

Connotation & Rhetoric: The Semantics of Suspicion in the Writings of Desmoulins

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Abstract

An exacting command of language in his employ, journalist Camille Desmoulins was arguably one of the most dangerous and cunning players in the political arena of revolutionary France. His work is a clear synthesis of linguistic and political theory but what, precisely, made it so effective? When his works are regarded collectively, a theme emerges wherein Desmoulins uses language designed to categorically perpetuate suspicion. Using the principles established by semantics and its more intricate theories regarding connotation, this project seeks to examine the semantic undercurrents of Desmoulins's works as they relate specifically to the public perception of suspicion, and to define the linguistic parameters within which he operated. A close analysis of selected examples will demonstrate how the evocative language speaks to the author's acute cognizance of his audience and his talent for inflaming the collective unrest and promoting suspicion, specifically through the use of the neologism *brissoter*, the impact of the repetition of "suspect" and use of converse antonyms in the oration "Live Free or Die," and the substratum of references which liken the monarchy to feral animals, effectively modifying the sense and reference of terms associated with the Second Estate. Additionally, this project seeks to conduct a feature analysis of nouns, verbs and modals in Desmoulins's work as compared to several of his contemporaries, Maximilien Robespierre and Jacques René Hébert, in an effort to tangibly demonstrate that Desmoulins's language differed from the language of his peers and that, through these differences, he was able to sow suspicion among the mercurial Third Estate.

Keywords: Semantics, Camille Desmoulins, Rhetoric

1. Introduction

On the eve of the French Revolution, attorney Camille Desmoulins was brand new to Paris and, frankly, entirely irrelevant. Dreaming endlessly of effecting political change but lacking social connections and title, he seemed doomed to die destitute and relatively unknown. However, as the years passed and conflict progressed, he turned to seditious pamphleteering and journalism and, an exacting command of language in his employ, sought deliberately to use these mediums to incite rebellion against what he felt was a bloated and ineffective monarchy. Over the course of the following years, he would complete a startling transformation, becoming arguably one of the most dangerous and cunning players in the political arena of revolutionary France.

In order to fully understand the impact Desmoulins's work might have had on the general public, a working knowledge of pro-revolutionary opinion is critical. Quoted in *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, eighteenth-century writer Mercier offers a tidy summary of the conflict: "The distance which separates the rich from other citizens is growing daily... Hatred grows more bitter and the state is divided into two classes: the greedy and insensitive, and murmuring malcontents." Given the intensity of this statement, it is clear that Paris was in the feverish

grip of revolution. In the traditional style of mob-mentality, the public was particularly susceptible to the suggestion of an orator or writer who could skillfully manipulate semantics and connotation.

On the threshold of revolution, Paris hummed with discord and a seething, omnipresent undercurrent of resentment toward the monarchy and the aristocracy, otherwise known as the elite Second Estate. Having lived for centuries under a system of royal absolutism, wherein the sovereign possesses unconditional power over the state and its people, the impoverished Third Estate (comprised of peasants, commoners and lowlier merchants) desired the establishment of a republic. This Third Estate, eager for an outlet for their collective frustration, was vulnerable to the psychologies of language; the discerning orator needed only to flesh out the exact formula of connotation and timing to incite the public to violence against their oppressors. Enter Camille Desmoulins, who had long harbored aspirations of aiding in the establishment of a republic.

From childhood, Desmoulins demonstrated great cunning and passion. He attended the prestigious College Louis-le-Grand, where he was surrounded by intellectuals such as those of Stanislas Fréron and Maximilien de Robespierre, the latter with whom he developed a stimulating and intensely loyal friendship.¹⁸ Desmoulins proved himself a scholar worthy of note, though he was relatively unpopular. His social ineptitude was furthered by a pervasive stammer, although this perhaps benefited him eventually in that it enabled him to cultivate his skills in a written medium, where his impediment could pass unnoticed.¹⁹

Desmoulins went on to become a barrister and moved to Paris to practice law, although he lacked any true professional talent and lived in near poverty.¹⁹ Eventually falling in with such characters as Georges-Jacques Danton and Philippe *Fabre d'Églantine*, and having maintained his childhood bond with Robespierre, Desmoulins soon found himself in the midst of men whose ambition aligned with his own: men who would eventually compose the Dantonists, a powerful faction of the fanatical Jacobin Club.²⁰

