

Lingo-Rhetorical and Socio-Pragmatic Peculiarities in Political Speeches by Barack Obama

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Abstract: In modern speech communication theory, rhetorics is defined as a verbal content of peoples' social life and as a source of communicative interaction (Hudson, 1978; Volkov, 2001; Daletskiy, 2003). That is why political rhetorics is considered to be an instrument of government in the political system of any society. Rhetorics includes a great number of cultural and linguistic phenomena as a part of the process of social communication. Rhetorics presupposes a convincing speech effect produced on the addressee by the sender. The description of linguistic, stylistic and socio-pragmatic specific features typical of a politician's speech behavior helps define his/her main communicative strategies. These strategies promote establishing harmonious communication and communicative contacts between the political leaders, on the one hand, and the electorate, on the other hand. They help the politician seize his/her political power and positions. The analysis performed in our investigation results in the description of the linguistic means and communicative strategies typical of the political leader, Barack Obama.

Keywords: Lingo-stylistics, political rhetorics, sociopragmatics.

1. Introduction

The main goal of public speech is to get the corresponding result through persuasion. Through persuasion a politician wishes: to get the addressee to vote for a certain candidate; to gain people's love and to strengthen his image; to make people share his opinion and to agree with his words; to inform the general public of his viewpoint on a certain question (Aristotle, 2000.). This is usually achieved with the help of a great number of cultural and linguistic features in the process of social communication. They are as follows: non-fact verbs, the verbs of mental activity, the verbs of estimation, the performative verbs expressing promise, declaring; different types of questions, both direct and indirect, reduced and full; cleft sentences, sayings and proverbs, Bible quotations, formulae of participation, syntactic parallelism (anaphora, anadiplosis), inversion, phraseological units, emphatic *do* and *did*, reiteration, metaphors, historical comparisons, antithesis, violent expressions which make the speech abrupt (categorical, raising no objections), and many others. Their use satisfies the requirements and ensures the success of communicative interaction. Moreover, the process of establishing communicative contacts must take into account the concrete goal of communication, the contents of the speech, and the circumstances under which it is made. Through all of these, rhetorical persuasion leads to a successful result and helps realize the corresponding communicative strategies.

In this connection the present paper consists of two parts.

The first part contains the description of the lingo-stylistic means, used by the speaker, which are aimed at making speech more emphatic, expressive, bright and intelligible.

The second part contains a brief commentary on the socio-pragmatic peculiarities typical of Barack Obama's political speeches.

The analysis is carried out on the basis of the following speeches by Barack Obama:

The Change We Need (September 17, 2008);

Barack Obama's Inaugural Address (January 20, 2009);

The 2011 State of the Union Address (January 25, 2011).

2. Methods of Analysis

The methods of analysis are comparative and descriptive, including observation, comparison, generalization, description, and critical discourse analysis. The latter studies the means by which social power realizes its supremacy over society (Chudinov, 2008, p.14). The section below contains a detailed description of the lingo-stylistic means used by Barack Obama. All of the quotations are from the above-mentioned speeches.

3. Lingo-stylistic Peculiarities of Barack Obama's Speeches

Our analysis revealed that all of the above-mentioned lingo-stylistic features were used by the speaker to a lesser or greater extent. These include:

- **Different types of questions, affirmative sentences**, reduced and abrupt, characteristic of colloquial English, elements of the so called "broken syntax" (Rogova, 1975). They are lively, free in form, not completed, often abounding in ellipses, parceling and sometimes preferred by the orator.

You never gave in. You never gave up. And together we made history.

That's the project the American people want us to work on. Together.

- **Metaphors**. They help the audience catch the connection between what people know and the new information. They help a listener look at the familiar things the other way round. They give a possibility to interpret the new information and to come to a certain conclusion: *We honor them not only because they are **guardians of our liberty**, but because they embody **the spirit of service**.*

- **Inversion** which removes the informative centre of the utterance and makes it more expressive and emotional: *We measure progress by the success of our people. **By the jobs** they can find and the quality of life those jobs offer. **By the prospects** of a small business owner who dreams of turning a good idea into a thriving enterprise. **By the opportunities** for a better life that we pass on to our children.*

- **Reiteration** – one of the most preferable rhetorical figures of speech which reveals itself in **repetition** of identical morphemes, words, sentences, and makes the speech swift, rhythmical, expressive and emotional and in this way strengthens its influence upon the electors. For example,

*What comes of this moment is up to us. **What comes of this moment** will be determined not by whether we can sit together tonight, but whether we can work together tomorrow.* Here we deal with syntactic parallelism, accompanied by anaphora, and antithesis. The combination of these means strengthens the impression produced on the addressee.

