Mediatisation and political language

Michael Higgins

Introduction

Concerns over the relationship between media and politics have echoed over much of the last century. Remarking that ‘if Stalin smiles at a visitor, the news is flashed to the world before the smile has left his face’, Gorman (1945, p. v) alludes to a quickening effect of mass media on the fortunes of politicians and to its supposed preference for demeanour over matters of substance. Jamieson (1996) and Franklin (2004) describe an emerging dynamic between the politicians, their communications advisers, industry lobbyists and media organisations, all vying to influence the ‘packaging’ of politics for public consumption. These efforts to reshape politics are a partial response to broader social and cultural changes, including the development of media platforms, as well as changing public attitudes. Corner and Pels (2003) describe the increasing roles of ‘consumerism, celebrity and cynicism’ in the mediation of politics, where voter disengagement and disillusionment is countered using the techniques of political marketing (Savigny 2008) and the political realm is left beholden to popular culture (Street 2004). In surveying this mediated politics, Corner (2003) points to the foregrounding of the politician as a ‘mediated persona’, schooled in performances that align with dominant political values and trained to pander to expectations around popular appeal (Langer 2012; Street 2011).

Various forms of language and discourse analysis have looked at the public discourse of contemporary politics. These range from the everyday pragmatics of political speech (Wilson 1990) to the continuing influence of classical rhetoric (Martin 2013). Also, various scholars associated with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) have sought to keep pace with the tactical dynamics of political language, from its articulation with various national identities (Higgins 2004; Wodak et al. 2009) to its strategic alignment with populism (Forchtner, Krzyżanowski & Wodak 2013). As an ever-greater proportion of exposure to politicians occurs through various media platforms, CDA has also sought to examine how political language and practice has reshaped to accommodate the imperatives of mediation, often in ways that have altered and diminished the value of political discourse (Fairclough 1995; Wodak 2009).
The chapter will proceed as follows. The first section discusses the role of ‘media visibility’ in the political realm, and its relationship with the personalisation of politics. This is followed by a discussion of the usefulness of ‘mediatisation’ in understanding the dynamic influence between political discourse and ‘media logic’. After this, we outline the media imperative of ‘sociability’, and its relationship with ‘conversationalisation’ in media discourse. We then look at how this is manifest in language and representation across a number of political contexts, starting with an example of the televised performance of sincerity set against a more conventional political address. This is followed by a discussion of the production and contestation of the populist media persona of UK politician Boris Johnson: constructed in personalised and anti-political terms, but, as we will see, remaining vulnerable to the purposeful redirection of those same discourses. Then, we look at the institutional discourse of the party leaflet, again finding strategies of conversationalisation directed towards the playful destabilisation of the political lexicon, allied with intertextual references to popular culture. In the last section, on political debates, we examine the performance of ‘affective empathy’, and see a tactical combination of political and popular language co-ordinated with an embodied dis-alignment from political conventionality in favour of association with the audience.

Mediated visibility and political personality

Thompson (1995, 2000) deploys the term ‘mediated visibility’ to help us understand how these struggles of representation take place. As a key part of the experience of modernity (Thompson 1995), mediated visibility refers to a configuration of ‘public exposure’, around which mediation takes prominence over co-presence. Public space is constituted and populated through the technologies of media, leaving political figures to live by their success in ‘fabricating a self-image of appeal’ (Thompson 2000, p. 38). Our apocryphal example of Stalin’s smile, doubly articulated towards its recipient and the wider media audience, hints at the skills of ‘non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance’ (Thompson 2000, p. 41) that have become essential across an increasing range of media platforms.

As Corner (2003) has pointed out, in an environment dominated by media visibility, the focus is on the expressive capabilities of politicians and political institutions and the adequacy of their media performance. Over the past few decades in particular, Street (2011, p. 244) identifies a fusion between personalisation and popular culture, associating politicians with the performative practices of celebrity culture. As we will see, such performances are animated in a number of ways, ‘kinetic and gestural; visual as well as oral and aural’ (Drake & Higgins 2012, p. 386), and extend through modes of ‘conversationalisation’ to the written word (Fairclough 1995). This amounts to a repertoire of situation-appropriate activities, producing facades ranging from resolve to candour, and offering various degrees of emotional empathy (Corner 2003, p. 94).

