RHETORIC AND PSYCHOPATHY: LINGUISTIC MANIPULATION AND DECEIT IN THE FINAL INTERVIEW OF TED BUNDY

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Abstract – Linguistic manipulation and deception are common aspects of interpersonal communication, which can prove problematic in situations where truthfulness is a matter of legal necessity. This study provides a linguistic analysis of the manipulative techniques used by serial killer Ted Bundy in the final interview in Florida before his execution in 1989. It begins with a brief account of related research and the context in which the Bundy interview took place, before analysing the language used by Bundy from two of the modes of persuasion identified by Aristotle: *ethos* and *pathos.* The aim of the study is to gain insight into how a psychopath uses language to manipulate evidence and to determine the extent to which theories of rhetoric are applicable to manipulation / deception as well as to persuasion in legal and political contexts.

Keywords – Linguistic Manipulation, Psychopaths, Ted Bundy, Rhetoric, *Ethos*, *Pathos*.

Introduction

Linguistic methods of manipulation and deception are commonplace in everyday interpersonal communication. As Shuy points out, utilising language in a way which reflects favourably on oneself is expected in particular contexts, such as job interviews and political speeches (2002, ix). However, the boundary between what constitutes socially acceptable embellishment / understatement and manipulation or deceit is not always made clear (ibid.). In forensic contexts, where establishing truthfulness is a matter of legal necessity, this can prove extremely problematic, most particularly when ascriptions of guilt or innocence are partially or wholly dependent upon language-based evidence (such as witness testimony). Despite this, there is a dearth of empirical research in forensic linguistics which considers *how* people use language to manipulate and deceive. Furthermore, what little research does exist has been carried out by psychologists without much reference to established linguistic theory and methodology (Shuy 1998, 74). An analysis which is conducted into this topic from a forensic linguistic standpoint must therefore draw upon a variety of different fields which are potentially applicable to the topic at hand. One such field is that of rhetoric, otherwise known as the art of persuasion in discourse (Cahn 1993, 61), which is characterised by 'its unique breadth of application' (Cockroft and Cockroft 2005, 4); indeed, rhetoric and the law 'share a kindred origin, in what is now referred to as forensic rhetoric' (Levine and Saunders 1993, 108). Since rhetoric primarily focuses upon techniques of persuasion in language, and manipulation is certainly a type of persuasion (albeit with possibly more malignant intentions on the part of the persuader), theories of rhetoric may well prove illustrative.

Psychopathy is generally defined by psychologists as a personality disorder characterised by emotional vacuity and extreme egocentricity (Porter and Stephenson 2006, 481). Psychopaths are described as consummate 'con artists' (ibid.) and persistent use of both verbal and non-verbal methods of manipulation and duplicity are therefore seen as distinguishing features of psychopathy (Porter and Woodworth 2006, 93). Since psychopaths often exert and maintain control over others 'by deceiving and manipulating them' (Porter and Woodworth 2006, 92), criminals diagnosed as (or suspected as being) psychopaths are of particular interest in forensic linguistic analysis related to manipulation and deceit.

Related research

One study which focuses upon the language of psychopaths is that of Hancock et al. (2011). Suspecting that 'psychopathology may be reflected in idiosyncratic linguistic styles' (ibid., 103), the researchers utilised statistics-based textual analysis tools to examine the crime narratives of psychopathic versus non-psychopathic criminals. It was found that psychopaths, when compared to their non-psychopathic counterparts, were more likely to describe their own crimes in the past tense, utilise subordinating conjunctions for explanatory purposes and use language which was 'less emotionally intense and pleasant' (ibid., 102). It was argued that this reflected a certain level of 'psychological detachment' (ibid.) from their crimes, as well as an inability to articulate emotional processes and a desire to justify their own actions. The conclusion was that psychopaths operate 'on a primitive but rational level' (ibid., 112), and that their stylistic choices were both characteristic of their psychological state and largely outside of their conscious control. However, the results of this study should be treated with caution. Though there is a specific focus on language usage, the study has been conducted by psychologists, not linguists; I would argue that this is reflected in the terminology. For instance, measuring the emotional intensity and/or 'pleasantness' of a person's linguistic choices is not based on sound stylometric principles, but on the researchers' own subjective judgments. In addition, the conclusion that psychopaths' stylistic choices were largely unconscious contradicts the researchers' own admission that psychopaths have a propensity to use 'manipulative conversational skills as weapons' (Hancock et al. 2011, 109); indeed, the researchers themselves confess that they cannot be sure how much the interviewees were lying in their accounts of their own crimes (ibid., 111).

