Pitching Politics for the People: An Analysis of the Metaphoric Speech of H. Ross Perot[1]

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Journalists and voters alike commented on the speech of H. Ross Perot during the 1992 presidential race. Writing of the first debate, Robert Shogan of *The Los Angeles Times* suggested, "With a seemingly unending stock of folksy one-liners, independent candidate Ross Perot came close to stealing the show" (1992:A1). A pair of reporters from *USA Today* characterized Perot's speech as containing "biting aphorisms" (Howlett 1992:3A), "down-home slogans," and "folksy one-liners" (Bendetto and Norman 1992:3A). One voter's comment, "He calls an ace an ace," registered her approval. These examples suggest that part of Perot's appeal was his rhetorical approach which apparently provided a noteworthy antithesis to expected political discourse. These comments are impetus for further investigation.

The task of analyzing the discourse of Perot seems particularly suited to a researcher interested in exploring those linguistic phenomena termed *folk speech*. Perot's language is spiced with argot, slang, colloquialisms, and proverbs, among others. I have two fundamental purposes is this essay. First, I selectively identify examples in Perot's verbal repertoire which constitute traditional ways of talking. Second, I explore how these examples operate as metaphors which convey Perot's "pitch" that he is the candidate that can effectively lead a government "of, by, and for the people."

Politicians may be compared to pitchmen. The skillful use of language required by pitchmen has not gone unnoticed by folklorists. One investigator suggests that "[t]he use and manipulation of language is [his] stock and trade" (Krell 1980:28). One pair of researchers state that

a pitch is designed to help achieve the the practical goal of selling a product...to a large number of customers....Pitchmen and talkers must persuade their audiences to buy an untested product." (Dargan and Zeitlin 1983:3-4). Perot is a pitchman. But instead of peddling Pontiacs or paring knives, he intends to sell a cogently-presented political ideology:

> You own this country but you have no voice in it the way it's orga-
> nized now....The facts are, you now have a government that comes
> at you and you're supposed to have a government that comes from
> you.[2]

Perot's pitch is for his conception of a more representative government; implicit in this passage is Perot's assertion that he is the man who can usher in necessary changes. Perot's metaphorical use of language throughout the debate illuminated and reinforced this pitch.

In contrast to the other two candidates, Perot could not run for the presidency based on any official experience in government. In the debate, Clinton consistently used his twelve-year history as governor as a source of authority. Coupled with precise delivery of examples typically presented in threes,[3] Clinton's political record created a considerable presence. Perot, however, could not point to past political accomplishments. Because of Perot's lack of experience, metaphorical language became an important vehicle for communicating his pitch.

Perot's speech represents him as an "insider" with the voting public. Central is his need to distance himself from the powers which control the Washington constituency, thereby making himself one of "the people." By using formulaic expressions, Perot repeatedly emphasizes that he is *not* a politician. He says, *"Now I'm not a politician,* but I think I could go to Washington in a week and get everybody holding hands and get this bill [the Urban Aid Bill] signed." The success of such a mission was unlikely, but Perot metaphorically dissassociated himself from all the activities to which the word *politician* refers. Furthermore, because he must *go to* Washington, he is spatially and temporally separated from the locus of polit-ical control, and thus, by extension, not privy to its influences.

An analogous example begins with a familiar introduction: "Now the thing I love about it—*I'm just a businessman. I was down in Texas taking care of business, tending to my family.* This situation got so bad that I decided I bet-ter get into it. The American people asked me to get into it." This narra-tive snippet, centered around a metaphoric cluster, reinforces Perot as a public insider in three ways. First, he again asserts geographical separation, for he is not physically in Washington. Second, he was *"taking care of busi-ness,"* a semantically ambiguous statement which could be read numerous

ways, but which appears to function on a literal level for Perot, reinforcing the notion that he is not involved in government. Unlike Clinton and Bush, Perot's business is not, in reality, governmental politics—it is business, pure and simple. Thirdly, he was *"tending to* [his] *family,"* which again distances him from the political enterprise while simultaneously attesting to his dedication to his family and making him a fatherly figure suitable for a large family of voters.

