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Plenary Speeches

Sweet talking: Food, language, and democracy

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At a time of diminishing resources, the sum of apparently minor personal decisions about food can have immense impact. These individual choices are heavily influenced by language, as those with vested interests seek to persuade individuals to act in certain ways. This makes the language of food politics a fitting area for an expanding applied linguistics oriented towards real-world language-related problems of global and social importance. The paper draws upon five consecutive research projects to show how applied linguistics research may contribute to public policy and debate, and also how, by entering such new arenas, it can develop its own methods and understanding of contemporary language use.

Why do we eat what we do?

Being away at a conference makes deciding what to eat even more complicated than when we are at home. We have to make split-second decisions on the plane, at breakfast, in the restaurant – sometimes ones we regret. But why do we eat what we do? Why did you choose to have whatever you had for breakfast this morning, or for dinner last night?

For those of us in the rich world who have a choice, there are a host of answers. At one level, it is a reflex answer to a biological need. We need a particular combination of nutrients to stay alive. We also have a sense of what is good for our health, and balance that against the pleasure we may take in eating things which are not. But choosing food is not a question of satisfying our bodies. It is also social. Choices of food can express aspects our affections, a sense of occasion, or our identity. They can express cultural allegiance, too. George W. Bush once dismissed the press with the words 'I'm off to have a hamburger', thus intending to say much more, surely, than that he was off to have a hamburger. Food choice can be a political act or statement. For political reasons we might like our grapefruit to be – or NOT to be – from Israel, or Cuba. Many people have religious reasons for what they eat. They believe that garlic makes them sinful, that God told them not to eat prawns, that they should eat fish on Friday, or that animals should not be stunned before they are killed.

All of this assumes, of course, that we do have choice. Many people in the world can only eat what is available, or what they can afford. Even in the rich world, it is a truism that extensive choice is comparatively recent. When I was growing up in England in the 1950s,

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my mother would not make a definitive list before shopping, but go to the greengrocer or butcher and ask what they had.

Reasons for food choice is not a question we often talk about, however. They are too obvious – an example of what Bourdieu (1977: 164) calls *doxa*, an experience in which 'the natural and social world appears as self-evident'. Taking apart the obvious, however, should be at the heart of academic enquiry. As even this brief discussion suggests, almost every academic discipline, from biology and medicine, through sociology and psychology, to politics, theology and economics, has a reason for interest in food choices.

Food/language parallels

What, though, is the relevance to applied linguistics? A possible answer is that there are parallels between language and food. In the words of Bakhtin (1984: 283), '[t]here is an ancient tie between the feast and the spoken word'. Humans are intrigued by those things which transcend the boundaries between self and other, seeming to be internal to the individual at one moment and part of the external world the next. Food that goes into our mouths and language that comes out of them are both of this kind. Many metaphors reflect this close union – one of which I have chosen as my title. I want to SWEET TALK you. To BUTTER YOU UP. To give you FOOD FOR THOUGHT. I hope you won't find what I say UNSAVOURY. I want you CHEW IT OVER, to DIGEST it, maybe REGURGITATE it later. And I hope I won't have to EAT MY WORDS.

In addition, different focuses on food consumption echo different focuses in linguistics. There are schools of linguistics that see language as primarily biological, or aesthetic, or social, or political, or economic. Their influences are felt in the study of language acquisition. Vivian Cook (2002: 264), for example, reductively equates second language input with nutrition:

> Input for language acquisition mostly provides data for the mind to work on, just as the digestive system works on the vitamins in one's food. The message of the input sentences could be anything at all, provided they contain the necessary language elements on which the mind can build; it doesn't matter what your food tastes like or whether you eat liver or spinach provided you get iron in your diet . . .

