

TONES & COUNTERTONES IN COMPETITIVE DEBATING

David Lavoie

Too many times debaters, particularly novices, fall into the pitfall of allowing their adversaries to set the tone of a debate. Sometimes this tone is both inappropriate and ineffective. Of course, many debates have no particular flavour beyond that of normal, reasoned discourse. This is fine, but on occasion somewhat lacking in flair. Other debates, or debate sides, or parts of debates have a very marked tone. What is important is to learn to recognize your opponent's attempts to set a particular tone and to know how to counter it.

In speaking, communication occurs on a number of different levels. You should be aware not only of what your words but also of what the tone of your argument is communicating to your listeners. Remember that the most important of your listeners, by far, are the debate judges. How will they react to the tone of your argument? You should think seriously about this. It is usually ineffective to allow your opponent to set the tone and then imitate it, particularly if the tone is a negative one. For instance, if someone is being very sarcastic, it's a mistake to be sarcastic in return. It does not impress judges to listen to you and your opponent engage in a contest to establish which one can be the nastiest. This simply makes them uncomfortable. Instead, recognize that sarcasm is often a defense mechanism designed to conceal nervousness, insecurity, lack of preparation, or all three combined. The correct countertone to sarcasm is gentle, calm persuasiveness. It makes you look reasonable and mature and leaves your adversary to be nasty all by him, or herself.

Another tone of argument, sometimes a very effective one, is that of highly charged emotionalism. Many topics lend themselves easily to such an approach; Separatism is an example.

"English Canadians have kept us in chains since the Plains of Abraham.
We suffer each day the imprisonment of the soul of our people."

This kind of argument, charged with passion and rhetoric, often works well because people like to identify with a perceived "underdog." It is usually packed with loaded words which invite an emotional, rather than a rational response (chains, suffer, imprisonment, soul). It is very difficult to counter such an approach when it is well done; it is fatal to counter it with ridicule. If you are perceived as representing only the interests of the "big guy", you won't win. Rather, be sympathetic, polite and very logical. In countering the speaker above, for instance, say something like:

"Madame Speaker, we recognize this unfortunate part of our mutual history. But consider the number of items of special legislation enacted by our government to recognize the special status of Quebec. Let me outline them for you."

It's easy to be intimidated by a debater who is completely unemotional and terrifyingly factual. Such people seem not only read books and articles you have never even heard of, but also to have committed them to memory. Typically, people who use this approach are condescending and love to "wow the judges with numbers." They say things like:

"A survey of statistics based on the G.N.P. for the years 1952 to 1978 inclusive supports the diagnostic of this significant decline in numbers of the unemployed formerly earning under \$12,500 per annum when the variant figures are seasonally adjusted."

Quite often the judges don't know what these "experts" are talking about either, so there is no need to be afraid. The most effective way to counter this kind of clinical analysis is to be very warm and humane.

"Mr. Speaker, all the numbers in the world won't alter the fact that we are dealing here with human beings in desperate circumstances who need our help."

Perhaps most difficult of all to counter is the humorous tone, but it helps if you understand some things about humour. First, being humorous in front of an audience comes very easily to some people; for most of us it comes much harder. If your opponent is one of those people of quick and clever wit who loves an audience, he or she has a genuine advantage. It's no good matching joke for joke with someone who is better at it than you. Your best defense is to remain good-humoured and calmly logical. If the jokes persist, you might try conveying slight indignation at the frivolity of this approach.

On the other hand, if you plan on being humorous yourself (as often happens in an impromptu debate) remember that humour is much harder than seriousness. You can't "wing it." It is very difficult to keep a joke going after the initial funny opening line. The joke often falls flat and you are stuck for six or seven minutes with both the tone you have created, and the initially funny, but probably absurd, idea you have introduced. In addition, beginning humorously and then trying to become serious often backfires.

Remember too that humour is very generational and that it dates very quickly. What you think is hilarious the judges may not think funny at all. Think about jokes that appeal to your parents or teachers. How often do you find them really funny? On the other hand, when you were five and, for the first time you heard the answer to "Why does the chicken cross the road?" you probably thought it was hysterical. Do you still? Do your little brothers and sisters tell you jokes now? Are they funny? Humour often depends on how old you are and what your values are.

I once saw an important debate at a district tournament for which the resolution was "What Canada Needs Is More Government." The six finalists had had a long hard

day and they wanted a humorous topic. They were disappointed with this one, but they decided to treat it humorously anyway. They didn't realize how closely matched they were, but they did know that the prize for the winner was a trip to the National Debating Seminar in British Columbia. The government argued, with the most absurd logic imaginable, that Canada needed a dictator and a fascistic government just like Hitler and Nazi Germany. The youthful audience found this display of Monty Python reasoning extremely funny. The debaters were having a wonderful time waxing more and more ridiculous except for one fellow who was being good-natured, but treating the topic a little more seriously. I happened to glance at the judges; the four of them were in their fifties or early sixties. They were not laughing. These were people whose lives had been directly affected by the Second World War; it was neither history, nor funny to them. Want to guess who got the trip to British Columbia?

By all means use humour, especially if you're good at it, but be calculating! Estimate the effect on your audience and particularly on the judges. Think about how long you can keep a joke going and how you can make the transition to seriousness if you have to. People who enjoy debating usually like clever word-play and verbal absurdities, but avoid self-depreciation with them. If you have judged your audience correctly and if you've got the tone and pacing right, humour can be an extremely powerful weapon. But weapons are dangerous to the user if they are not handled correctly. Use humour intelligently!

The same advice applies to the other tones of argument. Know what they are. Know how to counter them. You'll be surprised at how quickly you develop an awareness of the tone of all sorts of messages being delivered to you. Such an awareness helps to empower you.