

“Diplology”, or diplomatic rhetoric: A case study regarding Iraq

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In her study on the pragmatics of diplomatic discourse, Constanze Villar declares that “Diplomatic discourse enjoys a poor reputation: it is called banal and euphemistic, clichéd or mendacious”.¹ The study then continues with a dismantling exercise to illustrate how what is considered to be a lie is, in actual fact, a series of rhetorical techniques of ambiguity. In my *Hyperpolitique*, I have analysed diplomatic speech used by the executive power (and not career diplomats) as being the implementation of three hyper-diplomatic means of persuasion (the colossus, glory and the totem).² Cases do exist where, in the hands of an ambitious or zealous diplomat, the desire for “hyper-diplomacy” results in an effective lie. Such is the subject of the following analysis.

In 2010 a junior French ambassador to Iraq gave an interview to French daily *Le Figaro* in which he developed a forcefully argued diplomatic narrative on Iraq as a “laboratory for democracy” in the region.³

I shall now undertake a rhetorical decoding of that interview which, intended as it was for a wide public and through a public medium — something fairly rare for a diplomat stationed abroad — is thus part of an exercise in public diplomacy, in other words propaganda. The North-South dimension, furthermore, should not be overlooked: this too is an ostentatious effort to affirm that the analytical discourse of a Western diplomat is superior, persuasively (in its argumentation) and materially (in its desired effects), to the locally produced explanations. The desired effect is therefore one of hegemony.

The form it takes is that of an interview composed of questions and answers.

¹ Constanze Villar, *Le discours diplomatique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006). Quotation from “Pour une théorie du discours diplomatique”, *Annuaire français de relations internationales* VI (2005): 45.

² Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *L'Hyperpolitique* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2009).

³ Interview with the then French ambassador to Iraq Mr B. Boillon, “L'Irak, laboratoire de la démocratie du monde arabe”, *Le Figaro* (30 August 2010): <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2010/08/30/01003-20100830ARTFIG00616-l-irak-laboratoire-de-la-democratie-du-monde-arabe.php>.

1st Decoding: Setting up a diplomatic sophism

Question: “The Americans are leaving Iraq. Is that good news?”

Answer: “Yes, for several reasons. Firstly, adherence to the agreement struck between the Americans and the Iraqis proves that things are playing out as anticipated. Secondly, because the American soldiers’ departure removes the terrorists’ main argument, namely foreign occupation. Moreover, the withdrawal allows the Iraqi security forces, which over the last two years have become increasingly powerful, to assume greater responsibility. There were many who considered that civil war was inevitable. It never happened. And lastly, the United States and Iraq will be able to renew their relations starting off on a new basis. All the parties are pleased about the withdrawal. Not a single Iraqi leader has asked for it to be postponed, as that would mean political suicide”.

Decoding

This is a sophism in three parts:

“Firstly *etc.*”: Adherence to the agreement does not prove that everything took place “as anticipated”, since the argument is tautological: Mr Obama began withdrawing troops for reasons which are also — and, some would say, mainly — related to domestic policy, and which have nothing to do with an external timetable. The ambassador is thus confusing motive with intention. Because it is, in fact, the withdrawal (for domestic reasons) which gives substance to this stated agreement and which therefore endorses the intention, and not the other way round.

“Secondly *etc.*”: At the time the withdrawal had just begun and, as long as 50 000 combat or support troops remain (this category excluded an anticipated 7 000 private security troops, housed in five “fortresses” and employed by the American Foreign Affairs or State Department), and also taking into consideration two enormous consulates built at a cost of \$1 billion, the air force being strengthened with a surveillance and destruction capability, plus over one thousand armoured vehicles and a whole armada controlled by the Americans, one doubts that the population would have had an obvious sense of an end to the occupation, despite its having become a protective “presence” managed by said State Department and, of course, the secret services. One doubts that this was the reason for fewer attacks.

"And lastly *etc.*": The "new basis" the diplomat is referring to, consists of his first two points which have become surreptitiously facts but which, as I have just shown, are and remain fallacies.

To these false logical proofs the ambassador adds a proof which is rhetorically called "ethical": the Iraqis are "pleased". Indeed, at one point even the Vichy Militiamen had had enough of the Germans telling them how to torture their compatriots; they wanted to "be pleased" by doing it in the French manner. In short, this first paragraph takes the form of a sophisticated syllogism: a) since the Americans and the Iraqis (But who, in fact, are "the Iraqis"? The Shiites, the Sunnis, the Kurds? Another masked fallacy of definition.) are adhering to their agreement, and b) since the American occupation is over, c) therefore a respectable element remains, the "parties which are pleased". Quite, that is exactly how things are when viewed through the lense of a sophism.

The first rhetorical technique then consists in a fallacious syllogism structured in three steps, each step being fabricated on the basis of a fallacy. Yet, in the flow of the interview, it sounds acceptable, common sense even, except that the journalist asks the next question.

2nd Decoding: Setting up realistic effects

Question: "And yet, the violence continues".

