the speech is well paced and the queen's voice is carefully balanced. Looking self-composed and distinguished, she managed to combine ceremony and feeling. Although the speech did not and could not have worked wonders, it appeased the crowds and opened a niche where the royal family and the people could join in the national farewell to Diana. The speech tempered the public mood and prevented a crisis that might have had critical consequences for the monarchy.

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