A further example of relevant research was conducted by Porter and Woodworth (2006). Here, fifty criminals – both psychopathic and non-psychopathic – were asked to provide a descriptive account

of homicides they had committed (2006, 91). Their accounts were compared to the official file reports, in which the homicides had been codified according to whether they were reactive (as a result of an emotional reaction to a person or situation), instrumental (goal-oriented with little to no justification / provocation), or a mixture of the two (ibid., 97-8). It was found that the psychopaths were more likely than their non-psychopathic counterparts to 'alter details of the offense in a self-exculpatory fashion and … exaggerate the reactivity of their homicides' (ibid., 103). It was therefore concluded that psychopaths use manipulation and deception as 'useful tools with which to promote their own interests' (ibid., 104). However, this research does have some limitations. Once more, it was conducted from a psychological viewpoint, and there were no examples of specific linguistic devices used by the interviewees to exaggerate or understate aspects of their crimes. Furthermore, out of a total of fifty participants, only nine were classified as psychopaths; the extremely small sample size therefore reduces the validity of any conclusions drawn. Lastly – and this drawback is acknowledged by the researchers themselves – the benchmark for measuring the criminals' honesty (or lack thereof) was the official reports, which we cannot say for certain were factually accurate representations of the crimes (ibid.).

Data

The speech chosen for analysis is an excerpt from Ted Bundy's final interview (video recording available online, YouTube 2013). The recording is just under 30 minutes long and the section used for analysis begins at 6:58 with the words 'Like an addiction, you keep craving something which is harder…' and ends at 8:37 with the question 'You feel this really deeply, don't you?' A total of 1098 words were transcribed. The original interview took place on the 23rd January 1989, the day before Ted Bundy's execution. The interviewer, Rev. Dr James Dobson, was an evangelical Christian with outspoken views against pornography and violence in the media (Dekle 2011, 219). Ted Bundy was an American rapist and serial killer who eventually confessed to being responsible for the deaths of at least thirty women (Michaud and Aynesworth 1999, 339). He was diagnosed with various psychological disorders, including antisocial personality disorder, manic depression and psychopathy (Michaud and Aynesworth 1999, 13); like many psychopaths, he was described as 'a consummate gamesman' (Michaud et al. 2000, 15), largely due to his infamous habit of attempting to delay his own execution. In this particular interview one might therefore presume that Bundy may be attempting to linguistically manipulate his interviewer and/or the wider audience in some way.

Methodology

In an attempt to redress the gaps of knowledge in this particular field, this analysis focuses on

Bundy's stylistic choices within an overall framework of theories of rhetoric. In his work on rhetoric, Aristotle outlined three 'artistic proofs' (Killingsworth 2005, 2) which the speaker has at his disposal when attempting to persuade; these are *ethos,pathos* and *logos* (related to ethics, emotions, and logic, respectively). This triadic system of persuasion in discourse is referred to as the rhetorical triangle (Levine and Saunders 1993, 109; Killingsworth 2005, 25). However, given the small scale of this study, the focus is limited to just two of these: *ethos* and *pathos*. The analysis considers the ways in which specific linguistic devices – such as the usage of pronouns, modal verbs, and determiners (Cockroft and Cockroft 2005; Halliday 1978; Yang 2009), lexical choices (Cockroft and Cockroft 2005; Finegan 2008) and metaphor (Kovecses 2002) – are utilised by Bundy within these modes.

