The Power of Voice Merging in Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*

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The author analyzes rhetorical elements of the final speech in Chalie Chaplin's film The Great Dictator. *Chaplin deliberately uses voice merging from Franklin D. Roosevelt's speeches as well as "god" and "devil" terms. The author asserts that these devices elevate Chaplin's credibility and make him a powerful influence for the world.*

My roommate shows me all sorts of ridiculous online videos; he always has. I rolled my eyes one night in particular as he called me from the bathroom, with the toothbrush still in my mouth, to watch a YouTube video. But this time was different. The toothbrush almost fell as I listened to one of the most moving speeches I had ever heard. Oddly enough, the man giving the speech looked like Hitler, but I knew it couldn't be, because he spoke of goodness in humanity, a world united under democracy, and freedom from dictators. I later discovered that this was the final speech from a movie that Charlie Chaplin (1940) had produced, directed, and written called *The Great Dictator.* The movie begins in a time and place identical to one where Hitler had risen to power and begun with the decimation of the Jews—only in Chaplin's story, Hitler is named Adenoid Hynkel and Germany is called Tomainia. The movie is about a Jewish-Tomainian barber who escapes persecution and joins an old comrade in an attempt to end the rule of the power-hungry Hynkel. In the final moments of the movie, Hynkel's men confuse the barber for their leader (because they are both played by Chaplin) and give him the opportunity to speak before the entire country. In Chaplin's final speech, he adopts an authoritative voice and key words from Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) in order to build his credibility, portray all tyrants as enemies of the world, and convince us all that we can overcome both dictators and dictatorships by fighting together under democracy.

Chaplin, both as the screenwriter and as the barber, knows that to incite a worldwide audience to action, he must act the part of a leader who has credibility before the world. Charlie Chaplin adopts authority by "voice merging," a strategy that "occurs when a writer quotes, paraphrases, or alludes to an authoritative voice" (McInelly 2011). The barber's speech is littered with references to a speech given by FDR on July 10, 1940, about four months before Chaplin's film came out. FDR made his speech in response to Italy's recent alliance with Germany. In light of a surge of recent innovation caused by the Machine Age, he talks about the effect of these machines in the hands of tyrants. He says that "the machine in hands of irresponsible conquerors becomes the master;

mankind is not only the servant; it is the victim, too" (Roosevelt par. 11). Then, he goes on to address that those who fear tyranny will prevail; by that point in history, most of Europe had already been overrun by Germany. FDR reminds the country that "victory for the gods of war and hate would endanger the institutions of democracy" (Roosevelt, par. 18), but he puts faith in democracy by proclaiming that "we will not . . . abandon our continuing effort to make democracy work within our borders" (Roosevelt par. 32). Chaplin deliberately used themes from FDR's speech to build his own credibility and to forward the same goal of democracy in the face of tyranny. Chaplin, like FDR, references the Machine Age when he states that "machinery that gives abundance has left us in want" (Chaplin par. 4). He recognizes the rise of tyrants when he says that "brutes have risen to power, but they lie" (Chaplin par. 11), but he too puts confidence in democracy by saying that "the people have the power to make life free and beautiful" (Chaplin par. 11). By borrowing themes like the Machine Age, tyranny, and democracy from FDR, Chaplin connects both himself and his message with the President of the United States, which strengthens his credibility and his words before a worldwide audience.

In order to understand exactly how FDR's speech builds Chaplin's credibility, we must know at least a little about FDR himself—he was a leader not only in the eyes of the American people, but in the eyes of the world. America was recognized in this era as a superpower, so FDR, as its leader, had to be a symbol of strength and solidarity. He commanded at least world recognition, if not a great deal of respect, and all of America's enemies knew that he would not be easily swayed or controlled. He was also known as a talented orator who could give powerful speeches that moved people to action; he gave people hope and always fought for democracy. In Chaplin's speech, he addresses not only Americans but the "millions throughout the world" (Chaplin par. 6)—every country, every race, and every gender. For a message directed toward such a broad audience, especially in the persona of a leader, Chaplin knew he had to have the credibility of

an actual leader with respect in the eyes of the world. By repeatedly drawing from themes from a very recent speech given by a national leader and polished orator, Chaplin adopts the same respect and reverence that an audience might have given to FDR himself. In that light, the audience sees him not as an ordinary man, but as one who is aware of the problems of the world and who has the experience to fix them. Also, just as FDR's speech gives Chaplin more credibility, it gives Chaplin's message more credibility as well. Since democracy is a theme often championed by FDR, it is easier for the audience to see its importance as Chaplin attempts to unite the world underneath it.

