

Phonostylistic processes as a marker of style-shifting in political discourse

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No-one speaks the same way all the time. People shift between styles according to the situation, topic or familiarity between speakers (Labov 1976). In the view of natural Phonology the more formal the context the more attentive the manner of delivery and the discrepancy between the underlying intention and the actual production is smaller (Dziubalska-Kończak 2002: 85). As a result the intelligibility maximises as the number of listener-friendly fortitions (e.g. aspiration, lengthening, and diphthongization) increases and speaker-oriented lenitions (e.g. assimilation, weakening, cluster reduction) are surpassed.

Political performances well exemplify the formal style of speaking and politicians who want to sound attractive for the audience are supposed to abandon the “casual” manner of delivery in favour of more sophisticated and listener-friendly (Bloch 1975). The question arises whether this stylistic shift leads to a change in the ratio of phonostylistic processes, namely the increase in fortitions and reduction of lenitions.

In order to provide an answer to this enquiry I analyzed four speeches made by one of the most popular American politicians Arnold Schwarzenegger. The first two performances were given at the beginning of his political career (in 2003 and 2004) whereas the remaining two are relatively current and were delivered in 2007 and 2008 respectively. The results indicate that in the later speeches the number of fortitions in particular aspiration and lengthening rose and lenitions mainly cluster reductions were surpassed. It can be therefore assumed that phonostylistic processes can be a marker of style-shifting in political discourse.

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