Rhetoric in Ted Bundy's speech

Ethos

As a mode of persuasion, *ethos* refers to the persuader's attempt to appeal to the audience's values by establishing a particular character or image, one aspect of which is 'personality' (Cockroft and Cockroft 2005, 16). By this means, the speaker tries to convey his or her own individuality in a way which will connect with his/her listener(s) (ibid.). This can be linked to Halliday's 'triadic system' of textual functions (1978, 63), specifically the interpersonal function, the relationship between the speaker and his audience (ibid. 46). Realizations of the interpersonal function can come from a variety of linguistic techniques, such as the usage of pronouns, modal verbs, tense, and lexical choices (Cockroft and Cockroft 2005, 38). Pronouns in particular can be used to 'map out the degrees of distance between persuader and persuadee' (ibid.). Looking at Bundy's speech in a transcription of the interview, we can see several examples of this.

Example (1)

1. **TB:** …those of **us** who are – who have been so much influenced by violence
2. in the media in particular pornographic violence are not some kind of inherent
3. monsters (.) **we** are **your sons** and **we** are **your husbands** and (.) **we** grew
4. up in regular families

In the first line of Example (1), Bundy uses the first person plural object pronoun 'us' to refer to himself and others like him – namely, others 'who have been so much influenced by violence in the media'. In this way, he is able to draw the audience's attention away from himself as lone criminal;

instead, he is simply part of a wider group of offenders who have been profoundly affected by sexualised violence in the media. This is further emphasised by Bundy's pronominal usage on line 3 of Example (1). He uses the first person plural subject pronoun 'we' three times, once more affirming his 'membership' to the aforementioned group, and he combines this with the second person possessive determiner 'your' in the noun phrases 'your sons' and 'your husbands' when addressing both Dr Dobson and, it seems, the wider audience. This allows Bundy to establish a connection with his audience members: their attention is drawn away from Bundy's culpability and towards their relationship with Bundy (and, by extension, other serial killers) as parents and spouses.

Modal verbs can also be used by the speaker in a variety of ways to represent his or her personality (Cockroft and Cockroft 2005, 42). Although largely absent in Example (1), the use of a modal verb is noteworthy in Example (2).

Example (2)

1. **TB:** …pornography **can reach out and snatch** a kid out of any house
2. **today** (.) it – it snatched me out of my home – it snatched me out of
3. my home twenty, thirty years ago

As is argued by Yang, modality in English is used to express probability, intention, or obligation (2009, 158). Specifically, probability is expressed through the use of modal verbs, 'modal adjuncts' (ibid.), or a combination of the two. In line 1 of Example (2), Bundy utilises the present tense modal verb 'can' to communicate the possibility that exposure to pornography will 'reach out and snatch' children's innocence from them at any given moment. The immediacy of this prediction is further cemented by his use of the adverb 'today'*,* as this anchors the statement in the present tense. In doing so, he not only communicates the probability of an immediate threat, but also portrays pornography (rather than himself, a serial killer) as the predator, with the audience members' children as potential victims, and himself as a past victim 'twenty, thirty years ago'. Once more, this allows him to represent his personality as a concerned member of society, warning parents about the potential dangers of sexualised violence in the media.

Another method by which speakers are able to convey personality to the audience is through 'lexical choices' (Cockroft and Cockroft 2005, 42). Bundy demonstrates this technique in his speech in Example (3), below.

Example (3)

1. **JD:** Well addictions are like that they affect some people more than they
2. affect [others] but there is a percentage of people affected by hardcore
3. **TB:**   [well]
4. **JD:** pornography in a very violent way and you're obviously one of them
5. **TB:** that was a major component and I don't know why I was **vul-vulnerable** to it

In line 5 of Example (3), Bundy uses the adjective 'vulnerable' to describe himself in relation to pornography. This functions to reassert his position as a victim of the predatory, 'addictive' nature of sexualised violence. This particular lexical choice can be related to the concept of the semantic field, 'a set of words with an identifiable semantic affinity' (Finegan 2008, 180). Bundy appears to be creating a semantic field of innocence and/or victimhood in his self-descriptive lexical choices, in order to convey a weak, impressionable, and almost childlike personality type. This is supported by Example (4).