Mediatisation and politics

‘Mediatisation’ provides a useful way of conceptualising this relationship between politics and media. Its basis is that ‘media logic’ exercises growing authority over the organising principles of our everyday lives (Esser & Strömbäck 2014; Hjarvard 2013). According to Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999, p. 250), the political consequences of mediatisation emerge when policies and innovations proceed to the stage of ‘publicity’, and ideas, themes and candidates are presented to the political polity. Whatever the ideological, economic or social
basis for backstage political decisions, the proposal is that their shape and delivery will be determined by the organising principles of media rather than those of politics, and this will be reflected in the associated language and other communicative activities.

As we note above, this places new demands on the aspiring political actor, whose success hinges upon the maintenance of media appeal and the cultivation of media skills (Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999, p. 251). This is a relationship in which politicians have at least partially internalised the expectations of media, and laud the demands of news value as professional goals. As Forchtner, Krzyżanowski and Wodak (2013, p. 207) suggest, what is produced is a ‘performance of politics’ informed by, and geared towards, the production priorities and presentational styles of the medium involved.

There is, of course, an intricate network of influence in play. Political actors retain some measure of commitment to party histories and core beliefs, as well as a formal obligation to democratic arrangements and procedures. And even as media institutions exercise influence in setting and pursuing agendas, any power is curtailed by sets of technical, conventional and regulatory limitations. In the example of the televised debates we will look at later, for example, the formalised practices of turn-taking and audience participation are negotiated between producers and political representatives, with close attention to the rules governing impartiality (Coleman 2000).

Media sociability and the conversationalisation of political discourse

As many of the concept’s critics have pointed out, the explanatory purchase of mediatisation rests upon a clear idea of those qualities that characterise ‘media logic’. In a discussion of broadcast media, Scannell (1996, p. 23) suggests the currency of ‘sociability’: the art of sustaining the company of an audience ‘who have no particular reason, purpose or intention for turning on the radio or television set’. The imperative to be ‘sociable’ has a complex relation with media practice. For example, in parallel with their obligation to be engaging, broadcasts are motivated by ‘strategic purposive intentions’, such as the provision of information, or the sale of a product. Also, audience members congregate with incentives and demands of their own, ranging from enlightenment to idle distraction. Furthermore, as digital and social media come to prominence, there emerges an increasing variety of media platforms through which political and other types of information may be drawn, each offering their own appeals to their audiences and publics (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham 2007; Higgins 2008). Indeed, as participation and conversation become a more prominent part of the everyday experience of technology, the obligation for mediated discourse to be successfully ‘engaging’ becomes all the more pronounced.

If political communication is to be successful in a media context, it is therefore important that it adapts to the developing expectations of media form. While figuring as just one of these expectations, the imperatives of sociability are aided by a shift in style towards what Fairclough (1995) calls ‘conversationalisation’. For Fairclough (1995, p. 142), the political consequences of this are rooted in its association with ‘common sense’ and its foregrounding intuitive forms of knowledge associated with the life-world: ‘the voice of ordinary experience’ (Fairclough 1995, p. 144). Later in the chapter, we will find this manifest as the ‘populist ventriloquism’ of the plain-speaking journalist, with an expressive commitment to ‘how things seem’ (Brundson & Morley 1978, p. 83). But for these efforts in conversationalisation to be apparent to those listening or watching, they often need sustained emphasis using a conspicuously colloquial lexicon, along with such indicators of conversational speech as the use of first person and hesitancy markers (Fairclough 1995).
Developing this association between conversationalisation and the predominance of the ‘informal’, Pearce (2005) charts the rise of conversational tokens in party-election broadcasts from the 1960s. Consistent with Scannell (1996), Pearce finds that discourse proceeds less on the basis of communicating policy intentions and bureaucratic ordinances than on the production of markers of a mutually supportive exchange. Accordingly, Pearce argues (2005, pp. 73–75) that features associated with formality such as elaborated noun-phrases have declined over time, to be replaced by tokens of informality, such as personal pronouns directed towards the listener, as well as those ‘discourse markers’ – contextual ‘fillers’ such as ‘I mean’ (Schiffrin 1987) – associated with spontaneous speech.

