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Analysis of Political Speech in Linguistics: Obama's Inauguration speech

Introduction

Language is an important tool used to access knowledge as well as to influence behavior and perceptions. Words evoke emotion and cause strong psychological impacts on the audience. Linguistics is the scientific study of language and is generally descriptive. It explains and describes different language features without subjecting any judgment on whether a particular feature is used in a good or bad way. A political speech relates to matters concerning governance, as opposed to individual or organization affairs. Political speeches provide insight into the political picture of the speaker. Depending on its characteristics, a speech may either move listeners into or away from the speaker's favor. This essay is an analysis of President Barack Obama's inaugural speech in 2009. The Obama's inaugural speech relies on figurative and literal meanings amongst other linguistic devices.

Obama uses his inauguration speech to present a unifying idea about the life that all Americans expect. He repeatedly draws examples from America's past history to reinforce his theme. In his speech, he states that " The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation." He strongly encourages Americans to return to their past historical values: " our success depends - hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism - these things are old." Obama pleads with Americans to ".. begin again the work of

remaking America,” in order to overcome the economic crisis they are facing as a state.

Plot structure of Obama speech

Six major plot elements are evident in Obama’s speech. These include the opening of the speech, acknowledgement of the present economic crisis America faces, seeking of cooperation between pessimistic forces and politicians, repositioning America in the global context and finally the closing statements.

In the opening of the speech, Obama gives thanks to the electorate for entrusting him with the position of the president. He acknowledges the sacrifices made by his predecessors to bring the state up to where it currently is.

He acknowledges America’s prevailing economic challenges. He accepts that the country is in bad shape economically, and he does not promise an instant solution. Rather, he shows optimism and claims that his administration will tackle those challenges: “ But know this, America — they will be met.” Obama persists in his optimism on America’s capability to overcome the crisis. He cites scriptures and reminds the Americans of the past struggles they have overcome. He tries to solicit cooperation of his political competitors and the other pessimists in his blunt statement: “ their memories are short.” He convinces them to be cooperative and consider his agenda for the whole country. Furthermore, he talks about enacting new foreign policies, that are based on general human ideals and that will reposition America’s global involvement in the fight for justice for all.

In the closing statements, Obama states that the power to resolve problems

is vested in the people. He splendidly uses the parallel commitment of the armed forces and that of ordinary citizens in the terms of “ spirit of service” as indicator of factors that will determine the success of his regime.

Lexical categories

Use of nouns

Abstract and concrete nouns are used in Obama’s speech. Concrete nouns such as “ trust, task, and generosity” are sparingly used in the speech.

Proper nouns are used in the speech to indicate past war historical sites. For example, he uses terms such as “ Concord, Gettysburg” to refer to World War II, while the Vietnam War is referred through the term “ Khe San.”

Collective nouns are used throughout the speech. These include words such as “ America” to refer to entire American people and “ generation” to refer to the present American generation. However, more abstract nouns are used to refer to events. The abstract noun “ prosperity” is used to show how prosperous American people are and the word “ peace” to show the Americas peaceful condition. These words “ during the rising tides of prosperity and the still waters of peace” are used to illustrate Americas good times and “ gathering clouds and raging storms” to show the difficult times that influence Americans characters.

Obama also uses abstract nouns when referring to perceptions. He talks about America’s perception on “ their supremacy.” The word “ greatness” is used in “ the greatness of our country” and the phrase “ the course of American history” as a “ journey.”

Verbs

Obama use verbs to convince the audience that their future will be desirable, irrespective of the challenges they are facing. In his speech, he says: “ But know this, America – they will be met.” In addition, he repeatedly uses illocutionary acts through the use the helping verb “ will” to show determination in his administration as shown below: “ We will act” ; “ We will build the roads and bridges ”; “ We will restore science to its rightful place”; “ We will harness the sun and the winds We will transform our schools and all this we will do.”

Grammatical categories

Types of sentences

Most of the sentences in Obama’s speech are intensively compounded, comprising of clauses joined using conjunctions. Coordinating conjunctions such as “ and” are used intensively to express overloaded views, for example, “ For the world has changed, and we must change with it”; “ I thank President BushAs well as the generosity and cooperation he has shown”

Complex sentences are also used by Obama to elaborate his ideas. He uses complex sentences by joining main clauses using conjunctions and relative clause, for example, he states, “ each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet.”

