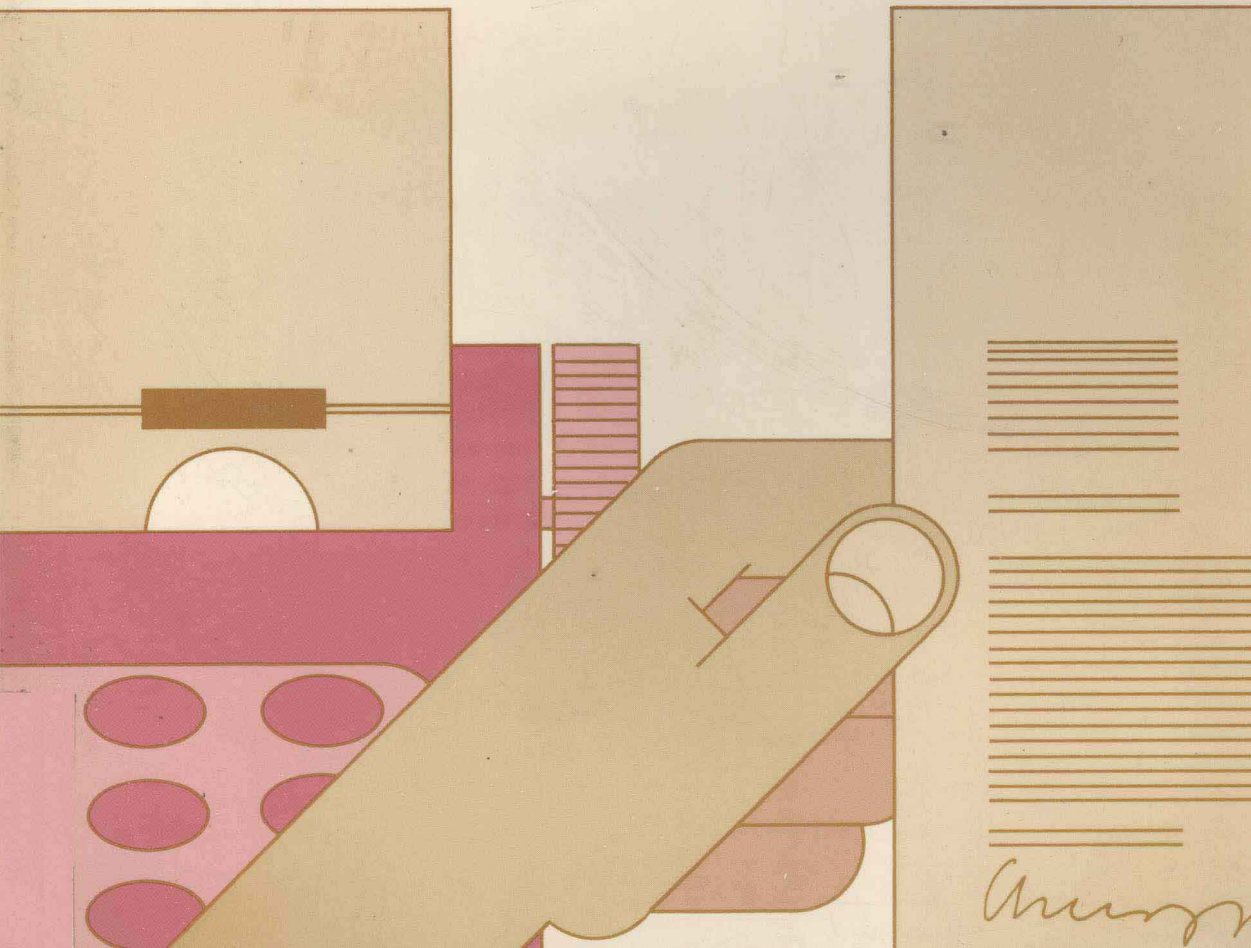# THE BUSINESS SPEECH:

Speaker, Audience, and Text

James Van Oosting

THE BUSINESS SPEECH:

Speaker, Audience, and Text

James VanOosting
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To
Wallace Bacon
Allen Goetcheus
Lilla Heston
Jessica Rousselow

who taught me to hear the human voice

Preface

This study investigates the composition, delivery, and perception of business speeches. Public speaking is but one of several communication skills required of persons in business. Other necessary abilities include letter and report writing, interviewing, small group participation, modes of leadership, media management, and interpersonal relations within an organization. Whereas many textbooks in the area of business communication introduce each of these subjects and include public speaking as a list item, our attention is devoted entirely to the live communication of one-to-many—public speaking. *The Business Speech: Speaker, Audience, and Text* is offered as an introduction to the subject for college and university students. It may serve, too, as a workshop guide to business professionals.