Answer: "Since August 2009, spectacular and co-ordinated attacks indicative of al-Qaida have indeed taken place. These attacks have targeted symbols of Iraqi or international power and generally involve ethnically or religiously mixed areas. But the violence is limited to Baghdad and its surrounds, and to border areas such as Mosul or Kirkuk. Al-Qaida's tactics, which aim to tear apart the country and rekindle civil war, have failed. The threat of Iraq being partitioned is behind us. Confessionalism does not feature in any political programme. As for the rest, and contrary to what one reads everywhere, security has not deteriorated. On the contrary, the situation has improved because, instead of one hundred deaths per day four years ago, today we have about ten. In fact, the trend was reversed from the time the American troops began leaving the cities, in June 2009. With their final withdrawal, this trend should continue and stabilise".

Decoding

This reply constitutes a second rhetorical setting-up because, when answering a question, it is often advisable to refer to chronology, add key

images and introduce figures. This technique aims to create an effect of reality: dates create a tangible effect of time bound reality, while images anchor dates in one's imagination, and we know the "truthfulness" effect of stats and figures.

Thus, the ambassador informs us, in "2009" the horrifying attacks were "spectacular" and "limited". Let us decode this statement, again in three steps:

1. Firstly, the epithet "spectacular" in no way diminishes the atrocity of the massacres: a massacre which is, moreover, spectacular is thus a massacre which makes an even greater impact and not a lesser one. I would have advised him to say: "invented to impress the media".
2. Secondly, "Kirkuk": this city is more than just a "limited" area, it is the oil trove of Kurdistan protected by the American army along the length of a demarcation line (or Green Line) made secure by them, who have thus created within Kurdistan — itself under their protection — an effectively "limited" area, though not for the reason suggested (*i.e.* where the violence is "contained") but in the sense that they, the Americans, have exclusive rights to it. "Limited" would seem to indicate a diminished tension, in the same way as one would say a fire is limited or contained, whereas the exact opposite applies: because this area is so coveted, it was placed under the control of ("limited to") the Americans.

In both cases, the rhetorical technique employed is to proffer a strong word which conjures up an image used to signify the opposite of reality.

3. What about "spectre of partition"? One has to appreciate the irony of the clause "spectre is behind us" whereas the reality is placed before our eyes (*sub oculos subjecta*, as it is called in rhetoric): all intelligence sources agreed that Kurdistan would be the next area of "partition". The ambassador, speaking about al-Qaeda and intimating a partition along religious lines, which has become "a spectre", is diverting attention from the real territorial issue, which is Kirkuk. And perhaps he should also be reminded that the distinctive feature of a spectre is to appear before us so as to frighten us and not behind us, where nobody sees it.

His conclusion, following on the heels of an iconic figure, "about ten": the "trend has been reversed". But 57 killed in August 2010 in an audacious

attack on a recruitment centre and 60 more in remarkably co-ordinated attacks against police stations, with what some have called "the worst attacks" taking place in May, is that consistent with a trend which is being reversed? "Trend" conjures up an image and obscures reality.

One understands the rhetorical setting-up — the use of word images to skew reality — but what is its mechanism? The mechanism is word positioning, because it is difficult for a journalist, even if he or she is not obsequious, to reply and correct each time. On-line comments would take care of a rebuttal, as they often do, but unfortunately they are stochastic, argued in no particular order and without a binding purpose: in a blog or page of comments, the person who posts the final word is the authority, for five seconds, before one proceeds to read or post the next comment.

Whence the peremptory conclusion which, in practical terms, is irrefutable, but is quite simply a fable, a fiction or a scenario (in rhetoric "*fictio*" is translated as "scenario", and is itself the Latin rendition of classical Greek *plasma*). The ambassador speaks in plastic terms.

3rd Decoding: How to create an "obvious" interpretation

Question: "Does the fact that a government has yet to emerge from the last elections not create a political vacuum?"

Answer: "Yet another misconception! In Iraq, there is a government that governs, and governs well, as well as an elected Parliament. One should not complain: in Iraq we have political forces which have been in discussion for five months, whereas three years ago political issues were being settled with weapons... And when one sees what is happening in Italy or Belgium, is Europe really in a position to teach lessons? Today in Iraq we are seeing a non-violent struggle for access to political power. The blockage is linked to issues of persons and not to religious differences. The fact that no consensus has emerged regarding a head of government proves that the political game is being played out in Iraq alone and that no neighbouring country is able to impose its choice on Iraqi politics. At the risk of restating the obvious, it needs to be repeated that the last elections were a victory for democracy. There are very few other countries in the region where the results are not known before the vote takes place..."

Decoding

Another rhetorical technique is to fabricate an "obvious" interpretation, without using any figures or having recourse to "facts". He even oversteps the margin by jokingly referring to two neighbouring European Union countries.