Yet, news and political coverage depend upon a constant negotiation of this informality with a necessary attitude of authority. Mediated strategies of conversationalisation therefore emerge in parallel with a display of political lexicon sufficient to associate the presenter with political access and competence. In line with our earlier remarks on political celebrity, Fairclough (1995, p. 147) and Higgins (2010) note that these negotiations may involve the ‘personality’ of the presenter as broadcaster, combining professional renown and performance with the institutional imperatives of the programme and format. In trying to identify the language patterns that underpin this personalisation, Pearce (2005, p. 75) points to an increased expression of ‘stance’, animating ‘attitudes, value judgements or assessments’. While a number of these take the ‘epistemic’ form that may be expected of information-laden political discourse, many are also ‘attitudinal’ in ‘reporting personal attitudes or feelings’. To some extent, personalisation has imported performative styles alien to early broadcasting into political journalism – aggression dominating over sociability, for example – which have subsequently developed as legitimated forms of media discourse (Clayman 2002; Higgins 2010).

Mediated political sincerity

So how do the qualities associated with conversationalisation aide political discourse? The figures that follow exemplify a conventional political ritual: statements issued by political leaders on a tragedy of national consequence. Such rituals are creatures of mediation in their very essence, and Boorstin (1963) sees these public statements as ‘pseudo-events’ initiated solely to be broadcast. However, they also amount to a communicative act of ‘tribute’; of placing on record the personal torment of those in political power on occasions of collective mourning. In both cases, they draw upon the various traditions of political speaking described by Ilie and Sclafani in this volume (pp. 309 & 398, respectively) and include the communicative intentions of those press conferences discussed by Ekström and Eriksson also in this collection.

The statements we look at date from 1996 and are by then Prime Minister John Major and Leader of the Opposition Tony Blair, talking in response to the murder of a number of primary school children and their teacher in the town of Dunblane. Bracketed ellipses are used to mark pauses, a colon indicates the stretching of a sound or word, and underlining marks the speaker’s emphasis:

1 JM We met a number of th:е () patients () some of whom had been (.) very severely
2 injured and (.) they are in (.) remarkably good shape and there’d no doubt that they
3 had the most tremendous treatment (.) and I was delighted to be here this morning
4 with Tony (.) to express (.) our thanks to them for the work that they’ve done
Mediatisation and political language

5 TB I share all those (..) sentiments entirely (..) I think we were both struck by (.) the quite extraordinary dedication of the hospital staff here the way they have worked as a team in partnership together (..) and the dedication of the police and of course all those people at the school (...) it’s been a quite (..) remarkable coming together and (...) I hope that in some (..) small way (..) I think we both found this rather distressing and certainly very moving (..) our coming (.) today in uniting together can symbolise (..) the unity of the country (.) and of people all around the world (.) in sympathy and respect (.) for the people here in Dunblane [thank you]

[change of setting to street outside primary school]

I don’t think it is (.) possible (...) to put into words (.) precisely what they have had (.) to deal with (..) and I think the way in which they have coped with all this (.) has been quite (.) remarkable in every respect (....) the community and the school (...) will need to put itself together over these months ahead (..) but I think that the strength (.) and the resolution (...) that Tony and I found here in that school today suggests to us that (...) hugely difficult task can be done

TB I would (.) I would echo entirely what the (..) Prime Minister has just said (...) we have seen for ourselves both the (..) enormity of the evil act that was (.) perpetrated at the school (..) but also the quite (.) extraordinary (.) courage and resilience (..) of the staff (..) of everyone connected with the school (.) and the local community (..) and I know that we are both (..) absolutely proud to have been here (.) and to have paid our respect to them (..) this community has suffered so much (..) and yet there is such strength in it

(BBC 15 March 1996)

This extract produces what Montgomery (1999) has identified as a ‘televisual’ mode of public speaking by politicians that foregrounds sincerity and emotion over the conventional decorum of the political statement. As Smith and Higgins (2012) argue, the emotional trauma around Dunblane was manifest not only in the manner of its mediation, but in public and industry reception to the coverage and its tone. Fairclough (2000, p. 101) has already identified the prominence of ‘ordinary’ language and emotional empathy in Tony Blair’s media performance, and the fraught emotions of the setting are reflected most vividly in Blair’s lexical choice, such that references both to his own emotional state and to those of the local community figure strongly in his contributions (‘rather distressing and certainly very moving’ from lines 9 and 10 in the first address, and ‘this community has suffered so much’ from line 25 in the second).