Example (4)

1. **TB:** … part of the shock and horror for **my dear friends and family** when –
2. years ago when I was first arrested was that they just there was no clue (.)
3. they looked at me and they looked at the uhhm **the all-American boy** and I
4. mean I wasn't perfect but it was – it was – I want to be [quite candid with you]
5. **JD:** [they couldn't believe it]
6. **TB:** I was – **I was okay** (.) okay? I was (.) **the basic humanity** and **the**
7. **basic spirit** that God gave me was intact but it unfortunately became
8. **overwhelmed** at times

In lines 6-8 of Example (4), Bundy draws attention to his character, by emphasising his apparently God-given 'humanity' and 'spirit'. Bundy's choice of nouns can once more be connected to the semantic field of victimhood, particularly when combined with the verbal adjective 'overwhelmed'. Through this combination of lexical choices, he gives the impression that there is (or was) goodness in him; it was simply not strong enough to withstand the influence of pornography. Alongside this, his lexical choices reflect a representation of his personality as essentially 'normal': he refers to his

image as that of 'the all-American boy' and stresses intonationally that he was 'okay'. In Examples (5) and (6) he uses lexical repetition to cement this image of normality.

Example (5)

1. **TB: …**basically I was **a normal person**

Example (6)

1. **TB: …**I w-was essentially **a normal person** I had good friends I – I um led **a**
2. **normal life**

In doing so, Bundy once more establishes a connection with Dr Dobson and the wider audience: by portraying a personality which is, at its core, the same as everyone else's, he thereby minimises the aggressive, anti-social aspects of his character – the violence and the brutality – which would alienate his listener(s), and maximises the aspects which would allow them to identify with him. His references to God and to Christianity and the church (e.g. Example (4), line 7) appear to be aimed primarily at Dr Dobson as an evangelical Christian, but he makes clear that he wants people in general 'to recognise' the normalcy of his personality.

A problem with relying upon the concept of *ethos* to explain manipulation is that it does not account for instances where representations of the speaker's personality are potentially fabricated. Bundy's propensity to manipulate and deceive in the past would suggest that the personality he is projecting is at least partially, if not wholly, inaccurate. This, as well as the frequency with which he changed his testimony, would suggest that Bundy's representation of personality could be entirely fabricated for the purposes of manipulating – rather than simply persuading – the audience. This assumption is supported by the fact that the interview with Dr Dobson was 'the only one [Bundy] would grant in those closing days' (Michaud and Aynesworth 1999, 340), despite Bundy having dismissed the influence of pornography on his behaviour as negligible in the years before – and even the evening before – the interview took place.

The second concept of *ethos* is that of stance, defined as 'a wider framework of attitudes, a sense of the persuader's position or viewpoint about what's being discussed' (Cockroft and Cockroft 2005, 17). To be successful in his attempts to persuade, the speaker must address 'the demands of the topic' (ibid. 36); namely, he must acknowledge any reservations the audience members may have

and provide an appropriate counter-response. This happens several times throughout the interview, as shown in Examples (7), (8) and (9) below.

Example (7)

1. **JD:** Do you remember what pushed you over that edge?
2. **TB:** (sighs) Well –
3. **JD:** Do you remember that decision to go for it? Do you remember where you
4. decided to throw caution to the wind?
5. **TB:** (2) Again when you say pushed I don't want – **I know what you're saying I don't want to**
6. **[infer again that I was] some kind of helpless**
7. **JD:**   [yes I understand that that's clear]
8. **TB: victim and yet we're talking about an influence which** is – that is the
9. influence of violent types of media and violent pornography which had an – w
10. **was an indispensible link in the chain of behaviour** – the chain of events
11. **that led to the behaviours to the assaults to the murders**

Example (8)

1. **TB:** ...it just occurred to me that **some people would – would say well I –**
2. **I've seen that stuff and it doesn't do anything to me and I can**
3. **understand that** I – uh (.) virtually everyone can be exposed to so-called
4. pornography and while they're aroused to one degree or another not go out
5. and do anything wrong

Example (9)