Seventeen eighty-nine brought the actualization of Desmoulins's years of revolutionary fervor; while standing on a café table, surrounded by hordes of Parisian malcontents, he gave an impromptu and zealous speech. His oration saw the mob whipped into a veritable frenzy and, in a showing of bald aggression, they stormed the infamous Bastille.²⁸ The attack on the Bastille marked the true dawn of Desmoulins's journalistic and political career, thrusting him into the public eye and validating him amongst his contemporaries.¹¹ With his newfound popularity, Desmoulins devoted himself to the downfall of the monarchy and dreamt of aiding in the establishment of a republic; spending his evenings in the seditious bosom of social *salons*, he made valuable contacts in the pro-revolutionary community, steadily progressing from rabid orator to journalist and seditious pamphleteer. And thus, with historical and political context firmly in place, we can examine the semantic and connotative implications of Camille Desmoulins's work.

2. Semantic Theory

Semantics is an omnipresent and inexorable force in language as a whole, as it concerns itself primarily with word and sentence meaning. It is arguably one of the most slippery sub-linguistic concepts, open to a great deal of interpretation; but this element of fluidity is precisely what makes it such an effective instrument in political discourse, as it allows for intentional connotative applications in such mediums as speeches or, often in the case of Desmoulins, politically charged pamphlets.

Semantic content is determined in part by the connotative meaning drawn from an utterance, connotation being a primarily emotive function that conjures meaning and associates language with mental images.¹⁰ Connotations associated with an utterance are first derived from the mental representation conjured by that utterance, then solidified by physical representations drawn from real-world incarnations: these two representations, mental and physical, are known as *sense* and *reference*, respectively.²¹ This theory is critical in determining how specific words might be employed by Desmoulins to influence the public through carefully extracted meaning and emotion.

Rhetoric and semantics are essentially a two-step process: rhetoric can be defined as the content of a message directed at an audience, specifically designed to be evocative and influential.¹³ while semantics determines how that message is visualized by the audience. Author of *Terror and its Discontents*, Caroline Weber, details this concept beautifully, focusing directly on the importance of rhetoric and semantics in the political arena of the French Revolution. By analyzing the oratory prowess of two of the Revolution's more prominent enforcers, Weber demonstrates how rhetoric can be used as a tool: "Robespierre and Saint-Just were painfully aware of the capacity of language to mean something other than what it appeared to say, to signify differently to different people, to mutate over time and space, to undo rather than to secure a fusion between word and referent."²⁹

As Desmoulins's intention was to sow doubt and suspicion amongst the Third Estate, his rhetoric was often inflammatory in nature; he relied on said rhetoric to conjure a sense and reference that would win the audience to his

cause. Naturally, then, he would require dynamic semantic techniques that serve this notion of suspicion. Three particularly salient instances in which he establishes this climate of suspicion are detailed below, as they relate to the relevant linguistic theory.

3. Application of Theory

First, Desmoulins employed repetition of the word “suspect” in “Vivre libre ou mourir” (referenced henceforth as “Live Free or Die”) as a tool of rhetoric. His frequent usage of animal terminology when referencing King Louis XVI and his peers is the second linguistic effort, and proved essential to his vilification of the monarchy. Interestingly, Desmoulins uses techniques to personify the state of France during this process of dehumanization, creating a compelling stylistic reversal. Lastly, Desmoulins used the political neologism *brissoter* in his biting rebuke of an opposing politician, “Jean-Pierre Brissot démasqué.” These examples illustrate the ways in which Desmoulins used his linguistic cunning to further his political agenda.