We can also see evidence of what Montgomery (1999, p. 7) refers to as the rhetorical tactic of ‘amplification’, designed to emphasise the speakers’ commitment, as well as the use of ‘tact’ in lending appropriateness to this expression of emotion. Instances of amplification come, first, in the use of adverbial phrases designed to stress the exceptionalness of the circumstances (‘the quite extraordinary dedication’ from Blair in line 6 and ‘quite (..) remarkable coming together’ from Blair and ‘hugely difficult’ from Major in line 19). In another example, this amplification is what Montgomery refers to as ‘graduated’; thereby exercising tact in developing from a weaker to stronger formulation by situating sentiments first in the two political leaders themselves and then on behalf of the nation, before attributing them to the world as a whole (‘our coming (.) today in uniting together can symbolise (..) the unity of the country (.) and of people all around the world (.) in sympathy and respect’ on lines 10 and 11). In terms of emphasising measure and appropriateness, perhaps the most notable example of tact is Major’s hedge on the expressive limits of his claim to empathy
with the victims and community (‘I don’t think it is (...) possible (...) to put into words (...) precisely what they have had (...) to deal with’ on line 14 and 15).

Another quality to characterise these extracts is the predominance of pauses and the stretching of words. One such pause is emphasised by Blair’s switch in gaze to the side of the camera (Figure 25.1). These are not evenly spread across the extracts or speakers, such that Tony Blair produces many more pauses than John Major, and the second statement by Major makes more use of pauses than his first. (One way of interpreting this might be that Blair sets a performative tone in his initial contribution to which Major is then obliged to respond.) There are a number of purposes that pauses might serve in these extracts: one being the separation of passages of speech, and other being rhetorical effect, such that the measured use of pause in speech is essential to conventional political rhetoric, usually deployed in the service of devices such as contrast or accumulation (cf. Martin 2014). In Blair’s second speech, the extract ‘they have worked as a team in partnership together (...) and the dedication of the police and of course all those people at the school (...) it’s been a quite (...) remarkable coming together’ (lines 6 and 7) sees the first two pauses set between clauses, while the third separates ‘remarkable’ from its modifying advert ‘quite’. This produces a performance of unscriptedness or sincerity, where Blair seems to be either searching for an appropriate word or struggling to contain his emotions. Likewise, in Major’s second speech, ‘and the resolution (...) that Tony and I found here in that school today suggests to us that (...) hugely difficult task can be done’ the pauses are in keeping with the portrayal of an endeavor of such magnitude that it demands reflection; occasioning a hesitant and considered delivery. While there are embodied components to such a performance that we will turn to later, we can see here how Blair, especially, begins to dominate in using a combination of language choice and tactical use of pace to secure a mood of emotional commitment and authenticity.

Figure 25.1 ‘I hope that in some [...] small way’
Authentic personalities and the language of the popular

It is therefore clear that particular media performances foreground sincerity and emotional commitment, but there are related forms of media language dedicated towards expressing ‘the popular’ for party political purposes. The assumption of an institutionally-authored line is characteristic of much political talk, where party policies are enunciated and defended. Such institutional expression contrasts with what Wodak (2015, p. 131) describes as the populist drive to appear ‘authentic’, and of ‘the people’ in terms of taste, daily life and language. In echoes of Blair’s speech from earlier (in the extract on p. 386), ‘authentic’ non-political discourse downplays education and refinement in favour of hesitancy and colloquialism (Wodak 2015, p. 132). In betokening the ‘authenticity’ of the speaker, colloquial language foregrounds the expression and commitment of the individual in political discourse. That is, while it is possible to be consistent and truthful in expressing a mutually agreed policy line and intentions, doing so while projecting an authentic performance is a statement of the self.