In selecting and organizing materials for the book, I have made two assumptions about its reader. First, the reader has completed successfully a basic course in composition or speech. Thus, I do not include, for instance, a grammatical review. Second, the reader is making this study concurrent with the study of basic business subjects. Thus, I restrict the book's focus to aspects of communication and do not attempt a general introduction to business terms or ideas.

The Business Speech is divided into two parts. Chapters 1–14 consider the communication principles that govern public speaking in a business setting. While these discussions aim at a pragmatic explanation of speech making and its problems, they are deliberately philosophical. Chapters 15–22 are decidedly practical in their structure and intent. Each one offers guidance and practice in the composition, delivery, and perception of a particular kind of business speech. My decision to construct the book in this way reflects a conviction that good communication practice must be grounded in a knowledge of basic principles. Hence, theory precedes application. The plan is also based upon a desire that the book's second part should serve as a convenient source of reference.

While the organization of any textbook prescribes, to some extent, its proper use in a classroom, I have tried to avoid dictating a course structure. Chapters 1–14 interconnect in a logical and necessary sequence. Chapters 15–22 proceed, by arbitrary choice, in an order determined by textual complexity—from a speech of introduction to the verbal report. One instructor may be comfortable with dividing the course outline in conjunction with my chapter divisions; another may prefer interspersing chapters from the second half of the book with discussions in the first part.

In addition to the four people named in the dedication, I express public thanks for their help and encouragement to members of the Department of Speech Communication at Southern Illinois University, especially to Marion Kleinau and Ron Pelias. I thank my colleagues Don MacDonald and Mary Lou Higgerson for permission to include the sample speech transcripts in Chapters 7 and 8 respectively. For her research assistance with the sample speeches in Chapters 20 and 21, I thank Lori Schmidt.

Contents

I

PRINCIPLES OF BUSINESS SPEAKING

1

At the Outset

To make a separate study of business speech is to define the experience as somehow distinct from other public speaking situations, and to see it as unique among other forms of business communication. Both assumptions could be argued. "Business speech" is a generic label covering a range of settings, subjects, audiences, and speakers. Each business speech, while individual and peculiar in its way, bears a resemblance to all other oratory—political, religious, didactic, and even comedic. When studying a business speech, thus, general principles of public communication apply. Nevertheless, the purposes and practices of business speaking mark it as a distinct experience worthy of special study. Furthermore, while business speaking and commercial writing have much in common, they are enough unlike to warrant separate consideration.

The Business Speech: Speaker, Audience, and Text addresses its subject with a practical purpose, with an orientation to the business professional, and with two biases: (1) that good public communication rarely happens by accident, and (2) that it can be made to happen by design. What may seem at the outset to be a narrow topic—the business speech—actually contains myriad complexities that are often hidden to the casual observer, disguised by the workaday familiarity of most business speech settings. This study allows us to focus a special spotlight on the mundane and to probe its features

for what may be extraordinary. An assumption throughout is that the business speech is, basically, an experience of human communication—important, multidimensional, capable of causing change, with a creative potential both productive and dangerous.

WHAT IS A BUSINESS SPEECH?

The term "business speech" evokes a number of conventional images: a salesperson extolling the advantages of a new product line, the advertising executive displaying a promotional campaign, the market analyst charting a financial forecast, or the industrial manager urging workers to meet higher standards of quality or efficiency. All these situations describe business speech activities. However, business speaking includes many other situations that may not come to mind as readily. This broader range may be illustrated by contrasting the settings and purposes of in-house meetings and public forums, of an audience of consumer advocates and an annual gathering of shareholders, of a hands-on training program and a formal scientific convention, of an entertaining acceptance speech and a highly technical verbal report. Our working definition of a "business speech" must cover all these settings.

Does the definition of business speech include a situation in which

a corporate executive is invited to speak at a high school's career day or to lecture in the college classroom?
an economic forecaster gives an opinion of the grain futures market on a local TV program?
a company official is asked to defend air quality controls at a town meeting?
a bank president steps before the microphones to explain his or her sudden resignation?
an auto company executive testifies before a congressional committee to advocate foreign import quotas?
a plant union representative asks for a strike vote from the membership?
a shareholder makes a proposal at an annual meeting?