These parallels might be of some interest to us as linguists meditating on language. However, I want to go down what I see as the harder, APPLIED linguistics route of relating an understanding of language to a problem in the wider world – and trying to make this understanding relevant and accessible to other disciplines and to people outside of the academy (Cook 2003). Food choice is an applied linguistic problem because another major reason for choosing to eat what we eat, in addition to those with which I began, is that we are persuaded to do so by somebody else's sweet words. We are influenced by what is said about food offered to us, as much as by the food itself.

I can illustrate this very easily with reference to something that happens in my local supermarket. You can buy the same product at a low price in one aisle, or at a high price in another aisle. The difference is in the description. A loaf of white bread without words,

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for example, costs £0.75p for 400g, but white breadcrumbs catchily labelled as 'a handful of breadcrumbs' cost £1.19 for 100g. People are sweet-talked into buying such things – including sometimes me.

Food politics

Food choice, then, has always been complicated, the subject matter of many different disciplines and one in which language plays a particularly important role. Its impact upon the environment, however, has given it a new urgency. With the world population set to rise from 6 billion to over 9 billion by 2050 at a time of climate change and diminishing resources, the politics of food production and distribution has taken on a new political prominence. The extra people will have to be fed, and those in the poor world, where the population growth will mostly take place, will quite rightly demand the same kind of choices as people in the rich world. Yet, current food policy at the macro-political level is notoriously short-term. Conventional food production is characterised by an intensifying industrialisation of farming, consuming large but varying amounts of fuel in the process. Producing one tonne of maize in the USA requires 160 litres of oil, compared with just 4.8 litres in Mexico (Ambler-Edwards et al. 2009). Problems of distribution and storage are addressed through intensive food processing, and a global network of food transportation with some bizarre consequences. Some apples grown in the UK and sold as BRITISH in UK supermarkets, for example, have been flown out to South Africa to be washed by cheap female labour and then flown back again (Lawrence 2004).

These are issues for conventional political intervention by politicians. There is a different level of politics at play here too, however, which both shapes and is shaped by the macro-level. The most important developments in late modern globalised consumer capitalism are perhaps more the sum of individual choices and actions than single grand decisions by those in conventional political power, who arguably have less scope to change the course of events than earlier leaders. Thus, food sociologist Simon Tormey has argued (Tormey 2007) that our individual shopping choices may have more effect on the future than the way we vote in elections – making developments in Wal-Mart, Tesco or Leclerc more significant than those in the White House, Westminster, or the Élysée Palace. Whereas spheres of conventional politics, such as finance or foreign policy, remain of undoubted importance, especially to those who lose their jobs in a recession or come in the line of fire of invading armies, in 500 years the choices made in these spheres may be distant history, while the environmental consequences of our choices about food production will still be very present for our descendants.

There is a parallel between this assertion of the importance of local choices and areas more familiar to applied linguists. Conversation analysts, linguistic ethnographers and emergentists believe (with varying attitudes to postmodernism) that the deepest insights are to be gained from studying the apparent trivia of minute-by-minute actions, and that we gain understanding of larger social structures by looking at the micro-level from which they emerge.

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Research projects

With these ideas in mind, as part of my work in applied linguistics, I have over the last ten years run a series of projects investigating the language in food politics.[1] Topics have been baby food labelling, justification of genetically modified crops, debates over genetically modified food, organic food promotion, and school dinners. The aim has been to understand each point of a communicative triangle – what is said, the people who say it, the people it is said to – on the assumption that discourse is the interaction between the three, rather than any one in isolation. My research teams and I have attempted to do this through relating three types of data: corpora, interviews, and focus groups.

So for each project we have a corpus of relevant texts (now totalling 9 million words) which we can interrogate to find the usual things that corpus linguists find: frequencies, collocations, colligations, keywords (Scott 2005) and domain clouds (Rayson 2008). This interrogation has the strengths that are often claimed for it. The corpus is a reliable record of what is said and written, and has – as corpus linguists relentlessly reiterate with good reason (e.g. Stubbs 2001) – the virtue of revealing reliable facts which are not necessarily available to intuition. But there are also limitations. Corpus facts in themselves are dead data which divorce language from its users and from time. They do not reveal how those who used the language related to what was said (what was salient, or even noticed) or how this language unfolded in time (which is a key element in any study of rhetoric or eloquence).

