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Yes we can!

Barack Obama is a copycat. Surely not, you cry. After all, the man is a real pioneer: first black US presidential nominee, first black US president, and now the first person to win the Nobel Peace Prize on the basis of what he may achieve in the future! (Why wait, right? Barack will get it done - soon!) That's a lot of 'firsts' for one guy, so how come we're calling him a copycat?

Ever since Mr. Obama appeared on the scene, people have commented on what a good speaker he is. And we agree: Mr. Obama is an excellent speaker. But if you ask yourself what makes him so effective, you'll discover that at least part of Barack's success is down to borrowing liberally from the old masters. Ancient masters in fact - from classical Greece and Rome. If you had gone to school in those days, you would have spent a lot of time studying rhetoric. Rhetoric is the art of using language to persuade or influence others - and Aristotle, Plato and Cicero knew a thing or two about it. And so does a certain Mr. Obama.

The ancients would be pleased to see that their rhetorical techniques are still alive and well in the speeches of President Obama. Two of the president's favourite rhetorical devices are tripling and contrasting. Let's have a look.

Tripling

Tripling is all about making messages more memorable and powerful by grouping the information in threes. Here are a few examples that should sound familiar:

Veni, vidi, vici

Friends, Romans and countrymen

Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité

Groups of three are 'sticky' - they are difficult to forget and you can deliver them with great

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power. President Obama's speech to Congress earlier in the year contains numerous examples:

*I know that for many Americans watching right now, the state of our economy is a concern that rises above all others. And rightly so. If you haven't been personally affected by this recession, you probably know someone who has - **a friend; a neighbor; a member of your family.***

And he followed this with:

We will rebuild, we will recover, and the United States of America will emerge stronger than before.

Contrasting

Contrasting is what the ancient Greeks called antithesis. It is the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas in balanced phrases. Simply put, it is similar to saying 'not this, but that'. Here's Plato:

Wise men talk because they have something to say; fools, because they have to say something.

And Cicero:

Advice is judged by results, not by intentions.

In both cases, the speaker creates a contrast between the first and second phrase. And now here's that copycat Obama from the same speech to Congress:

*My job - our job - is to solve the problem. Our job is to govern with a sense of responsibility. **I will not spend a single penny** for the purpose of rewarding a single Wall Street executive, **but I will do whatever it takes** to help the small business that can't pay its workers or the family that has saved and still can't get a mortgage. **That's what this is about. It's not about helping banks - it's about helping people.***

Nothing of course stops you from getting ambitious and using two rhetorical devices in one phrase - a double-whammy. Here's Obama combining a contrast with a triple:

My budget does not attempt to solve every problem or address every issue. ***It reflects*** the stark reality of what we've inherited - ***a trillion dollar deficit, a financial crisis, and a costly recession.***

Nowadays the word rhetoric seems to have negative connotations - almost synonymous with boring and inflated language. Yet the ancients saw it as the key to delivering strong and clear messages - and so does you-know-who! Indeed, Obama is just the latest in a long line of copycats in Washington. How about this from John F. Kennedy:

Ask not what your country can do for you; ***Ask what*** you can do for your country.

And one from the great communicator himself, Ronald Reagan:

***Recession** is when a neighbor loses his job. **Depression** is when you lose yours.*

So, nothing wrong with copying - and nothing wrong with rhetoric. You should use rhetorical devices like these to coin at least one power line in all your presentations. If Barack can, so can we! Yes we can!

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