*What's more, we are the first nation to be founded for the sake of **an idea – the idea** that each of us deserves the chance to shape our own destiny* (anadiplosis).

***No workers – no workers** are more productive than ours* (anaphora).

*Our challenges **may be new**. The instruments with which we meet them **may be new*** (epiphora).

- **Alliteration** – a special stylistic means aimed at creating additional musical effect produced by the utterance. The words acquire certain intonational significance and attract listeners' attention.

*Because of a diplomatic effort to insist that Iran meets its obligations, the Iranian government now faces **tougher** sanctions, **tighter** sanctions than ever before.*

- **Antithesis** – a widespread stylistic means in speeches of political leaders, conveys contrast of ideas vividly expressed: *It's not a matter of punishing their success. It's about promoting America's success.*

- **Epithets** – attributive words which make the information more exact, precise, accurate. They help a word or an utterance obtain colorfulness and influence the addressees' vision of the political and social situation: *On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the **petty grievances** and false promises, **worn out dogmas**, that for far too long have strangled our politics.*

- **Metonymy** – a stylistic means with the help of which the necessary word is replaced by another, analogous in meaning. It gives an addressee the possibility to see between lines (Gaines, 1999): *know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman, child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and we are ready to lead once more.*

- **Hyperbole** – intentional exaggeration used by politicians to emphasize ideas and to intensify expressiveness: *It's never been harder to save or retire; to buy gas or groceries; and if you put it on a card, they've probably raised your rates.*

- **Personification** – transference of certain qualities from animate beings to inanimate ones. It makes speech more vivid and concentrates attention on the semantic component of the utterance: *Now, clean energy breakthroughs will only translate into clean energy jobs if **businesses know** there will be a market for what they're selling.*

- **Gradation** – a synonymic row of words in which every next element is getting more and

more or less and less intensive: *So it **has been**. So it **must be** with this generation of Americans. I believe **we can**. And I believe **we must**.*

- **Polisyndeton** is used to make up a rhythmical picture of speech, underlining the significance of every element and strengthening its expressivity: ***And** over the next 10 years, with so many baby boomers retiring from our classrooms, we want to prepare 100,000 new teachers in the fields of science **and** technology **and** engineering **and** math.*

The examples given above don't exhaust all possible stylistic means used in the texts under analysis.

The lingo-stylistic features are numerous and various. Mr. Obama's favorite figures of speech are antithesis, metaphors, reiteration. We can assume that the preferred use of certain linguistic means can in part be explained by differences in socio-economic status, education, gender, age, character and political competence of the speaker's interlocutors. This presupposes the speaker's ability to estimate a certain situation in the right way and to verbalize it correspondingly. In this connection it is necessary to say that Mr. B. Obama performed bright, emotional speeches, well-supplied with various lingo-stylistic means. The results of the analysis are represented in Figure 1. Out of the total number of features found, 27% were in the 2008 speech, 28% were in the 2009 speech, and 45% were in the 2011 speech (Figure 2).

Expressive Means	Sept 17, 2008	Jan 20, 2009	Jan 25, 2011
Address	4	5	6
Anaphora	8	9	18
Allusion	0	4	7
Antithesis	9	2	10
Anadiplosis	1	1	1
Alliteration	1	1	1
Antithesis	9	2	10
Allegory	0	0	1
Cleft sentences	0	0	2
Cliché	1	0	1
Comparison	5	5	3
Epiphora	0	1	0
Epithets	16	19	23
Gradation	2	6	12
Hyperbole	5	3	1
Imperatives	0	0	5

Inversion	4	2	2
Metaphors	17	22	25
Metonymy	0	2	1
Omission	0	1	0
Parceling	0	0	3
Parallelism	11	7	32
Periphrasis	0	0	2
Polisyndeton	6	2	6
Personification	2	0	3
Quotation	2	0	5
Reference to authorities	0	1	0
Reiteration	9	3	22
Set expressions	4	23	5
Synecdoche	0	2	2
Tautology	2	0	0