To know those things you need something else, which is why we turn to interviews with text producers, aiming to understand how they account for what they are saying. The weaknesses of interviews as reliable data are well known. So we do not take interviewees at their word or treat what they say as an unproblematic window into their thoughts and intentions.

To complete this attempted insight into the communicative triangle of discourse, we turn to the people this language about food aims to persuade: the 'public' – though this is far too monologic a term. We do this through focus groups, categorised in various ways – by age, income, family status, etc. – showing them texts which our corpus analysis has led us to select as typical, and/or ones whose authors we have interviewed. This, too, is a data source with notorious limitations. Groups are being made to react artificially, to read critically and carefully where they would naturally read carelessly. Group dynamics develop, often led by one strong individual. What you get is not direct access to people's motivations, but their public, morally accountable versions of their actions to each other.

All three datasets, then, have disadvantages; but the general idea is to use the strengths of each to offset the weaknesses of the other two. I believe this is a distinctive methodology providing a principled way of linking evidence from a rigorous description of what is said to the discursive repertoires of those who said it, and the public reflections of the people it is intended to persuade. It has also provided an accessible framework for the presentation of our findings clearly to non specialists (Robbins, Pieri & Cook 2004; Cook 2007a, b, 2008, 2009). It is a measure of success of these projects – as perhaps it should be for any applied research – that we have experienced considerable interest in our work from outside applied linguistics: from environmental campaigners and businesses and professional associations.

[1] For details see http://creet.open.ac.uk/projects/language-of-food-politics/

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Food rhetoric

So what kind of language is used in food persuasion, why and with what effect? How do people with vested interests try to influence our choices with their sweet words? Are the techniques of persuasion new and different in some way, or similar to those known to rhetoricians going back to Aristotle? Is this just a new topic – potatoes rather than policies – or a different discourse demanding some radical readjustment on our part?

The front line of persuasion about food is food labelling and packaging, possibly one of the most widely distributed – if most carelessly read – text types on earth. That fact alone should make it of interest to an applied linguistics seeking to engage with major social issues involving language. What kind of language does it contain? What are its tactics? On which of the many factors affecting food choice does it focus in the hope of influencing our behaviour?

There is obligatory factual information of course, about weight, ingredients, nutrition, expiry, storage, place of origin, and manufacturer. But the strategy of choice for manufacturers is not this factual information, which is literally consigned to the small print, but flamboyant, large-font, on-the-front product descriptions. These are disposed to use language in certain types of ways. They are often rather poetic ('silky smooth dark chocolate promises') – alliterative, rhythmic and metaphoric. For example, they are inordinately fond of vague language (Cook 2007c), packed with words such as *natural*, *select*, *premium*, *local*, *home-made*, and *free-range*. But what do these words and similar ones actually mean? How near is *local*? How old is *traditional*? How free is a *free-range* chicken? Retailers, when asked these questions, either refer to legal or regulatory definitions of such terms, or have ones of their own, as though they could somehow legislate new meanings for existing words, but not actually tell people the new definition. One spokesperson for a catering association, for example, asked to define *home-baked* confidently told us that:

> 'Home baked' could be something that is partly made up, like a sponge mix, and all you'll do is add in water, so it becomes 'home baked'.

A 'free-range' chicken is legally defined in the EU as one which has

> continuous daytime access to open-air runs [in which] the maximum stocking density is not greater than 2 500 hens per hectare of ground available to the hens or one hen per $4m^2$ at all times and the runs are not extending beyond a radius of 150 m from the nearest pop-hole of the building.

The pragmatics of this is weird. By using current words in their own private senses, regulator and retailer are communicating with each other – not with the purchaser. Here is an issue where applied linguistics could have much to say.

