Persuasion through Rhetoric: Common Devices and Techniques

Individual claims presented without support are not always ready for tests of initial plausibility and the credibility of the source. Those tests presuppose that the claim comes in neutral form to our accepting or rejecting minds; but even lone sentences have ways of smuggling in strategies to affect our reception of them. Nonargumentative persuasion can include the use of emotionally loaded language and suggestive sentence structure. Numerous categories of nonargumentative persuasion help you detect its often subtle appearances.

2. Rhetoric tends to either strengthen or weaken a claim, or to either elevate or disparage its subject.

a. Euphemisms and dysphemisms replace one expression with another that carries, respectively, more positive or more negative associations.
   i. "Escort" is a euphemism for "bodyguard"; "thug" is a dysphemism.
   ii. Entirely neutral language can function as a euphemism or dysphemism, if it replaces a more common term that carries associations.
      1. "Delivery system," neutral as it sounds, is a euphemism for "missile."
      2. Likewise, the neutral language of "payment for nonwork" does not stop it from being a dysphemism for "welfare."
   iii. Euphemisms can have acceptable uses, when they foster civility and diplomacy.

b. Rhetorical comparisons, definitions, and explanations are cases in which those modes of speaking slant what they say.
   i. A rhetorical comparison links our feeling about a thing to the thing we compare it to: "He had a laugh like an old car trying to start."
   ii. A rhetorical definition uses loaded language while ostensibly trying to clarify a term: "Animals are our fellow conscious beings."
   iii. Rhetorical explanations use loaded language while pretending merely to tell the reason for an event: "She smiled at you so she'd have an edge when you hand out raises."

c. Emotional associations, usually negative ones, connect to a person or thing described with a stereotype, a popularly held image of a group that rests on little or no evidence.
   i. Stereotypes are often involved when someone lumps people under one name or description, especially when it begins with "the": the conservative, the Asian.
   ii. Many times a stereotype arises because it serves an interest, as when one nation goes to war with another.

d. Innuendo belongs among those techniques that employ not certain words but ordinary features of linguistic communication. An innuendo works by implying what it does not say.
   i. Sometimes an innuendo suggests while pretending or even claiming not to: "Far be it from me to call my opponents liars."
   ii. Along the same lines, one may condemn with faint praise. Imagine a letter of recommendation that says only, "Richard was very seldom tardy."

e. A loaded question follows the logic of innuendo, illegitimately suggesting something through the very existence of the question.
   i. Whereas every question rests on assumptions, a loaded question rests on unwarranted or unjustified assumptions.
   ii. Another feature of the loaded question is that the answer it seeks will not address the assumption. For instance, a "No" answer to "Are you still

illiterate?" does not challenge the assumption that the person had been illiterate.

f. When the persuasive device aims at shielding a claim from criticism by qualifying it, we may call that device a weaseler.
    i. Words like "perhaps" and "possibly," and qualifying phrases like "as far as we know' or "within reasonable limits," most commonly signal the work of weaselers.
    ii. Claims that might otherwise convey strong and specific information, but possibly be false, can be made more nearly true through the use of weaselers, though for the same reason weaker and more nebulous: "She is quite possibly one of the most gifted students I am now teaching."
    iii. Weasely words can also plant an innuendo: "It's not impossible for him to have ulterior motives."
    iv. But such words have a proper place in communication, where we ought to qualify our claims.
        1. At best the mere existence of qualifying words should serve as a first warning that some weaseling might be afoot.
        2. To ascertain that it occurs, assess the speaker, the subject, and the context.
g. A downplayer is a rhetorical move to make something seem less important than it really is.
    i. Stereotypes, persuasive comparisons, persuasive explanations, and innuendo can all have this purpose.
    ii. We also find downplaying at work in the use of words like "mere," "merely," and "so-called," or the placement of a word in quotation marks:
        1. "Evolution is merely a theory."
        2. "Professor Economou has a new 'method' for measuring inflation."
    iii. More complex downplaying happens when a speaker uses conjunctions like "however" and "although" to diminish one claim in favor of another.
        1. As often occurs when a persuasive technique uses grammatical structures instead of words, this form of relative downplaying is harder to spot.
        2. "Despite the persistent growth of algae, the lake's water must be judged perfectly safe for drinking."
h. The horse laugh, ridicule, or sarcasm is a way to avoid arguing about a position by laughing at it.
i. Hyperbole means exaggeration.
    i. Not all strong claims count as hyperbole. "Michael Jordan is the best professional basketball player of all time," while a strong claim, is either true or close enough to truth not to involve hyperbole.
    ii. Hyperbole can turn up in a variety of other persuasive maneuvers, such as dysphemism, persuasive comparison, and ridicule.
    iii. The greatest danger that hyperbole poses is that, even when you recognize it as false, you prepare yourself to accept a weaker version of the same claim.
j. Suppose a claim comes to you with no support except for the speaker's assurance that some support exists: This assurance takes the name of proof surrogate.
    i. A proof surrogate may be as little as an adverb (e.g., "obviously") tacked on to a sentence.
    ii. The complete proof surrogate, however, refers to the evidence, argument, or authority that carries the day on some issue, without delivering details: "Philosophers agree that God does not exist"; "Studies suggest that people with arthritis don't actually feel aches when the weather changes."