All these situations and more could be included under the general heading of "business speech." Yet, dramatic differences exist among the examples cited. Part of the task of this study is to consider underlying principles of public communication without generalizing unfairly about disparate types of speech situations.

As a working definition of "business speech," we may include

1. any public speech given by a person in business when he or she is representing a corporate interest,
2. any public speech of which the primary subject is related to business concerns,
3. any public speech for which the primary audience is composed of business personnel, or
4. any public speech aimed primarily at achieving a commercial end.

As our discussion evolves, each of these qualifications must be tested against individual case studies. At the outset, it is important to note that "business speech" cannot be defined solely on the basis of a speaker's identity, the subject of a speech text, the profile of an

audience, or the persuasive intent of a given speech event. Each of these components is integral to public communication, and we are interested primarily in how they work together—how they influence one another.

SPEAKER, AUDIENCE, AND TEXT

This book's subtitle indicates a certain approach to the speech process. Speaker, audience, and text are integrally linked in a communication event; an understanding of one component without due consideration of the other two can yield only a partial, distorted understanding of the whole event. Any real communication that takes place in a business speech is the result of merged interests and perceptions on the parts of speaker and listener; the contract guaranteeing that merger is a speech's text, its language and logic.

The communication event of a business speech begins with the speaker, with his or her presence, identity, bearing, and voice. Everything that a speaker is and does contributes to, or detracts from, communication—the speaker's appearance, dress, physical stature, movement, gesture, mannerisms, tone, inflection, and characteristic attitude. Unless a business speaker is properly trained, these aspects of performance can make their impact without his or her knowledge and outside the individual's control. Likewise, a naïve member of the audience may make judgments and determine meanings on the basis of these unconscious performance behaviors. We shall devote considerable attention to the speaker's oratorical skills because they can enhance or undermine the persuasive impact of a speech. But no speaker, however skillful, is totally in charge of communication.

To understand the complexity (and fragility) of a speech event, one must also appreciate the role of audience perception. The truism that one gets out of an experience in kind what one puts in applies in many ways to the audience of a business speech. The ultimate test of effective speech must be measured by audience response—the levels of understanding and commitment *after* hearing a speech contrasted to *prior* knowledge and attitudes. These changes depend as much upon a listener's skills, interests, and aptitudes as they do upon a speaker's ability. We must look closely, then, at the place and function of audience perception in business speech so that we may improve our effectiveness as listeners *and* as speakers.

Whereas every detail of the public speaking situation—from a speaker's toothy grin to a listener's hard seat—plays its part in communication, most important is the speech's text, *what* is said. A speech text, even that of a simple demonstration, is complex. It contains a speaker's ideas, reflects a certain logic (or lack of logic), and uses a specific vocabulary, which itself indicates many things. A speech text says much about a speaker's knowledge of a given subject and reveals his or her authority to address the issue. The words and structure of a text can indicate, as well, a speaker's attitude toward, and feelings about, an audience. We shall see that a speech text, when examined closely, projects a miniature replica of the whole public speaking event.

This study of the business speech, thus, examines a multilayered experience, a communication event. We shall separate its dimensions for the sake of analysis, looking

individually at the speaker, the audience, and the text. But our thinking will always return to the interaction among these three components because it is this dynamic relationship that really describes speech communication. We are interested in the interplay among language, speaker, and listener—with the common links among composition, performance, and perception.

APPROACH: THEORY AND PRACTICE

The matched objectives of this textbook are (1) to improve the public speaking ability of business professionals, and (2) to increase the capacity for accurate perception on the part of speech audiences. Both aims are ambitious; they require rigorous study and application. To meet these objectives, the book moves constantly between theory and practice, philosophy and experience. If, by term's end, a student has developed certain skills as an orator but lacks a philosophical understanding of those skills and their communication impact, our aims will not have been met. Likewise, if an individual becomes conversant in theoretical issues of public communication but cannot apply these to specific business situations, his or her knowledge will have limited value. Our approach to learning, thus, demands both thinking and doing with a special regard for the intimate connections between theory and practice.

Several aids to this dual learning approach have been incorporated into the book's structure. First, the text as a whole is divided into two parts. The first, longer section considers underlying principles of business speaking, while the second part gives attention to the practice of business speaking in specific situations. Yet, these formal divisions do not separate theory and practice; various means have been devised to assure the dual approach throughout.