1. **TB:** ...it was like coming out of some kind of horrible trance or – or dream (.)
2. I can only liken it to after – **you know I don't want to over dramatise it but**
3. **to have been possessed by something so awful and so alien and the**
4. **next morning wake up from it**

In Example (7), Bundy draws attention to Dobson's use of the term 'pushed' to describe Bundy's eventual decision to act on his violent fantasies. He seems to anticipate that the wider audience will

object to Dobson framing Bundy as a 'helpless victim' and addresses this by ostensibly objecting to it himself; however, he quickly follows this objection with the adversative conjunction 'yet'. The part of the utterance which follows contradicts his earlier challenge to Dobson's terminology, as it once more portrays pornography as the central influence in Bundy's behaviour and backgrounds his own culpability; in this way, his pseudo-agreement with the audience's potential negative response allows him to subtly re-state Dobson's frame of him as a victim. In line 2 of Example (9), Bundy states his desire to avoid exaggerating the strength of his own violent urges, but promptly follows this with the adversative conjunction 'but' and likens his urges to a kind of possession by an 'awful' and 'alien' being. Again, this allows Bundy to deflect the audience's potentially sceptical reaction by explaining that it is the truth, even if it sounds dramatic. Example (8) is unusual in that Bundy states on lines 2 and 3 that he can understand why the wider audience might be reluctant to believe him, but the counter-argument is provided by Dobson rather than Bundy himself – though Bundy quickly agrees.

Bundy's stance on violence in the media and hardcore pornography, then, is made clear throughout. Namely, he portrays them (in many cases, with Dobson's help) as addictive materials which overwhelm the decency and inhibitions of essentially moral people. Much more subtle is his stance on his own culpability; though he is at pains to agree with his audience members that he is not a 'helpless victim', he often subtly undermines this by likening his violent actions to addiction or possession over which he had no control, thereby creating what is sometimes termed as 'an ethos of sympathy' (Miller 2004, 111). Provoking a sympathetic response from one's audience requires careful use of linguistic strategies in order to direct the audience's focus away from the speaker; as such, it is difficult to deny that 'deception is possible' (ibid., 212). Although some theorists admit this possibility, few openly address the topic of malignant manipulation or deception in forensic contexts. Theories of rhetoric are therefore of limited usefulness when attempting to identify and explain the linguistic techniques used by Bundy in this interview.

Pathos

As a mode of persuasion, *pathos* is defined as a speaker's attempts to achieve emotional engagement with his audience (Cockroft and Cockroft 2005, 17). It is argued that although emotional experiences differ from person to person, 'most of us can access a wider range of emotion through the power of imagination' (ibid.). A particularly useful method of linguistic emotivity is metaphor, which is defined as 'understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain' (Kovecses 2002, 4). These domains are termed according to their function: namely, the domain from which we draw metaphorical imagery is termed the 'source domain', while the domain which is

understood by way of this imagery is the 'target domain' (ibid.). Bundy's use of metaphor has a consistent theme throughout the interview, as demonstrated in the Examples (10), (11) and (12) below.

Example (10)

1. **TB:** …what alcohol did in conjunction with let's say my exposure to
2. pornography was alcohol reduced my inhibitions at the same time uh the –
3. fantasy life fuelled by pornography **eroded** them further you see

Example (11)

1. **TB:** …the basic (.) humanity and the basic spirit that God gave me was intact
2. but it unfortunately became **overwhelmed** at times

Example (12)

1. **TB:** …we grew up in regular families and pornography can reach out and
2. **snatch a kid** out of any house today (.) it – it snatched me out of my home –
3. **it snatched me** out of my home twenty, thirty years ago