In this context, the maintenance of particular kinds of personality can give politicians expressive latitude that reaches beyond the conventional realms of political language. The following example is the opening paragraph of a UK Daily Telegraph column by then London Mayor Boris Johnson – a well-known and eccentric UK politician – lamenting the prospects for socialism, in the context of a debate over the then-leadership of the UK Labour Party:

1 Uh-oh, folks, this is starting to look serious. There really does appear to be a plot to remove Ed
2 Miliband. One paper has reported that there are 20 shadow ministers who are ‘on the verge’
3 of asking him to step down. Nameless Labour MPs have said that the rebellion against Ed has
4 reached ‘critical mass’ – and one has a vision of fuel rods starting to shudder in a nuclear
5 reactor. Toxic steam is spurting from the innards; cracks are showing in the casing. Any minute
6 now the whole thing is going to go ka-boom, they say.
7 Tristram Hunt has turned up the pressure, by suggesting that his party leader is not much good
8 on TV. Clive Soley says Miliband is ‘not getting his message across’ – which is a way of saying
9 that he is useless. Half the Parliamentary Labour Party seems to be on the phone to the media,
10 whispering about the hopelessness of Miliband, while the other half is burnishing its own
11 leadership credentials.

(Johnson 2014)

This passage works to position Johnson as an explicitly ‘anti-political’ performer, given to endearingly whimsical outbursts. These aspects of Johnson’s political identity are discussed at length by Ruddock (2006), who describes how Johnson has cultivated a public image directed towards a particular construction of the authentic. This is a persona that is nation-specific and class-identified, ‘tapping cherished English upper class stereotypes (the naughty public schoolboy, the ‘upper class twit’)’ (Ruddock 2006, p. 265), instanced here by the upper class associated pronoun ‘one’ (line 4). Every bit as accident-prone as the P G Wodehouse characters he often resembles, Johnson is also beguilingly shambolic, combining ‘disarming charm, wit and intellect’ (Ruddock 2006, p. 276). In a study of public responses to one of his many ‘gaffes’, Ruddock (2006, p. 276) points to a widely-reported admiration for Johnson as a ‘distinctive figure in an otherwise “grey” political environment’.

Given the extent of his profile and the readership of the Conservative-supporting Daily Telegraph, it is reasonable to assume that the reader will be familiar with Johnson’s style of
speech, and recognise the manner in which the short, declarative sentences that open the
extract give way to elaborate metaphor. Johnson also deploys the hedging identified by
Montgomery (1999) in ‘sincere’ media public pronouncements, using ‘seems’ to playfully
exaggerate the extent of his opponent’s dissent (‘Half the Parliamentary Labour Party seems
to be on the phone to the media, whispering about the hopelessness of Miliband, while the
other half is burnishing its own leadership credentials’ on lines 9 to 11). Crucially, what
Chouliaraki (2000, p. 297) describes as the ‘intertextual’ character of political discourse is
manifest here as items from the lexicon of the British comic book (‘uh-oh folks’ on line 1,
‘ka-boom’ on line 6), that sit in contrast with phrasings more readily associative with the
political field (‘on the verge’ on line 2, ‘critical mass’ on line 4); the latter conspicuously
outsourced using quotation marks. This opposition between the straightforward language of
‘Boris’ and the implied prevarication of conventional politicians is then rendered
unequivocal, as Johnson reformulates opposing politician Clive Soley’s mannered
euphemism ‘not getting his message across’ to Johnson’s preferred style of ‘a way of saying
that he is useless’ (lines 8 to 9).

Using Johnson as an example of the populist politician – and Campus (2010) and Niemi
(2013) point to many others who are similar – we can see how the use of a popular lexical
field works at cultivating certain kinds of mediated political persona. But, according to
Brookes, Lewis and Wahl-Jorgensen (2004), there are other tactics of alignment dedicated
towards claiming ownership of the link that media provides between the politicians and
their electorate, such as in the way that media texts routinely claim to represent the ‘public’
in the pursuit of a shared interest. Higgins (2008) goes further, arguing that mediated
political discourse routinely involves a struggle between media and politicians to be seen to
speak on behalf of this ‘public’. This is particularly noticeable in ‘the accountability
interview’, where politicians vie with interviewers to align themselves with public concerns
and sentiments (Montgomery 2007). Just as politicians seek a public mandate through
election to office, in the context of media they are obliged to engage in a parallel and
continual struggle for their claim to public representativeness.