Beginning with Chapter 2, each chapter starts off by stating its subject, defining necessary terms, and discussing certain principles of communication. Learning then moves from theory to practice with a series of exercises designed to apply those principles discussed in the introductory essay. Following the exercise section is a sample speech with discussion of its merits and problems. At the end of each chapter, the student is presented with a hypothetical business assignment and is asked to respond by creating an appropriate speech.

The movement between theory and practice within each chapter, which is also implicit in the book's overall structure, underscores our pragmatic aims. This is *not* a book of theory; it *is* a laboratory experience in public speaking for the business professional and aspirant. But the experiments conducted in this laboratory must be informed by a solid understanding of basic principles. Nowhere more than in today's business enterprise do the theory and practice of speech communication merge. If business speech practices do not reflect sensible theory, their communication results cannot be reliable. Furthermore, if business speech practices do not contribute to our general understanding of human communication, something is seriously wrong. Sensible theory and studied practice are inseparable components of the successful business speaker's training.

A PREVIEW

Part I, "Principles of Business Speaking," is divided into four sections, each comprised of three chapters. Chapters 2–4 look at the business *speaker*—his or her identity and context, intention and credibility, and role as a performer. Chapters 5–7 shift focus to the speech *audience* with discussions of analysis and projection, the skills of listening and viewing, and the functions of assessment and response. In Chapters 8–10, the idea of a *text* is examined—topic selection and research, information exchange, and strategies of persuasion. Three areas of special consideration receive attention in Chapters 11–13: directing a convention, ghost writing, and the speech in print. Part I concludes in Chapter 14 with a philosophical overview.

Part II, "The Practice of Business Speaking," looks at eight specific speech types, from a simple introduction to the more complicated situations of a motivational speech and a verbal report. In each instance, the speech type is defined and illustrated with a discussion of the special features and responsibilities of the speaker, the audience and the text. As with the chapters in Part I, these latter chapters offer hypothetical cases for student speeches. Following Part II is an Appendix that outlines strategies for continued study.

As suggested in the preface, chapters from the second part of the book may be interspersed with those from Part I, or topics for study may proceed in sequence from Chapters 2 through 22. In either case, a student is expected to follow closely the interplay between idea and experience.

SUMMARY

Business speaking is a division that falls under the larger heading of public communication. It deserves special attention as a separate subject because of its distinctive purposes and practices within a commercial culture. Our study is designed for the business professional and apprentice. Its two aims are pragmatic: to improve a student's public speaking ability and to increase the skills of perception in a business audience.

For the purposes of this study, business speaking is defined to include (1) any public speech given by a person in business when he or she is representing a corporate interest, (2) any public speech in which the primary subject is related to business concerns, (3) any public speech for which the primary audience is composed of business personnel, or (4) any public speech aimed primarily at achieving a commercial end.

Any accurate description of a business speech event must take into account the roles of speaker, audience, and text. Each variable contributes to meaning. As students and practitioners of business speaking, we are interested especially in the interplay among these components—how they affect one another. Our study, while designed with a practical thrust and a professional orientation, is as much concerned with underlying principles of communication as with the behavioral signs of speech performance. Sensible theory and effective practice cannot be separated.

In the chapters to come, we shall consider a business speech event from the separate perspectives of speaker, audience, and text. Binding the whole together is a constant concern with meaning, both as intended by a speaker and as perceived by an audience. And underpinning this textbook from start to finish is a conviction that all business communication, including public speaking, is human communication—personal and worldly, essential to individual and corporate welfare.

2

The Speaker: Identity and Context

A serious study of public speaking could begin at any of several points, so rich and diverse is the communication event. A careful observer might start by surveying the physical setting in which a speech occurs, or by analyzing the human environment and the audience's expectations of the speech event. One could begin by profiling the vested interests of all participants, speaker and listeners, and the influence upon communication of corporate loyalties and viewpoints. The investigation of a given speech might begin with the close scrutiny of a printed transcript. Where one's consideration of public speaking begins is not nearly so important as where it ends. One can begin anywhere, with anything, but a reliable understanding of the experience as a whole demands pursuing all lines of inquiry and their points of connection with one another. Our study begins with a close look at the business *speaker* and, especially in this chapter, with some understanding of that speaker's identity and context.

WHO IS THE BUSINESS SPEAKER?

To begin, this question cannot be answered in the singular: there is no such thing as *the* business speaker. There are only business speakers in the plural, and the distinction implies an interesting starting point for discussion. Very few commercial enterprises