There is also great emphasis on pleasure and indulgence, often iconically represented in extravagant syntax. We found elaborate modifier-laden noun phrases to be very common, like these ones of 19 and 6 and 3 words (marked off in square brackets):

> [masterfully prepared sweetened real fruit juice pieces, made from a blend of pomegranate and other select concentrated fruit juices], are dipped in [our extra creamy pure dark chocolate] to create this [decadent taste sensation]

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Extravagance is also captured lexically. Our corpus analysis shows product-description keywords (i.e. words occurring with statistically significant frequency against a reference corpus) to include many referring to the sensuous experience of taste: *delicate*, *delicious*, *distinctive*, *flavoursome*, *full*, *intense*, *mouth-watering*, *natural*, *peppery*, *real*, *succulent*, *superb*, *sweet*, *tangy*, *tasty*, *unique*, *wonderful*.

The corollary of this preoccupation with vague and sensual description is a tendency to downplay facts, unless they are to the retailers' advantage. A classic example of this can be found on tins of formula milk powder for babies, the topic of our first project. Medical opinion is unanimous in judging breast feeding to be best for a baby's health. In addition, in places without clean water supplies, there is a danger of disease and death if mothers who can breast feed are persuaded to use a substitute. One pressure group estimated that a baby dies every thirty seconds from this 'bottle baby syndrome'. For these reasons manufacturers were obliged by a World Health Organisation code of practice to 'include clear information on .... the benefits and superiority of breastfeeding' (WHO 1981 onwards).

Though manufacturers have complied, the ways in which this information is included might be seen as cynically observing the letter but not the spirit of the law. Tins of formula milk powder are literally smothered in small print, thus diminishing the salience of this important information – sometimes poetically expressed (and perhaps thus trivialised) as 'breast is best'. When we interviewed designers of such labels we were told that small print on a curved surface in pastel colours is hard to read – and when we interviewed mothers in a London baby clinic we found that they had not noticed this information (Cook & O'Halloran 1999). Regulation adheres to a view of communication as propositional – concerned with facts – but fails to regulate either the linguistic realisation of those facts or the multimodal aspects of communication. These are again matters upon which applied linguistics could have a great deal to say.

The overwhelming emphasis in food labelling is on sensuality and self interest: tastiness, low cost, and health benefits (though claims can raise legal complications). Even the organic movement tends now to put their faith in conventional market tactics, believing that persuasion will be best achieved by appeal to emotion and self interest, rather than by arguments about the social and environmental advantages of organic agriculture. In its list of 'Ten Reasons to Buy Organic', The Soil Association (the main UK organic campaign group and certification body) at one time moved its alliterative slogan 'Top for Taste' to first position and demoted 'Good for Wildlife' from number one to number ten. In our survey of organic marketing, we found in general little difference between the tactics of smaller organic enterprises and the larger supermarkets (Cook, Reed & Twiner 2009). Political positions on organic and conventional agriculture may be different, but the rhetoric and assumptions are very similar. All sides are 'drinking from the same discoursal trough' – to adapt an image used by Block (2008: 191) – and that may undermine any case for alternative policy. This is a cause of division within the organic movement in the USA as well as the UK (Fromartz 2006).

Such tactics are as old as advertising, and it may seem that nothing is new. One interesting and significant recent shift in food labelling, however, has been away from representations of the consumer to representations of the producers – suggesting perhaps some awareness among retailers of a mounting consumer interest in choices between different agricultures,

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to which I shall move shortly. Thus, whereas classic advertising images show happy healthy people consuming food, you are now as likely to see, everywhere from Organic and Fair Trade marketing to McDonald's and Monsanto PR, images of the farmer – rugged, trustworthy, and almost always male – and his livestock, crops or land. We are often told his story, even addressed by him in chatty conversational style, as though in a local market of farm shop. Representations of farming, whether verbal or pictorial, are often bucolic rural idylls, in which, for example, as one packet of organic sausages has it:

> pigs are reared outside with freedom to root and roam … in small family groups. Warm shelters and straw bedding protect them from winter, while mud baths keep them cool in summer.