The extract is from an interview between the above-mentioned Boris Johnson and BBC
journalist Eddie Mair from 23 March 2013 on the news analysis programme the Andrew
Marr Show. We pick up the interview as it turns to a forthcoming documentary ‘exposing’
elements of Johnson’s personal history. In addition to the conventions outlined prior to the
above extract, square brackets indicate overlap between speakers:

1  EM  let me ask you about some of the things that came up in the documen[tary
2  BJ  [r right well I I haven’t seen it [so
3  EM  [but this happened in your life so you know about this (..) [The
4  BJ  [clearly
5  EM  Times let you go after you made up a quote (..) why did you make up a quote?
6  BJ  (...) well ah (.) this this again y’know (.) these are these are (.) b:big terms for what
7  happened w I can tell you the whole thing I mean it was [mumbles] y’know ar are you
8  sure our viewers wouldn’t want to hear more (.) about housing in London?
9  [about I can tell you
10 EM  [if you don’t want to talk about made up quotes let me talk about something
11 BJ  it was a long it was a long and lamentable story
12 EM  okay

(BBC 24 March 2013)
In terms of phrasing, it is clear that both interviewer and interviewee have temporarily absented themselves from the lexical field associated with politics. Interviewer Marr emphasises the topicality of the personal over political with ‘this happened in your life’ and offers two variations of the conspicuously informal construction ‘made up quote’. While this seems at odds with the role of the interviewing journalist as a publicly appointed expert advocate (Clayman 2002; Higgins 2010), it bears comparison with the plain-speaking ‘populist ventriloquism’ described in Brunsdon and Morley’s (1978) classic analysis of popular news. In response, Johnson produces markers of spontaneous and sincere speech, including punctuating ‘discourse markers’ ‘well, ah’ and ‘y’know’; although in this instance they may betray a genuine rather than rehearsed hesitancy. Notably, however, Johnson’s third turn produces the kind of claim to an alternative configuration of the public interest described by Brookes, Lewis and Wahl-Jorgensen (2004) and Higgins (2008): ‘y’know ar are you sure our viewers wouldn’t want to hear more (.) about housing in London?’ (lines 8 and 9). Even when edging round the norms of political discourse, such claims to speak for the polity are at times necessary in a media setting, particularly when it is in the politician’s interest to retreat to a claim to the authority of public representativeness. Indeed, in Johnson’s case, the doubly articulated reach of the claim is emphasised still further in his formulation of this political public as ‘our viewers’.

Political leaflets: affinity and intertextuality

At the outset of the chapter, it was claimed this media intimacy extended to printed media. Having looked at Boris Johnson’s newspaper column, we now turn to how these qualities of sociability and sincerity are manifest in election literature: a form more associated with political institutions and their reflective processes than with the dialogic spontaneity of individual performance. The page below comes from a leaflet distributed by the ‘Yes’ campaign in the 2014 referendum for Scottish independence (Yes Scotland 2014):

In terms of its political purpose, this text manifests the anti-elite qualities of populism, articulated with a narrative of national belonging (Wodak et al. 2009) and guided by the principles of media sociability. The thrust of the two paragraphs is to set the actions of centralising politicians apart from the interests of the audience. ‘Westminster’ as a metonym for the UK political establishment (Higgins 2004, p. 642) is set against the inclusive category of ‘our nation’, later rendered in the nation-specific terms of ‘Scotland’. Indeed, the opposition between formal-political and informal lexicons are used humorously, in a rhetorical opposition between ‘Devo Max’ and ‘devo-a-wee-bit-more’ (‘wee’ being Scots dialect for ‘small’ or slight’).