The first instance of semantic technique working insidiously to bolster suspicion is also the most straightforward. In his famous oration “Live Free or Die” Desmoulins repeats the word “suspect” eight times in a span of two paragraphs, in clever conjunction with antonymic pairs. While this certainly could simply signify Desmoulins’s predilection for dramatic effect, the political nature of the speech in addition to the context revealed when examining his work as a unit suggests that he is deliberately employing semantic techniques: namely, repetition and antonymy. Antonymy is expressed in pairs of propositions with meanings that are semantic opposites; while there are several distinct types of antonyms within the scope of antonymy, Desmoulins concerns himself mostly with converse antonyms, in which the two contrasting propositions oppose one another only in terms of point of view.²²

Desmoulins begins his argument in “Live Free or Die” with the striking sentiment, “Everything gives umbrage to a tyrant”; that any action or reaction by a citizen is capable of angering a tyrannical ruler. Desmoulins elaborates, suggesting that “If he is a rich man, there is an imminent peril that he may corrupt the people with his largesses, and he becomes a suspect.” He then offers the converse to this: “Are you poor? How then! Invincible emperors, this man must be closely watched; for no one is so enterprising as he who has nothing. He is a suspect!”²³ The speech continues in this vein, offering examples that function as converse antonyms.

Repetition is primarily a tool of rhetoric whose purpose is to emphasize a key idea. In the case of Desmoulins, his work seeks to paint the Second Estate as dangerously and irrationally suspicious, trusting that the audience will feel suspicious in return. Thus, his repetition of “suspect” is a deliberate rhetorical (and therefore semantic) device designed to fortify this notion of suspicion. This technique uses linguistic and situational context to establish meaning and value for the word “suspect.” These semantic features, repetition and antonymy, facilitate Desmoulins’s argument through their shared rhetorical capabilities. Desmoulins’s language is clear and aggressive: calculated to seize the attention of his audience and drive home his point.

In a display of slightly more picturesque language, Desmoulins demonstrates a particular fondness for drawing comparisons between the monarchy and feral animals. He liberally peppers his work with these insulting comparisons, effectively crafting comical and often vulgar images of those unfortunate enough to fall prey to his pen. These examples are especially compelling as the intention is specific and indisputable.

The royal absolutist structure of the eighteenth century relied entirely on the classical body of the sovereign, where the form is human and proportionate – naturally, the deconstruction of this perfect body was a favorite tactic amongst those who sought to discredit a monarch.¹² Desmoulins time and again draws a clear parallel between the monarch and a beast, and in doing so dissects the ‘classical body’ of Louis XVI.

However, Desmoulins did not reserve this punishment for the king alone; he extended his viperous expositions to counterrevolutionaries in general: “C'est cette nuit qui a exterminé les sangliers, les lapins, & tout le gibier qui dévorait nos récoltes” (“This night has exterminated the boar, the rabbits and all the game which have been devouring our harvest”²⁴) appears in the famous “Discours de la lanterne aux Parisien,” referring to established royalty and the nouveau riche alike. “Discours” is brimming with such references, with Desmoulins even referring to members of the Second estate as “les sangsues” (“leeches”).⁵

Consider that in this example, Desmoulins’s rhetoric conveys to the audience the idea of the Second Estate exhibiting animal tendencies. The semantic relationship, then, can be defined in terms of sense and its referents. Desmoulins uses these grotesque bestial terms alongside terms normally associated with the monarchy to force a small-scale semantic degradation; this sort of degradation occurs when a word begins to take on connotative associations more negative than those it initially carried.²³

Consider Desmoulins's speech, "Convention Nationale" in which he refers to Louis XVI as a "bipède anthropophage" ("anthropophagous biped");⁶ such a sentiment would doubtless have introduced themes of savagery into the sense of the words "king" or "monarch," effectively internally modifying the sense in the mind of the reader... certainly a semantic degradation.

An irrevocable connection has been forged in the mind of the reader between the word "king" and the idea of brutality, gluttony and inhumanity. The referents associated with "king" expand to include more feral incarnations; perhaps a rabid dog seen on the street, or a neighbor's filthy pig. With this supplemented reference for "king," Louis XVI is *dehumanized*, given animal tendencies and proclivities. This triggers an irrepressible response in the reader to the connotations of Desmoulins's assertions, as they are forced to subconsciously question the veracity of their earlier sense against the newly introduced sense and referents; in short, they become suspicious.

Professor of psychology Michelle Maiese defines dehumanization as "a psychological process whereby opponents view each other as less than human and thus not deserving moral consideration."¹⁷ Desmoulins sought to turn the King and his cohorts into inhuman beasts, thus creating a sense of mistrust amongst the Third Estate; this technique can be categorized both as psychological and linguistic, but its rhetorical and connotative merits are undeniable.