Perot also manipulates political argot metaphorically. Rarely does he neglect the opportunity to indicate his fiscal independence: "I'm spending my money, *not PAC money*, not foreign money, my money, to take this message to the people." He mentions in another response, almost a mirror image of the first: "I don't have any foreign money in my campaign. I don't have any foreign lobbyists in my campaign. I don't have any *PAC money* in my campaign." In each instance, *"PAC money"* takes an unpalatable referent. Perot's separation from the government is repeated in his response to a question about health care:

A senator runs every six years. He's got to raise 20,000 bucks a week to have enough money to run. Who's he going to listen to, us? Or the folks running up and down the aisles with money—the lobbyists, the *PAC money*. He listens to them. Who do they represent? The health-care industry. Not us.

The image of the political debtor who accepts tabooed *PAC money* and the use of the inclusive pronoun "us" combine to make Perot one of the American public and to distance both from the government. By his denial of *PAC money* and all that is freighted behind it, endless compromises that lead to *gridlock*, a political landscape not informed by *real people*, and coffers stocked by lobbyists, Perot metaphorically asserts his connection with the "people." Similar to *PAC money*, *spin doctors*, or speech experts who interpret a candidate's comments for the media, represent the corrupt forces of Washington which obfuscate objectivity and truth. Perot states, "Now, just for the record, I don't have any *spin doctors*. I don't have any speech writers. Probably shows. I make those charts you see on television." Therefore, Perot's conscious denial of using spin doctors is another metaphorical reassertion of his solidarity with the people.

The self-deprecating tone that Perot engenders in this example, represented by his comment that his failure to use *spin doctors* "probably shows" is significant. It is better, he implies, to be awkward, misstated, and honest than to be slick, methodical, and dishonest. Indeed, this admitted vulnerability is a rhetorical strategy in its own right, for as folklorist Sandra Stahl suggests of the personal experience narrative, "Nothing creates

intimacy quite so well as some confession or exposure of the self." (Stahl, 1983:274). Perot further cultivates this tone in another example. He says, "I decided I was dumb and didn't understand it so I called the *Who's Who of the folks who've been around it* [the free-trade agreement]." The allusion to *Who's Who* is a gloss to Perot's admission of "dumbness," which suggests "there are people who know more than I do." These examples communicate that he is not completely knowledgeable about all of the issues, and that he is going to need the help of the citizens of this country. By suggesting that he is "man enough to admit his shortcomings," or not afraid to ask for help, he reasserts his honesty and creates a feeling of trust. Again, Perot narrows the chasm which separates politician and constituent, thus reconfirming the pitch via metaphor.

By peppering his speech with work-related terms, Perot develops an appeal to a broad-based constituency. In response to a question about health care, he advises interested persons venturing into Congress to *"Wear your safety-toe shoes when you go.* As a private citizen, believe me, you are looked on as a major nuisance." *Safety-toe shoes* is a multilayered metaphor which, echoing such traditional expressions as "Don't tread on me," conjures up images of a certain constituency of so-called working-class people, or, in juxtaposition to the "elites" of Congress, "real people." The implication is that government is "stepping on the toes of the people" instead of working for them. Followed by Perot's assertion, "As a private citizen, believe me, you are looked on as a major nuisance," the separation of the government and the people is made complete, Perot aligning with the latter.

Perot continues the work-related metaphors when responding to a question about Social Security and pension administration. Suggesting that any plan needs to be carefully implemented, he states, *"Like the old carpenter says, measure twice and cut once."* This proverb, a variant of "Measure thrice what thou buyest; and cut it but once" (Smith 1952:415)[4], articulates Perot's preoccupation with efficiency, a concern that is buttressed by several more examples: Perot's indication that *"I'd go crazy slow-dancing that one. In other words, unless we're hoping to do it, then pick someone who likes to talk about it"* and his desire to *"get down to brass tacks"* characterize him as hard-working and productive. The proverb evokes not only the image of a "working man," the kind who may in reality wear safety-toe shoes, but of an old working man. The use of the adjective "old" is particularly suitable, for the question asked pertains to a constituency of older voters. The proverb nicely fits the context, and again, Perot, himself the image of "the old carpenter" who is going to "fix up" the country, con-

cretizes his concern with "real people."