Such images may not, however, always be what they seem. One packet of potatoes in our corpus shows rolling wooded English countryside, although closer inspection reveals the contents to be grown in Egypt.

Some overall characteristics of food-marketing language then can be summarised as follows. It is poetic, vague, sensual, fact-selective, personalised, story-telling, conversational, and aimed at self-interest. We have become so used to these strategies, that we find them no longer worth attention. This is indeed an example of *doxa*, and nobody – even in marketing research – seems to ask in any serious way whether these strategies still actually work, or whether public perceptions of food production at a time of environmental crisis might be changing. The overwhelming assumption among marketers remains that food can be treated as any other item of fast-moving consumer goods, that purchasers are still easily swayed by some tickling of emotion, distraction from unwelcome facts, or association with nice people – and that consumers are not interested in, or prepared to pay for, the wider implications of their choices. One packaging copywriter we interviewed (who wrote the text about pigs quoted above) referred to her words with a simplistically behaviourist view of communication, as 'touchy feely buttons':

> I know this packaging and I know that, yes, *succulent* is a difficult word but how the hell do you give the sense of flavour without words like that? … I spend a lot of my time making sure that what I write is factually accurate so to speak, but also hopefully presses those nice touchy, feely buttons which I actually think is part of the reason why consumers buy organic. (Supermarket food writer)

The GM debate

In Aristotelian rhetoric there are three main means of persuasion:

- *Logos*: roughly, argument by reason
- *Pathos*: argument by appeal to emotion
- *Ethos*: argument by appeal to the good character of the speaker

The food product descriptions discussed above are in these terms predominantly arguments by *pathos*. There are, however, many other reasons to choose food (as I tried to show at the beginning) in addition to self interest and vague emotion. There are other voices than those of retailers and labellers. There are arguments less concerned with *pathos* than with *logos*.

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The current debate over the advantages and disadvantages of competing agricultural technologies should, one might imagine, provide such instances. Battle lines are drawn between those who advocate the replacement of current practices with organic agriculture (relying on rotation, composting and the avoidance of chemicals), and those who favour genetic modification of crops (GM), further intensifying and extending cultivation. There are powerful arguments on both sides. Proponents of GM agriculture argue that it poses no health threat, is safe and even advantageous for the environment, that it can feed the world and cure disease, increasing yields and modifying plants to grow in previously uncultivatable places. Opponents argue the opposite – that GM is a health risk, causes environmental damage, destroys wilderness and wildlife, and does not and cannot deliver on its promises to feed the world. To this they add social and political arguments: that it disrupts local communities and employment by further intensifying agriculture, that it severs cultural and symbolic relations of humanity to agricultural cycles, and that the real motives behind it are not philanthropic but strategic and commercial. They point also to the ways in which decisions about it were reached, arguing that the world move towards GM was undemocratic, initiated by commercial rather than elected bodies, taken up by the US government, and then energetically promoted through pressure on other elected and unelected governments.[2]

The result of this stand-off has been two intense opposed rhetorical campaigns: one by governments and corporations presenting GM as a quick-fix solution to the pressures on food resources posed by climate change and population growth, the other by environmental campaigners arguing for longer-term strategies.

How is this argument conducted? What kind of language is used? Is it different from the commercial tactics of food labelling? Do WE, in the words of Lord Robert May (2002) former president of the Royal Society, 'first establish the facts and acknowledge the uncertainties, and then reason together about the choices', with 'we' here presumably meaning everyone and not just one side. It would be a step forward for democratic debate if that were the case. Our research, however, shows something rather different. Corpus linguistic analysis shows how particular lexical choices insinuate judgments. We found, for example, that the verbs used to report or refer to anti-GM views in pro-GM arguments are almost exclusively ones referring to emotion rather than cognition (Cook, Robbins & Pieri 2006). Thus, while proponents 'think', 'know' and 'say' things, opponents 'feel', 'worry' about them and 'fear' them, reinforcing explicit claims that opponents are not only emotional but also hysterical (Cook, Pieri & Robbins 2004). In Britain, a key phrase in this smearing of opposition was 'Frankenstein foods', whose alliterative allusion to Mary Shelley's cautionary parable seems to bear the charge of an emotional science phobia (Cook 2009). Our corpus analysis, however, showed that while this phrase is indeed used by opponents, it occurs far more frequently in the discourse of the pro-GM lobby, anxious to stereotype all arguments against GM as ill-informed tabloid-inspired hysteria. Typical uses found in our corpus are claims that, for example, 'Lurid warnings about "Frankenstein foods" have bedevilled' the debate, or that the public is in 'hysterical panic over "Frankenstein food"'.