But Chaplin doesn't just use voice merging to build his credibility; by intertwining his speech with FDR's, Chaplin is able to use key words from FDR's speech to both elevate and further the meaning of his own analogies and metaphors in order to effectively create an "us versus them" mentality between dictators and the world. Certain words and phrases are deemed either "god terms" or "devil terms" (McInelly 2011) because of the powerful emotional overtones that they have. Chaplin voice merges, not by using entire quotes or sentences, but by using god and devil terms that are key to FDR's argument. Chaplin uses one devil term in particular—*machine*—because of the added meaning that it carries from FDR's speech. FDR used this word hand in hand with words like *irresponsible conqueror*, *master*, and *servant* (Roosevelt par. 11), making a point that machines, when used in the wrong hands, can enslave us and make us all their victims. He implies that they, the machines, can use us without us even realizing it. Chaplin uses this same devil term but to define all dictators and tyrants, calling them "machine men, with machine minds and machine hearts" (Chaplin par. 9). FDR spoke of machines enslaving the conquerors that use them, but Chaplin goes one step further by using this same logic to imply that these conquerors have now become the machines that control. *Machine* is a powerful descriptor because of its strong negative connotations; it is used when describing something that is cold, calculating, unfeeling, and inhuman. Through voice merging the

devil term *machine*, he automatically characterizes tyrants as cold and inhuman objects, who are past caring for others and who are quietly enslaving those that they are using to further their own objectives. The logic and reasoning used by FDR, coupled with Chaplin's new usage of the word, creates a cycle that further implies that just as tyrants can become like the machines they control, anyone can become like the tyrants that they perhaps are helping or hiding behind for their own purposes. Just by voice merging one simple word, Chaplin has made all dictators enemies of the world.

Chaplin then links both democracy and tyranny to specific god and devil terms to further separate the world from tyranny and emphasize democracy's superiority. Chaplin has already tied the word *machine* to tyranny with all its negative connotations, but he uses other devil terms, some borrowed from FDR and others original, in order to continue to undermine the concept of tyranny: *slavery* (Chaplin par. 9), *hate* (Roosevelt par. 18), *brutes* (Chaplin par. 11), and *unnatural* (Chaplin par. 9). By painting dictators and rulers with these words, he puts the concept of tyranny below humanity and mankind, making it the "unnatural" choice. He then connects democracy with god terms like *freedom* (Roosevelt par. 13), *liberty* (Chaplin par. 9), *human beings* (Chaplin par. 1), and *humanity* (Roosevelt par. 22) in order to make it the natural choice. Chaplin is claiming that mankind is born with the desire to free and be freed. He is connecting the entire world by saying that we all want the same things: "We all want to help one another. We all want to live by each other's happiness, not each other's misery" (Chaplin par. 1). These comparisons make democracy superior by portraying democracy as the human thing to do. It pits the world against all tyrants and portrays them as men now twisted by the very machines that they used to gain power. It helps the audience equate democracy with a sense of unity and tyranny with one of captivity.

By adopting an authoritative voice and voice merging key words from FDR into his speech, Chaplin is able to build his credibility to the point that he can not only address but also

connect with a world audience. This allows him to defeat tyranny by uniting the entire world against it under one banner: democracy. He convinces us that as human beings we all want democracy because we all want freedom. He employs these strategies so effectively that by the time his speech is over, we are already prepared to respond with action to his final words: "In the name of democracy, let us all unite" (Chaplin par. 12).

References

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