The aforementioned "Convention Nationale" introduces a striking feature that operates as a compelling contrast to Desmoulins's dehumanization of the monarch and aristocracy; it personifies the State. The opening paragraph reads:

« La France sera-t-elle une république, ou cherchera-t-elle dans la monarchie, le repos de sa lassitude des trahisons éternelles de ses représentans? Ferons-nous partie de la monarchie prussienne ou autrichienne, ou la France ne sera-t-elle démembrée qu'en républiques fédératives? Paris, pour prix de son civisme et de ses sacrifices, nagera-t-il dans le sang? »⁷

Roughly (as translated by the author of this study), "France; will she be a republic or will she seek, in the monarchy, repose from eternal betrayal by her representatives? Shall we take leave of the Prussian and Austrian monarchy, or will France be dismembered in federal republics? Will Paris, for the price of his citizenship and sacrifices, swim in blood?"

This passage is so emotionally arresting because Desmoulins employs critically non-traditional rhetoric; he is using verbs like "chercher," 'to look for,' and "nager," 'to swim' which are verbs of *action*. More intriguing still is that he uses the future tense: "cherchera" and "nagera." Consider the utility of a future tense: to express the *will* to perform an action. In giving France (and Paris) will and activity, Desmoulins gives them agency. This paints France as a free-thinking entity and thus France is personified.

Consider as well that in this passage from "Convention Nationale," Desmoulins questions whether France will be dismembered ("...ou la France ne sera-t-elle démembrée..."). This French verb, "démembrer," comes from the Latin "dis" (apart) and "membrum" (limb); it refers specifically to limbs. Rhetorically, Desmoulins gives France a body; for, if something can be dismembered, it must possess a body. Recall the earlier mention of the 18th century philosophy which relied upon the humanity and proportionality of the royal body and how crucially this classical body factored into the public perception of the king; if the body was deconstructed, his status as a symbol of power was, too, deconstructed. With that in mind, consider Desmoulins's use of animal terminology for the monarch and the aristocracy alongside his use of future tense and action verbs for France. A powerful reversal occurs here: Desmoulins at once rhetorically gives France a body while destroying the notion of the ruler's body. This serves as a critical precursor to the following discussion of Desmoulins' use of the neologism "brissoter" wherein he rhetorically robs the man Brissot of his personhood.

"Je vous avertis qu'on ne réussira pas à brissotter ma reputation: c'est moi qui vais vous arracher le masque; mais je ne veux point me fâcher, et vous rendre injures pour injures."⁸ In an essay written for *A Companion to the French Revolution*, historian Marisa Linton offers a tidy translation for this excerpt from Camille Desmoulins's pamphlet, "Jean-Pierre Brissot démasqué": "I warn you that you shall not succeed in your attempt to *brissoter* my reputation: it is I who will tear the mask from your face."¹⁴

Linton speaks further on the neologism "brissoter," a verb meaning "to steal," in her 2013 book *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution*. Although coined by Parisian journalist Morande, the word was used by Camille Desmoulins in his 1792 pamphlet "Brissot démasqué," a biting rebuke of his political opponent, Brissot, for whom it was designed to humiliate and discredit.¹⁵ Brissot was a member of the prominent Jacobin Club faction, la Gironde.¹⁶ Although la Gironde shared goals nearly identical to those of Desmoulins and the Dantonists, differences in method and general character forced a rift between factions. Despite their differences, however, Desmoulins and Brissot enjoyed some measure of friendship until the two politicians quarreled over a legal

matter.¹⁶ As a result, Desmoulins targeted Brissot personally in the venomous pamphlet in an effort to discredit and ostracize him; but how could Desmoulins expect a single word to cause any lasting damage?

Consider that neologisms are defined as “newly coined lexical units or existing lexical units that acquire a new sense.”²⁵ *Neologism as a Linguistic Phenomenon in Mass Media* explains that a neologism specifically used in a political context to rhetorically make a point is termed a “political neologism.”²⁴ These are phrases often coined by the speaker, and uniquely relevant to the native language; as such, they are steeped in connotation and serve as a useful tool for influencing an audience.