As in intelligence, there are those who collect and those who analyse. He analyses, in two steps:

1. "Misconception". The true idea here is thus that Iraq is being governed, just as are Belgium and Italy, the object of his witticism (after all, are they not under American occupation?) The use of analogy (*a* is more or less like *b*, and *b* like *c*, therefore *etc.*) is a technique of interpretation used to divert us and put us off the scent. But, in real terms, the basis of this analogy is false: Mr Obama's security adviser had just put out a reminder that it was "urgent" to form a government, and the general responsible for training the military security troops had pointed out that the great danger of too visible an American withdrawal of its troops (but excluding the massive support and private security under Mrs Clinton's control) was that the Iraqi generals might "become involved in politics".
2. "Political game". The extensive and generally recognised lack of stability is redefined as a "game" and the rhetorical trap here is the use of an amphibology referring to the meaning of "game". Let us remind ourselves that a game exists if there is a game board and recognised rules are extant; a real game (a match) exists because there is an abstract game which presupposes it: in this case, a stable agreement on the nature of the politics. Game, or play, also exists when proper adjustment is not made during the assembly of a machine, resulting in a play on the wheel in its cogwheel for instance, leading to a probable accident. So the absence of an agreement between the two main parties is presented not as a structural problem of the "game" (first meaning) put in place by the Americans and the supervised elections, but as "play" (second meaning) between "persons", with failure guaranteed. On that basis, which "democracy" cannot be interpreted in this manner? The difference is that in Belgium or Italy the game (the rules) is well-established and "play" in the machinery is effectively possible yet constrained. By contrast in Iraq, the game (the rules) is constantly being revised, and everything works as "play" (constant adjustment). In short, the ambassador uses a metaphor in order to misrepresent and to mislead.

We are dealing here with the fabrication of a false interpretation which, like La Fontaine's jay adorning itself in peacock plumes, waves before our eyes illusions of proof which it does not possess. Such truth is no truth at all but

merely a fabrication based on analogical thinking and a play on words.

4th Decoding: Diplology

Question: "And finally, has the war been won in Iraq?"

Answer: "Of course the Iraqis say that the 2003 allied intervention came at a high cost in human lives and with the destruction of infrastructure, but they also remember that it freed the country. The results are thus both positive and negative. Iraqis appreciate the fruits of democratisation: the freeing up of the press, the emergence of civil society, free expression by the political parties and the exemplary nature of the elections. These are all facts. When speaking about Iraq, it is imperative to reason without any given ideology. Iraq is the true laboratory of democracy in the Arab world. This is where the future of democracy in the region is playing out. Iraq can potentially become a political model for its neighbours".

Decoding

One must appreciate, first of all, the endorsement given by the representative of France in Iraq to the American-British invasion (condemned by France): is he expressing the thinking on Iraq of the then French government? Furthermore, note the misleading use of the epithet "allied" which, in everyday French and in a context such as this, refers to the Allies in the World Wars: using the adjective enables him to skirt around the French absence from this alliance and to become associated with it, all in the same breath. This technique is akin to the win-win technique used by salespersons.

One notes next a rhetorical balancing act between the price paid in human lives (the accepted average estimate is 100 000 dead) and what this price paid in blood has bought: "the freeing up of the press and free expression". A strange trade-off which offends one's conscience but, more important, is a type of sleight of hand, which is even more serious, since the ambassador, transformed here into a ventriloquist, imputes this to the "Iraqis" and no longer to himself. From being a spokesman for his government, he also becomes that of the "Iraqis". One could quote a thousand counter-declarations and ask him: "To which 'Iraqis' are you referring and how can you be their representative?"

In short, "These are all facts". Actually, they are not "the facts" but reality effects. But whoever criticises this rhetorical montage and exposes the fallacy, is accused of being engaged in "ideology". And yet, immediately afterwards, the ambassador himself engages in ideology by declaring *ex officio* that Iraq is "the true laboratory of democracy in the Arab world".

Therefore it follows that a “false” laboratory exists in the “Arab world?” Now, in 2010, which one would that be: Morocco? Antevernal Tunisia?⁴ The expression is borrowed from a stock used in French political science, permutations on a core *topos*, “France, laboratory of democracy in the 19th Century” and more recently used in the case of “Benin, laboratory of democracy”. What is important however is the diplomatic description of 100 000 local dead, 4 000 soldiers lost and 35 000 American injured as a “model” — setting aside other “laboratories” under construction such as organised rebellion, a proconsulate in the oil-rich region, and, at the time, a civil protectorate heavily armed and managed by the State Department. But, owing to the miracle of the diplomatic word, the country possesses “free expression”. Therefore it is a laboratory for democracy since free speech is a pre-condition for democracy.

In sum what is at work in this particular case is what I would term “diplomacy”: a conscious effort to construct rhetorically a diplomatic reality. The case analysed here is striking inasmuch as it highlights how international flashpoints are special sites for deft fallacies, and how diplomacy “from the North” is particularly savvy at it.⁵

(Translated by Bas M. Angelis)

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⁴ Two standard references of “democracy” in the eyes of their former colonial power, even before the so-called “Arab Spring”.

⁵ On diplomacy and language invention see my Introduction to “The rhetorical shape of international conflicts”, special issue of *Javnost-The Public* 12, 4 (2005): 5-10.