This image of the public as uniformly ignorant, emotional and easily swayed, reflects what sociologists of science have called the deficit model of the public understanding of science, in

[2] For fuller discussion of these issues see Cook 2004, 2008; Cook et al. 2004, 2006; Thomas 2008.

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which opposition to new technology is attributed wholly to a lack of knowledge (Gregory & Miller 1998; Wynne 2001). Bearing this out, we found the scientists we interviewed to have a rather low view of their audience, as in this statement:

> Those that are [against GM] tend to be less well informed in general than those that have taken a more measured view.

In this they echo the statements of some senior scientists, like this one, which compares opponents to naughty children:

> Most people do not even know what a gene is. Sometimes my young son wants to cross the road when it's dangerous – sometimes you have to tell people what's best for them.
>
> (Professor Janet Bainbridge, Chair, UK Government Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes, quoted by Monbiot 2000)

Such attitudes are odds with research – ironically conducted by the pro-GM UK government – showing that the more you tell people about GM, the more they are against it (AEBC 2003).

Opponents as enemies and terrorists

In addition to being seen as Luddite, opponents are also metaphorically represented as military enemies. The British Prime Minister Tony Blair talked of 'us' (apparently meaning the British people) 'being overrun by protesters and pressure groups who use emotion to drive out reason' (Blair 2002) using a word, *overrun*, which corpus linguistic analysis can show collocates almost exclusively with vermin or enemy armies. There is also a very frequent comparison of opponents of GM with Nazis or with Terrorists, a very serious charge to make against fellow citizens after 9/11 or the London and Madrid bombings. One GM scientist told us:

> You got terrorists come along and trashing it. Our crops last year were trashed twice you know. What grounds do we have for rational scientific debate if NGOs [non-governmental organisations] and their associates conduct and condone this type of activity. I mean quite frankly it's outrageous. And you know in the 1940s they burnt books and now they tear up plants.

GM technology was even recruited as a possible ally in the 'War on Terror' with newspaper reports claiming that plants could be modified to identify bombers (Cook 2004: 50) – though this prediction, like many others, never materialised. Lord Robert May, ironically in the same speech (quoted above) in which he had advocated calm rational debate, went further, specifically equating proponents of organic farming with Nazis, Maoists, the Taliban, and creationist fundamentalist Christians (op. cit.). There is some interesting confusion here, however, as it is the biotech industry rather than the organic movement which has close links with the religious fundamentalist right. Monsanto is jokingly referred to by its own employees as having its St Louis headquarters in the heart of the 'Bio Belt' and its PR talks of its activities as 'stewardship': a theological term which derives from the Christian belief in

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human dominion over nature, the authority for which is ironically the story of the Creation in *Genesis* (1 vv 28–29). GM is, for theological reasons, endorsed by the Vatican, protestant churches, and Chief Rabbis, even though many individual Christians and Jews oppose it for their own religious reasons (Cook 2004: 114–118).