Also, while this is an official referendum communication, informality and conversationalisation are in play throughout. The externalised Westminster parties’ keenness to act is expressed as ‘falling over themselves’, associating elements of ungainly slapstick with the intentions of political opponents. Elaborated phrasings are deployed for emphasis (Pearce 2005), such as ‘actually ever happen’, a tactic we have already seen in Tony Blair’s use of ‘quite’ in the spoken extracts above. Calling upon what Horton and Wahl (1982) describe as a technique of ‘para-social interaction’, through which an audience is addressed as though it were present, rhetorical questions are issued, including one ending in the elaborated verb phrase ‘how will they ever agree?’. Also from the rhetorical toolbox of mediatised sincerity, repetition is used in up-shifting ‘change’ to ‘real change’.

We have discussed the imperative of ‘sociability’ above. In this case, the text of the leaflet is purposively dialogic, such that the discourse of inclusivity extends to the assumption of a
shared investment in the development of the position. For example, conversational strategies of amplification are in play, such as ‘What’s more’, serving to accumulate points towards an overall argument. As a contribution to a debate around statehood and sovereignty, the leaflet also has a concern in maintaining what Billig (1995) identifies as a shared assumption of national belonging. This is a mood of common purpose that is manifest in lexical terms. After the rhetorical question deploying the political item of ‘Devo Max’, the first paragraph marshals the national body within an inclusive pronoun on assent, ‘On that point, we all agree’; an assumption of a shared critical faculty that continues with the pronominal phrase ‘let’s not forget’.

While we have identified a correspondence between conversationalisation and media logic, there remains the possibility that both media and politics merely draw upon a common well of sociability and the comforting rhetoric of mutual regard. However, there are other identifiable qualities here that draw more explicitly from media discourse. Prominent on the leaflet are two brief headlines pertaining to each of the paragraphs. Both of these perform the function of ‘soft’ intros, by alluding to the content of the main bodies of text without necessarily betraying the detail that follows. We have seen elements of intertextuality in Johnson’s hints at comic book language, but the intertextuality of these extracts is more explicitly anchored, drawing upon recognisable items from popular music: one, ‘Promises,
Mediatisation and political language

Promises’ from the name of a Bacharach and David musical, and another, ‘Definitely, Maybe’ from the title of “Britpop” group Oasis’s debut album. Thus, the popular credentials of the text is secured in its language and in the repertoire of cultural references.

The political debate and the semiotics of empathy

The final platform that we will look at in order to understand these aspects of the mediatisation of political language is that of the televised debate. Although long-established in the US, the televised election party leaders’ debate was introduced to the UK at the 2010 general election (Drake & Higgins 2012). The following extract is one of two debates held between representatives of the two sides of the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. This second debate, which was broadcast on the BBC, was one in which Alex Salmond of the Scottish National Party (SNP) was thought to have performed more strongly. This extract is from a turn dealing with a debate on currency, in which Salmond was said to have excelled:

1. I know there’s other options for Scotland (.) I mean we could have a (. ) eh Scottish currency
2. we’d have flexible currency like Sweden or Norway does (.) we could have a fixed rate a
3. Scottish pound attached to the (.) the pound sterling eh that’s what Denmark does with the
4. Euro of what I’m seeking a mandate for (.) is to have the pound sterling (.) so we pay our
5. messages we pay our mortgage (.) we get our wages in the pound

(BBC 25 August 2014)

Even from this brief extract, we can see political rhetoric combined with the qualities we now associate with mediatisation. Although it may appear as though Salmond is making his way through a list of refused options in order to emphasise and settle on his preferred choice (Atkinson 1984), the uncertainty of the currency settlement is such that Salmond is obliged to display his understanding of alternative options. There are markers of spontaneity – and sincerity – in the pauses before delivery of the first and second choices (lines 1 and 2), along with a crafted emphasis on items of the political and economic lexicon (‘flexible’ on line 2, ‘fixed rate’ on lines 2–3, ‘mandate’ and ‘pound sterling’ on line 4), as well as on individual economic action in ‘pay’ (lines 4 and 5). The monetary union dilemma is also expressed as a concern shared between Salmond and the listening audience, and their common appreciation of an appropriate informal lexicon is marked in the use of the informal Scots term for grocery shopping, ‘messages’.