As we can see on line 3 of Example (10), the conceptual metaphor used by Bundy is that of his violent sexual fantasies (the target domain) as a natural force (the source domain). This allows Dobson and the wider audience to envisage Bundy's inhibitions as being physically ground down, in the same way that a large body of water will erode the landscape surrounding it. This is further supported by the metaphors on line 2 of Example (11) and lines 2 and 3 of Example (12), in which pornography – or the violent sexual urges apparently caused by pornography – is represented as a physical opponent or predator. Bundy's 'humanity' and 'spirit' are depicted as being beaten and subjugated by something with physical force, and pornography is represented as an entity which is capable of preying upon, or 'snatching', young children – including Bundy himself as a child – from their homes. In all of the aforementioned metaphors, qualities from the source domain (physical force, destructiveness, predation) are 'mapped' (Kovecses 2002, 6) onto the target domain (pornography and/or Bundy's sexual fantasies). In this way, Bundy appeals to Dobson's and the audience members' emotions by metaphorically depicting himself as a helpless victim in the face of a forceful opponent.

Pathos is not only about arousing listeners' emotions, however; persuasion can be effectively achieved if some emotions – particularly negative emotions – are downplayed or suppressed. Bundy achieves this through his clinical method of describing his own crimes.

Example (13)

1. **TB:** …the influence of violent types of media and violent pornography which
2. had an – w-was an indispensible link in **the chain of behaviour** – **the chain**
3. **of events** that led to **the behaviours to the assaults to the murders**

Example (14)

1. **TB:** …that was a major component and I don't know why I was vul
2. vulnerable to it all I know is that uh that it had an impact on me that was
3. just so uh (1) central to **the development of the violent behaviour that**
4. **I engaged in**

As shown in Example (13), lines 2 and 3 and Example (14), lines 3 and 4, Bundy consistently uses the definite article 'the' when referring to the murders he committed rather than, for instance, the first person singular possessive determiner 'my' (as in 'my violent behaviour'). Bundy's acts of violence are represented as a series of noun phrases rather than as verbs committed by a particular subject, which allows him to distance himself linguistically from his own actions. This is supported by the clinical nature of his lexical choices. I would argue that the terms 'chain of behaviour', 'violent behaviour', 'the assaults', and 'the murders' are all from the semantic field of policing, and are therefore more connotatively neutral than would be expected given his awareness of the extremely brutal nature of his own crimes. It seems that Bundy is attempting to understate this level of brutality for a specific manipulative purpose: to avoid arousing negative emotions (such as anger or revulsion) in his audience members.

However, there are difficulties with applying this particular mode of persuasion to Bundy's language: psychopaths, by virtue of their psychological disorder, exhibit 'profound emotional deficit' and 'little or no "conscience"' (Hancock et al. 2011, 104). Given that many linguists argue that we must be capable of feeling emotion 'before we can move others to emotion' (Cockroft and Cockroft 2005,

62), how is it that Bundy is able to attempt to linguistically manipulate his audience's emotions despite his own potential affective deficit? I would therefore argue that theories of rhetoric are not wholly applicable to contexts in which emotion is potentially fabricated and in which intentions of the persuader are malignant rather than benign.

Conclusion

Due to both the small scale of this study and the scarcity of data in this particular field, the results are only applicable to the chosen extract. Nonetheless, the evidence in Bundy's case – his classification as psychopathic and manic-depressive, along with documented instances of him bargaining with legal professionals and repeatedly changing his story – support my conclusion that Bundy was indeed trying to manipulate and deceive both Dobson and the wider audience. Given these findings, I would argue that there is justification for more in-depth study in order to find stylistic similarities across the language of individuals likely to attempt manipulation or deceit, such as those diagnosed as psychopaths.

Theories of rhetoric did prove illustrative, to some degree, when considering linguistic methods of manipulation and deceit in this instance. Specifically, modes of persuasion such as *pathos* and *ethos* were linked to potentially manipulative aspects of Bundy's language, such as the application of conceptual metaphor, the use of plural first person pronominals and modal verbs, and the use of lexical items from particular semantic fields. However, I would argue that the applicability of rhetoric to this area of linguistics is limited: current theories do not account for the fact that linguistic methods of emotional engagement can potentially be achieved by those who exhibit a profound affective deficit (such as Bundy and others clinically classified as psychopaths), nor do they consider that representations of personality or stance may be partially or wholly fabricated. Future research could therefore benefit from the development of a rhetorical framework specific to linguistic methods of manipulation and deceit.

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