In short, appeals to SCIENCE are used in a very UNscientific way to characterise and browbeat all opposition as anti-science. Those who do not accept GM are emotional, hysterical, ignorant, on the side of the terrorists, or just plain stupid. If we are looking for rational argument, they are not to be found in such advocacy of GM. In Aristotelian terms, this is not *logos*, but a kind of argument by what we might call 'negative *ethos*', in which a point of view is smeared by associating with undesirable people. In the terms of my title, this is more like 'rough talking' than 'sweet talking'. What is missing – or avoided – is a key lexical distinction between SCIENCE and TECHNOLOGY. Opposition to a technology is not necessarily opposition to the science behind it. Opposition to nuclear weapons, for example, is not the same as opposition to nuclear physics. Avoidance of this distinction is a convenient rhetorical choice for governments and corporations intent on positioning all opposition as anti-science.

This SCIENCE–TECHNOLOGY distinction is one of which we in an APPLIED discipline are particularly aware. We know that the findings of linguistic science cannot transmute directly into the technologies of, for example, language teaching, language policies, speech therapy, forensic linguistics, or translation, without taking other factors into account.

The spoken to

Vickers (1988) argues for a connection between forms of persuasive discourse and political institutions, claiming it is no coincidence that democracy and rhetoric emerged together in 5th-century Greece when rulers needed to influence voters for the first time. If this connection exists, and if consumer choice is now a political institution, then we might expect this new force to be reflected in changes to persuasive discourse. Yet, in the two points of the communicative triangle I have described so far (what is said and the speakers) there seems to be little change. The techniques of persuasion now seem the same as those used two-and-a-half thousand years ago. However, by focusing upon texts and their senders, we may simply be looking for change in the wrong place. If discourse is the interaction of all three points of the communicative triangle, then a change to any one is a change to the whole. A change in persuasive discourse may originate in the third point of this communicative triangle – the people who are spoken to – whose attention is the prerequisite, and whose attitudes and behaviour are the yardstick of rhetorical success.

Traditional rhetoric, and a good deal of contemporary discourse analysis, have chosen to focus upon texts themselves and to patronise and simplify their reception, treating this third point of the triangle as an undifferentiated mass. In Ancient Greek terms they were 'the crowd', 'the multitude'; in modern terms they are 'the public', 'the consumer'. They are treated as homogenous, rather as some analyses of language teaching talk about a generic 'the learner'. Our focus-group findings, however, show a much greater variety of response and a much more complex reaction than either the speakers or academic analysts seem to assume. This is hardly surprising, given the multiple factors affecting food choice of which

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I spoke at the beginning, and the fact that this 'the public'/'the consumer' is in principle everybody in the world. Our focus-group data has to be treated for what it represents: the views of some publics in one country. Nevertheless, it may be indicative of developing wider trends.

In the focus-group data from all our projects, there is an impression of a serious dislocation between the speakers and the spoken to, suggesting that the old-style techniques of persuasion emanating from self-interested parties (politicians, corporations, etc.), and their categorisation of audiences, are out of kilter with the people they are aimed at. It is not as simple as saying that an internet-informed audience subjects all arguments to rational, critical, and evidence-based analysis, refusing to be taken in by spurious argument. Yet, our focus-group participants did show themselves to be more knowledgeable, critical and streetwise about what is going on than is often assumed – as illustrated by the following examples, each typical of general trends across our data.

They were not taken in – at least when asked to reflect upon them – by attempts at emotional manipulation through *pathos*.

> I wouldn't buy something that said the word *succulent* on it because that for me conjures up the image of fat and I would just think, 'oh, no I don't want that'

> What's the point of saying 'home made' when you know it's not?

They showed an astute awareness of different discourses, as in this observation on the evaluative and unscientific nature of the word *weeds* in 'scientific' articles,

> One person's 'weed' is another person's 'wild flower'.

and of linguistic nuance

> It's not saying modified crops WILL help endangered birds i.e. lapwings, it just says 'such as' and it says it CAN kill weeds it doesn't say it DOES kill weeds. So the terminology's very vague.

There is resistance to attempts by corporations and politicians to position them as ignorant.

> It's rather condescending to say we're all emotional and irrational. I mean, we all have points of view and . . . just because we don't agree we're not emotional and irrational.