What recommends this extract over the portion of the address that preceded it is that Salmond has stepped out from behind the podium in order to stand closer to the studio audience and cameras (see figure 25.3). In terms outlined in Peters’ (2001) discussion of ‘bearing witness’, Salmond produces a token of personal investment and a willingness to offer the body as ‘collateral’ for his words. Exposed in this way, the body constitutes a display of willingness to disregard personal imperilment for the benefits of sharing the same space, engaging with and emphasising. This extra-linguistic performance ventures beyond the conventions of professional practice by foregoing the formality and stuffiness of the stage props. In a gesture of alignment with ‘the people’ (Wodak 2015), Salmond abandons the podium as a symbol of political institutionalism and a restraint on his desired connection with the ordinary electorate. But of course, this abandonment of the conventionality represented by the podium has become a semiotic resource of itself. The alignment of this type of embodied performance with particular linguistic markers of sincerity and belonging
was also a feature of the analysis of Nick Clegg’s contribution to the leader debates of the 2010 UK general election (Drake & Higgins 2012; Parry & Richardson 2011).

Granted, this is only one example of the visual aspect of mediated political performance. A fuller multimodal approach to mediated political expression will be sure to reveal other, related, markers of embodied sincerity among politicians, such as deploying a markedly casual appearance or, as Cameron (1996, p. 95) suggests, speaking with an ‘authentically’ non-elite accent. Yet, such gestures of affinity remain subject to the norms of political propriety and can remain subject to the essential elements of a political demeanour. The successful navigation of set-piece events, such as interviews and ritualised debates may demand embodied and linguistic markers of sincerity, but only as part of a dynamic in which political credibility remains the dominant concern. On the basis of what we have seen so far, televised debates show these negotiations in practice, producing what may be described as a semiotics of affective empathy, combining language with embodied performance, directed to achieving formal political ends.

Conclusion

There are few qualities in political language that are solely attributable to mediatisation. The activities of both language and politics draw upon a similar cultural lexicon, and are committed to related imperatives of care over expression and comprehensibility, including developments in emotionality outside media and politics (cf. Eccelstone & Hayes 2008). As critics of the mediatisation thesis point out, media logic is designed to appeal, retain attention and persuade, and can internalise the priorities of other cultural forms that are similarly directed. In producing sociability, for example, media aspires to the pleasures of non-mediated conversation, leaving a tangled relation between media politics and the skills and norms of public address. Nevertheless, there are particular priorities in mediatisation that reflect upon and often reconfigure the composition of political language. Mazzoleni (2014, p. 45) points to ‘the spectacularisation of political discourse, “personalisation” involving a
focus on personal aspects at the expense of policies [...] , the simplification of political speeches – the ‘sound-bite’ effect – and the ‘winnowing’ of political actors according to their mediagenic presentation’. We can see that, at least to some extent, the personalisation and ‘simplification’ of political language are entwined, such that the foregrounding of personality, including the ‘synthetic personalisation’ of conventional political texts, are bound up with what Scannell (1996) describes as the imperative to provide the easy pleasures of sociability; offering a politics designed to please rather than improve and to reassure rather than challenge.

Future thinking on mediatisation and political language should also account for the persuasive purpose that communication serves within the political realm. Recent discussions of the rise of ‘mediated populism’ have emphasised the obligation of politically-directed language to avoid appearing ‘political’ (Higgins 2009). That is, as soon as a rhetorical act becomes exposed as a structured political tactic, its persuasive force gives way to the appearance of manipulative cynicism. As journalism moves towards the production of emotional affect (Richards 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen 2013), this has implications for the language and performance associated with the mediatisation of the political. Also, as van Leeuwen shows in this volume, a multimodal approach is necessary to situate language within a broader communication field, including the networks of association and significance in media format and performance. Across these developing contexts, there is much to be gained in examining the extent to which political language strives towards the sociability and informalisation that has characterised the development of media discourse in general.

Acknowledgements

The author owes thanks to Angela Smith, Mari K Niemi, Burcu Demirdöven and Fiona M McKay for their thoughts and input, as well as for the constructive feedback of the collection’s referees and editors.

References


Thompson, J B, 2000, Political scandal, Polity, Cambridge.
Yes Scotland, 2014, Why independence will be the best thing for generations, Yes Scotland, Glasgow.