Brissoter is not only a neologism, but an eponym: a word whose etymology traces back to a proper noun, derived from the qualities associated with the referent, Brissot.²⁶ Eponyms enjoyed a relative popularity in France; in *A Textbook of Translation*, University of Surrey’s Dr. Peter Newmark argues that the primary function of eponyms is “denoting either allegiance to or influence of the person, or a conspicuous quality or idea associated with them. This has always been common for French statesmen and writers...”²⁷ Desmoulins’s use of *brissoter* supports Newmark’s theory in that the function of the neologism was to draw a direct parallel between the name Brissot and the concept of theft: the “conspicuous quality” perceived by Desmoulins.

In the precise way that he used animal terminology to achieve a semantic degradation of monarch-associated terms, Desmoulins has produced a degradation of Brissot’s own name; now, the sense of the word has been modified to include the concepts of theft and cheating, while the referents may have expanded to include not only Jean-Pierre Brissot, but perhaps known local criminals and identifiably corrupt acquaintances. Certainly this is conjecture, but language works today in much the same way it did during the 18th century... that is to say, one need only look at the way political smear campaigns operate in modern times to see how they would likely have operated only three hundred years in the past.

Of further importance, in using this neologism, Desmoulins goes beyond a simple degradation of Brissot’s name: once more, dehumanization is a vital concept. The celebrated semiotician Marcel Danesi says that, “names are perceived typically to belong to the realm of the sacred.”¹ The name is an integral part of identity, tied inextricably to the very notion of personhood.² By employing this kind of root creation - the eponym - Desmoulins dehumanizes Brissot in much the same way he dehumanized the monarch and aristocracy, with one notable difference: because he dehumanizes Louis XVI through the use of animal terminology, Desmoulins preserves his sentience. He robs the king of his personhood, but allows him to remain, metaphorically, conscious and animate. By creating a verb from a proper noun and a name - Brissot - Desmoulins simultaneously degrades the sense of Brissot’s name and deprives him of his personhood entirely, reducing him to nothing more than a verb. More compelling still is the inherent insult of being made a verb; a verb may be conjugated, forced into various forms to suit the necessary operation. Desmoulins, in creating a verb from the name of Brissot, takes both his humanity and his agency.

Thus, regardless of whether the reader agrees with Desmoulins’s attack on Brissot, the negative connotation attached to *brissoter* pervades the linguistic sense related to the name itself. Linton suggests that Desmoulins’s use of *brissoter* dealt a terrible blow, calling it “a highly successful tactic”¹⁶ - it certainly was successful, as it indisputably marked Brissot’s descent into public ruin and, in little more than a year, his execution by guillotine.

4. Conclusion

This project still requires a full feature analysis of nouns, verbs and modals in a sample of work from Desmoulins to provide statistical support for its hypothesis. The findings are expected to demonstrate a measurable difference in frequency of certain types of verbs in Desmoulins’s writing when compared to the writings of Maximilien Robespierre and Jacques René Hébert; an identical feature analysis for both writers will be conducted in an effort to fully control the experimental environment.

Yet even without statistical support, Desmoulins demonstrates a masterful application of semantic theory in each of the aforementioned examples; each serves to demonstrate the range and depth of his linguistic acuity, his proficiency in employing both rhetorical guile and subtle connotation.

The day the Bastille fell, Camille Desmoulins was thrust irrevocably into revolutionary glory, but that would not be his only legacy. Through words alone, he destroyed reputations, undermined the dominion of the steely Robespierre, aided in the execution of a monarch, and was the impetus that drove the downfall of an entire Jacobin faction; whether he was a patriot or a terrorist is subject to interpretation, but his masterful manipulation of rhetoric and connotation are undeniable.

Understanding the linguistic applications in Desmoulins’s work requires us to delve into both the political and social climate of eighteenth century France, as well as into abstract linguistic theory. Although the argument could be made

that all French Revolutionaries employed these same techniques, the sheer breadth and impact of Desmoulins's work places him firmly at the forefront of the Revolution's journalistic movement; thus, understanding the mechanics which made his writing relevant is critical to understanding the Revolution itself and, in this way, we can appreciate the depth of his linguistic cunning.

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