Figure 1. Lingo-Stylistic Features Used in Barack Obama's Political Discourse

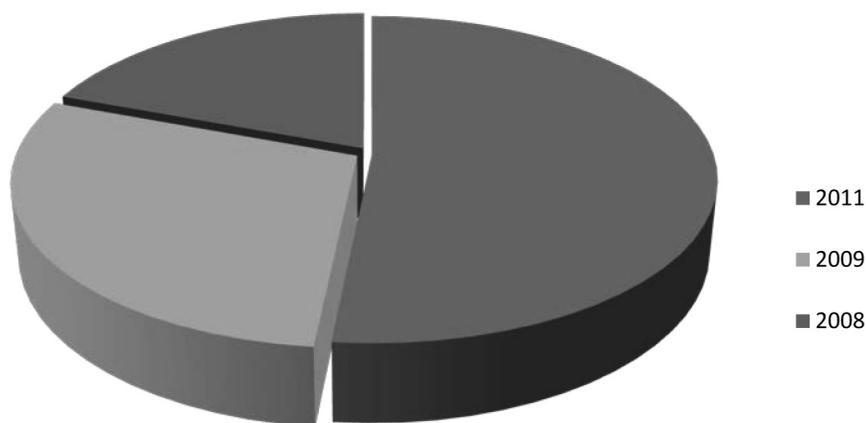


Figure 2. The Comparative Analysis of the Lingo-stylistic Means

4. Socio-pragmatic Peculiarities of Barack Obama's Speeches

The description of linguistic, stylistic and socio-pragmatic specific features typical of politicians' speech behavior helps define their main communicative strategies on the ground of the political rhetoric. As soon as we start speaking about communicative strategies, we touch

upon sociopragmatics, a branch of sociolinguistics, which is aimed at examining relations between the language use and the language aims (Leech, 1983). It embraces the actual problems of language policy and language planning, the social functions of the language, the influence of social events upon the language, and the role of the language in the life of the society. This approach gives a chance to describe the mechanism of social stipulation of speech activities (Spolsky, 1998).

For a researcher interested in sociopragmatics, it is equally important to know what is said and **how it is being said**. This refers to, on the one hand, the verbal form of the information and, on the other hand, the verbal means with the help of which this information is represented in speech. So, the verbal form acquires social features as the social situation is reflected in the form of communication (Krisin, 2008).

As has already been said, Barack Obama's speeches contain political metaphors which represent and emphasize particular aspects of the American people's life. His speech sounds reasonable and well-grounded. The latter permits Mr. Obama to concentrate the voters' attention on the actions which will lead to a successful future by realizing mistakes made in the past. The speaker underlines the ability of the American people to learn lessons from the past in order not to make new mistakes in the future. He shows the solicitous attitude of Americans towards their history and their pride in it:

*Starting today, we must **pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off**, and begin again the work of remaking America... **We will build** the roads and bridges,... **We will restore** science to its rightful place,... **We will harness** the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories. And **we will transform** our schools and colleges and universities...All this **we can do**. All this **we will do**. ... **We will work tirelessly**.*

The word *harness* underlines the internal power of American people, their readiness for hard and sometimes dangerous labor, and their willingness to subdue the wild elements.

These words, supported by political metaphors, sound actual, lively and aggressive. This is an appeal to the nation to change the situation and "to restore America's standing in the world. To make America once again a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws" (Clinton, Aug 26, 2008).

The preferred use of the Future Simple tense and the absence of imperative constructions testifies in favor of Barack Obama as a wise leader who gives every American the right to make his/her own decision, and this, in its turn, helps strengthen the voters' respect and confidence in him.

Addressing the American people, Barack Obama uses the word combination *My fellow citizens* which underlines the equality and unity of the President and his people. On the whole, the formulae of participation often appear in his speech: *our economy, our collective failure, our health care, our schools, our nation*. They underline the President's ability to unite people and to lead the nation.

The parallel syntactic constructions are primarily used in indirect imperatives:

To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward,... To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict,... - know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy..To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit..., know that you are on the wrong side of history;...

To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside...And to those nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say we can no longer afford indifference to the suffering outside our borders;...

Parallel structures make utterances more rhythmical and this, in its turn, makes the speech more understandable, accessible and easy to interpret. Inversion, which is also used here, gives strength to communicative tension.

Sometimes we come across brief, synonymic, parallel syntactic constructions:

Homes have been lost; jobs shed; businesses shattered. Our health care is too costly; our schools fail too many;...

These words sound severe, categorical but realistic. It is a severe truth that must be coped with. But at the same time it is an original appeal to keep going father.

The modal verb **shall** used in the following sentence is meant to convey promise, intention and even an obligatory action:

... , we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that...our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.

The President looks at the future with sincere hope to get over the difficulties arising on the way to peace and to a better life.