There is ironic reversal or defiance of such attempts.

> I'm Luddite enough that if I had been invited to take part in an illegal activity of pulling up crops I would . . . trample on it . . . Yes I would do that.

Most strikingly of all, across all groups, there is a strong distrust of conventional authority, a tendency to assess an argument by assessing the trustworthiness of the speaker – often through analogies with other manipulation

> It's RATIONAL to have evidence but [Tony Blair] didn't give us proof that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction so I think . . . Yes, maybe he always tells lies.

These examples are illustrations of very widespread tendencies, and it is a moot point whether they are peculiarly British or more widespread. They seem to suggest, though, that while many people lack the time or knowledge necessary to assess technical arguments outside their own area of expertise, this does not mean that they are easily taken in. They have an

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awareness of what they do and do not know, that issues are more complex than they are being told, and that there are rival sources of authority and evidence. A widespread perception that commercial and political lobbies have vested interests in pushing people one way or another is matched by an equally widespread yearning for informed, reliable, and trustworthy advice on complex issues such as choices between agricultural technologies.

Sometimes this craving for alternative authority finds what it is looking for in celebrities. Thus, for example, the most important legislative decisions to be made in recent years about food for Britain's schoolchildren were not initiated by politicians but by celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, campaigning against the low quality of school meals. In a series of only four TV programmes (not shown at peak time – because of his swearing) he managed to have such an impact that within weeks the reform lobby was in the ascendant, government policy and provision were radically reformed. Where campaigners and pressure groups had failed to overturn 25 years of market-led policy, Oliver's blunt populist talk and complexly gendered alternative presence (Talbot 2007: 109–121) succeeded immediately. The extent of the impact is reflected linguistically, too. Corpus analysis of UK newspaper coverage of his intervention, showed his name to be the fourth commonest word (after *meal*(*s*), *school*(s), *child*(*ren*) and *food*), and to behave like an adjective in collocations (such as *Jamie dinners*, *Jamie meals*, *a Jamie menu*, *the Jamie revolution*, etc.).

Conclusion

In a world of climate change and burgeoning population, the perception of food and its politics is changing fast, but persuasive language about it has not. It is sweet or rough talking without substance: emotional marketing appeals based on outdated assumptions, patrician condescension or authoritarian bullying by governments and corporations, the maverick opinions of celebrities. What may be changing, however, is the way this language is regarded. In the communicative triangle, there may be little change in what is said, but there is a change in the way it is received, and a serious crisis of communication as a result.

There is a crisis for democracy, too. For if food choices at the micro-level are important, and if democracy is to be preserved, then there is no way of formulating policy to cope with the impact of increasing food demands on the environment other than through the provision of complex information for assessment by the public at large, and opportunities for everyone to engage in debates and decision making. Democracy can only work if choices are made from below as well as above, at the micro- as well as the macro-political levels, in the supermarkets as well as in the ballot boxes.

At present, there is a parallel political agenda to the conventional one, in which decisions are being made for us, as it were, offstage, and the most influential voices are those of unelected authorities: corporations, technologists, celebrities. What is needed is an immense change in the way important choices facing the world are communicated and discussed. Though this might seem inconceivable, it is possible that the time is right for such a change.

Here we might make use of Chris Brumfit's often-quoted definition of applied linguistics: 'a real world problem in which language is a central issue' (Brumfit 1995: 28). I do not have an easy answer to this problem. I do believe, however, that applied linguistics is the

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right discipline to identify and engage with it, and can make an important contribution to a reassessment of how the world debates key issues such as food policy at a time of crisis. We are, after are all, an applied discipline, a technology used to handling the complex competing factors studied by a wide range of disciplinary interests. We have the right experience not only in the analysis of language but in the interaction of language with other complex factors. Understanding the communicative imbroglio of such debates is not only a fitting task for an expanding applied linguistics addressing significant contemporary problems and contributing to their solution, but an essential one for democracy too.

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