



# Aristotle – Patron Saint of Estate Agents?

**Did you know that Aristotle wrote *A Guide To Successful Estate Agency*? OK, that wasn't its exact title, but a re-interpretation of Aristotle's classic text on *Rhetoric* has revealed it to be a thinly veiled monograph on how to persuade buyers to part with their pennies.**

In the first systematic analysis of estate agent language, Sarah Oates and Gwilym Pryce from the University of Glasgow employ Aristotle's ponderings on the art of persuasion as a means of classifying the peculiar parlance of property peddlers. In the words of the great man himself,

"Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself." (Aristotle, 350 BC, p. 3)

Aristotle labelled these three elements: *ethos* (reliability of the speaker), *pathos* (the manipulation of the emotional predisposition of the audience) and *logos* (logical argument). Using this tripartite categorisation to decompose the language of estate agents, Oates and Pryce present a marked departure from previous research on the influence of estate agents which has tended to assign the language of selling a rather neutral role.

Of course, it doesn't take a genius to point out that the idea of estate agents as neutral disseminators of information differs somewhat from their popular characterisation. Indeed, the idiom of estate agency is perhaps its defining characteristic. "Des. Res.", "rarely available", "viewing essential" – these are the grist of the peculiar parlance of housing advertisements that contain a readily identifiable combination of euphemism, hyperbole and superlative.

Indeed, many of the jokes about estate agents rest on an accepted set of popular assumptions about their manipulative use of language. The following extracts from online humorous "dictionaries" of estate agent euphemism are a case in point:

*'Benefits From'* :

Contains a feature you may expect to be the bare minimum for the extraordinary price you are paying. Example: "Benefits from roof, floors, walls".

*'Bijou'*:

Would suit contortionist with growth hormone deficiency.'

*'Compact'*:

See Bijou, then divide by two.'

*'In Need of Modernisation'*:

In need of demolition.'

*'Internal Viewing Recommended'*:

Looks awful on the outside.'

*'Original Features'*:

Water tank still contains cholera bacterium.'

*'Studio'*:

You can wash the dishes, watch the telly, and answer the front door without getting up from the toilet.'<sup>1</sup>

*'Secluded location'*

It was in the middle-of-nowhere - barren and desolate. Suitable film set for Mad Max 5.' (Houseweb, 2006)

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<sup>1</sup> The above quotes are all taken from BBC News Online.

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But should we be concerned about realtors' abuse of language? Not necessarily, according to Oates and Pryce. The humorous dictionaries of estate-agent speak are testimony to the fact that buyers decode before swallowing the claims of house adverts. One does not actually expect a 'stunning lounge' to render one unconscious or an 'exclusive neighbourhood' to literally screen out undesirable people who want to move to the area. There is a commonly understood language of real estate, one that moves far beyond a mere description of the physical nature of a property (or even a rather one-sided, optimistic version of the attributes). Instead, our house is 'now seen as an expression of our taste and as an extension of our personality. It's a sophisticated language, but one we all understand'.<sup>2</sup>

The real question, then, is the extent to which the pattern of exaggeration and misrepresentation *remain uniform and constant*. Code-breaking becomes considerably more complex when the process of decoding is variable. This was the primary innovation of the Second World War code-making machines such as Enigma, and it is the principle that underpins modern encryption. And there may indeed be processes in the evolution of estate agent practice, even within a particular city, that might cause systematic variation in the idiom of selling to occur.

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<sup>2</sup> Sweet, 1999, p. 15; see also Lorenzo-Dus (2006)

So, it is to the question of whether estate agent rhetoric remains stable or varies over time and across neighbourhoods that the authors have devoted the lion's share of their research energies. They apply textual analysis to a unique dataset of 49,926 records of real estate transactions in the West of Scotland over the period 1999 to 2006 to reveal that there is indeed evidence of volatility in the use of language. Agents in certain areas are much more likely than those in other parts of the city to use "pathos" – the term used by Aristotle to describe the use of emotive language when attempting to persuade. A booming market also seems to evoke the use of more effusive language – perhaps due to the need to 'shout louder' in a more frantic marketplace.

In some ways these variations over time and across areas are all the more surprising when you think that the internet now plays a very prominent role in the marketing of properties. Rather like the alleged tendency for television to dilute regional accents,<sup>3</sup> one might expect the internet to have had a similar effect in bringing uniformity to the marketing of properties. Not so, it seems. The art of persuasion is alive and kicking, even in the information age of the twenty first century, and Aristotle still leads the field of unholy nominations for the Patron Saint of estate agents.

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<sup>3</sup> See Stuart-Smith, Timmins, and Pryce, G. (2005)

Click [here](#) to download a free copy of the paper by Sarah Oates and Gwilym Pryce on the language of estate agents.

Click [here](#) to download "Do Estate Agents Influence the Market?", presentation by Professor Pryce to the National Association of Estate Agents, 22 March 2006.

See the Housing Research page of [www.gpryce.com](http://www.gpryce.com) for more articles and resources on housing related topics.

### References:

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