Perot extends the carpentry metaphor in the same response. He says, "There are people all over the Federal Government, *if they could just touch it with a screwdriver could fix it.*" Perot implies that people within the government, if only allowed to do their jobs, could get the government off the ground again. He continues, telling us that if the government handypersons fail, "there's going to be another sucking sound that runs our deficit through the roof." In this instance, two metaphors Perot uses earlier in the debate combine and expand into one image cluster. Perot uses the "sucking" metaphor in the opening sequence to illustrate the aesthetic result of bad fiscal policy – the slow movement of the economy and jobs toward Mexico. He also mentions the *"dollar going through the floor"* as the result of faulty money management. In this example, the dollar has gone *"through the roof."* By using this running carpentry metaphor which ends appropriately with his proclamation, "Now then, to *nail it,*" Perot transforms complex economic processes into the images and language of a certain demographic constituency.

Perot's appeal, however, is not limited to so-called blue-collar workers. His repertoire of work-related metaphors extends beyond socially constructed occupational boundaries. In the debate's opening sequence, he addresses a response to "those of you in the audience who are business people," and several times he refers to himself as "a businessman." Therefore, one may expect him to have at least a familiarity with numerical argot and economic jargon, such as "trickle-down economics," "one-way trade agreements," "international competitors," "standard of living," "misery index," and "enterprise zones." His business sense is suggested by "pennies on the dollar," which he uses to articulate the potential financial gain if the United States were to invest in Soviet reconstruction.

These examples illustrate the breadth of Perot's appeal. He is the practical businessman who can speak the language of, and therefore represent, the working person and the professional person alike. Indeed, Perot's metaphor, "electronic town hall," brilliantly meshes arguably impersonal, yet efficient, cutting-edge technology with the intimate and so-called old-fashioned sense of the small-town meeting. Past meets future; mass voicelessness becomes mass voice. And Perot, the great mediator, becomes the usher of an age in which people of many backgrounds and professions come together to fashion government of, by, and for the people.

Perot further aligns himself with the people via short narratives. In response to the question of how the national debt affected his personal life,

Perot responds: "It caused me to disrupt my private life and my business to get involved in this activity....But I became—I have lived the *American dream.* I came from a very modest background; nobody's been luckier than I've been." In his summary Perot reiterates this point, even more completely stressing the personal impact of the national debt: "Now just remember, when you think about me, I didn't create this mess, *I've been paying taxes like you.* And Lord knows, I've paid my share. Over a billion dollars in taxes. These examples act metaphorically on several levels. Implicit in these responses is Perot's concern with business and a work ethic that has resulted in making him a billionaire. Yet, the fact that he is a billionaire, wealthier than Bush, is not a concern, for he suggests that he *made* his fortune while implying that Bush was born into his. Furthermore, Bush, the son of a senator, is metaphorically implicated with government, for he was born into government, or tax payers', money. These future oriented examples also suggest that we all may aspire to such prosperity.[5] The *"American Dream"* is made a tangible reality, for Perot, a self-made man untainted by governmental influences, paints himself as the flesh-and-blood metaphor for Everyman or Everywoman, and thus a man particularly suited to oversee a true democracy.

Political speech constitutes a body of linguistic data relevant for folkloristic inquiry, and its metaphorical aspects may be particularly enlightening. Within the context of the second 1992 presidential debate, repeated metaphorical patterns developed as Perot continually repeated key phrases and reasserted critical issues. Through his skillful manipulation of speech, Perot reconfirmed his pitch that the truest government is one that is "of, by, and for the people:" "Of" because Perot is one of the voting public, one of "us," because "we" put him on the ballot, and because all are included in Perot's broadly-based constituency; "by" via apparatuses like the "electronic town-hall"; and "for" because Perot, a self-made man of action who despises inefficiency, can create the most representative government.

Notes

[1] This essay was generated in a graduate seminar on folk speech that Robert A. Georges taught at UCLA in the Autumn of 1992. The paper was presented in conjunction with four other graduate student papers, written for the same seminar, in a panel at the California Folklore Society annual meeting in San Diego in April 1993. The panel, of which Georges was the discussant, explored various aspects of folk speech in the second debate of the 1992 presidential election. Other panel particpants included Denise Bernard, Garry Creel, Janet Herman, and A. Joseph Ward.

[2] This and all subsequent references to the debate were excerpted from the transcript of the second debate published in the *New York Times.*

[3] For a discussion of the American cultural preoccupation with the number three, see Dundes (1980a).

[4] Smith also cites the proverb "Measure twice, cut but once," published in 1721 in *A Complete Collection of Scottish Proverbs* by J. Kelley.

[5] For a discussion of the future orientation of folklore in American culture see Dundes (1980 b).

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