Side by side with this, the orator uses parallel word combinations consisting of two elements, which make the utterance deeper and help keep the semantic balance:

honesty and hard work; courage and fair play; tolerance and curiosity; loyalty and patriotism; hope over fear; unity of purpose over conflict and discord.

At the same time figurativeness of speech is achieved due to antithesis or contrast of ideas vividly expressed: *Our journey has never been one of short-cuts or settling for less. It has not been the path for the faint-hearted-...Rather, it has been the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things...*

Speaking about the end of the previous political course pursued by George W. Bush and his supporters, Barack Obama declares the coming of new time, the time of changes. His aim is to establish political control over the world stage and to preserve it:

For the world has changed, and we must change with it. We remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth...., and we are ready to lead once more.... ... our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint. America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.

The appeal is reckoned on the emotional effect produced on the voters in order to arouse their feelings of civic duty and ideals of moral behavior such as humanism, collectivism, tolerance.

The foreign policy of the country under the leadership of the new President remains tough concerning other countries' aggression: *We will not apologize for our way of life, nor will we waver in its defense, and for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken; you cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you.*

But sometimes we hear a sincere desire for cooperation and for peaceful negotiations with other ethnic groups and countries: ***To the Muslim world... we will extend a hand if you are***

willing to unclench your fist.

The strategy of well-reasoned speech is actualized in his appeal to the historical past of the American people:

*Heroes who lie in Arlington whisper through the ages... they embody the spirit of service...spirit that must inhabit us all. **For us**, they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life. **For us**, they toiled in sweatshops and settled the West; endured the lash of the whip and plowed the hard earth. **For us**, they fought and died, in places like Concord and Gettysburg.*

The structural and stylistic peculiarities of the appeal (syntactic parallelism, inversion, anaphora) intensify different elements of the information, preserving their semantic balance and depth.

Special semantic loading in Mr. Obama's speech is taken by the idea that Americans are a nation selected and blessed by God:

God's grace upon us. The God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness. God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny.

Taking into consideration that religion in the life of an ordinary American plays an important role and shows his civic duty, the words of the President are taken as directives of moral behavior, as a demand to perform noble and fair actions.

All these means are intended to exert a deep influence on the voters in order to change the world political picture in their mentality. Being a strong-willed, insistent, decisive, consistent and, most importantly, rather experienced politician, and a very skillful public speaker, Barack Obama uses the strategy of positive self-presentation. Concerning the policy pursued by George W. Bush, Obama uses the estimation strategy of discredit and sometimes of contrast.

5. Concluding Remarks

- 1) The analysis of the linguistic and stylistic means carried out on the functional and interactive ground assumes that these means are not studied as ordinary forms and structures but as bearers of valuable information defined by the author, as bearers of certain ideas, relations, and communicative intentions. In the course of analysis it became clear that the orator uses metaphors, reiteration and parallel constructions most of all. Anaphoric syntactic constructions are used more often than others. These means produce a deep impression on the audience. Due to them, Obama concentrates people's attention on the necessary semantic elements and thus makes up the rhythmical trajectory of speech. The latter makes the speech easy to understand and to interpret. The use of antithesis helps the politician put the accent on his vision of the political situation and persuades the electorate to vote for him.
- 2) The description of sociopragmatic peculiarities of Mr. Barack Obama's speech behavior allows us to bring to light and to define his main communicative strategies revealed in his political rhetoric. They can be briefly determined in the following way: the subsidiary strategy of self-presentation; the estimation strategy of disapproval; the strategy of well-reasoned speech and the strategy of positive representation; the appeal to America's past (Scherbinina, 2007; Issers, 2008).

- 3) The comparison of speeches showed that in his pre-election speech (2008) Obama uses the strategy of self-presentation to introduce himself to the American people and to get their confidence; the strategy of disapproval concerning the policy pursued by his predecessors; the strategy of self-defense to criticize his opponents and the strategy of agitation appealing that he, Barack Obama, be elected.
- 4) In his Inaugural Speech (2009) Obama widely uses the strategy of self-presentation in order to affirm his image both in people who had elected him and in people who had voted for his opponent. We also find the strategy of holding political power which is objectified with the help of the following tactics: the tactic of raising the problem and the tactic of recognizing its existence. In this way the orator lets listeners and readers know that difficulties and problems exist but he, as a reasonable politician, sees them and promises his people to cope with them.
- 5) In his State of the Union Address (2011) Obama uses both the strategy of preserving political power and the argumentative strategy of confidence and reliability. This allows him to pay attention to the actions which will lead to a successful future by realizing mistakes made in the past.

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