Apposition

These are phrases that are non-restrictive and loose, and that intensify the conveyed meaning. In his speech, Obama says, “ The state of the economy

calls for action, bold and swift, and we will act – not only to create new jobs, but to lay a new foundation for growth."

The use of metaphor

A metaphor is a figurative language used in a speech to describe a subject by declaring that it is, on some point of comparison, the same as another unrelated object. In Obama's speech, he says, " Governments should practice the same principle as doctors: first does no harm." Obama uses this metaphor to describe the economy as sick and weakened. Citizens can gauge the overall health of the economy. Obama uses health metaphors to make it known in detail the complex economic challenges of the recession and explain the nature of the crisis. He portrays the reasons for the economic crisis as a disease, which has distributed itself in the economic body.

Obama also uses a metaphor when he compares the economy to a house. " We cannot rebuild this economy on the pile of sand. We must build our house upon a rock. We must lay a new foundation for growth and prosperity It's a foundation built upon five pillars that will grow our economy and make this new century another American century." This way Obama shows how his economic policies can revive the economy of the country. He uses five pillars as the foundation to demonstrate the five parts of his agenda that will make the audience follow his speech effectively. He connects his economic targets with some concepts in the source of his sphere of control: a new foundation, a rock and a stronger house.

Still in this speech, Obama also refers to politics as a journey, which is another exemplification of a metaphor. He says, " This is a journey we

continue today. We remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth.”

In the above metaphorical expression, the political life of America is compared to a journey, where citizens are travelling to a particular destination. A journey is characterized by challenges, excitement, and unforeseen obstacles and this ultimately predicts that the tasks ahead of Obama’s presidency are likely to be very eventful and very demanding of Americans.

He metaphorically refers to the state as a person. “ America will be there for you just as you have been there for America.” America is viewed as a moral person, to exhibit the base of ideas of equity and fairness. In addition, the state is viewed as a family, “ Because America’s commitment to its servicemen and women” This metaphor shows that, America as a nation has responsibilities the same way a family member has responsibilities to other family members.

Simile

Obama employs the use of simile in his speech to compare two things, which have something in common although, in all other aspects, they are different. He compares the people in service to the “ fallen heroes” and using the words “ just as” to foretell the common thing they share in terms of service. He says, “ They have something to tell us today, just as the fallen heroes who lie in Arlington whisper through the ages.”

Metonymy

This is where something closely related to the thing actually meant is used. It is used as a substitute for real things. For example, Obama uses metonymy

in his speech to criticize the opposing state politicians. He says, “ What the cynics fail to understand is that the ground has shifted beneath them ” Also “ We remember . Those brave Americans” to acknowledge the service people of America who have died in the line of duty.

Synecdoche

In his inauguration speech, Obama also uses a synecdoche. In the phrases, “ a sapping of confidence across our land” and “ a nagging fear that America’s decline is inevitable,” he is essentially referring to challenges that the American ideal is facing because of the hardships caused by the economic crisis which has weakened American economy. In addition, he mentions several places when referring to the war: “ For us, they fought and died, in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sahn.”

Use of allusion

As a politician, Obama uses allusion to implement some historical events, creating an evocative connection of America land pride of the past. He speaks about the “ Founding Fathers” who despite being “ faced with perils,” “ drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man.” Obama, by linking his words with the experiences and memories that America has gone through is able to evoke a public emotional response.

Repetition

In his speech, Obama uses Anaphora; a rhetorical device which involves repetition of the sequence of words at the beginning of neighboring clauses. It is used to emphasize on something or idea. He says that “ I believe that we can give our middle class relief I believe we can provide jobs for the jobless I

believe that we have a righteous wind at our backs." The word "believe" is repeatedly used to make the public believe that the difficulties they are facing will be overcome.

Antistrophe or Epiphora is also used by Obama in his speech when he ends successive sentences or clause with the same words. "That is in Israel's interest, Palestine's interest, America's interest, and the world's interest."

Here, the word "interest" is repeatedly used when he is discussing the Israel-Palestine conflict, and other countries around the world. He uses this repeatedly to portray its value and create positive effects on the public.

A three-part construction; also called the "rule of threes" is also used in this speech. This is more of a general principle rather than a stylistic device. The three-part structural construction is repeatedly used by Obama, with the purpose of developing the effect of continuity, reinforcement and sometimes creating sound bites. It is very effective when delivering a speech. For instance, Obama states, "I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you have bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors" and "Homes have been lost; jobs shed; business shuttered."

Context and cohesion

Cross-reference by pronouns

Pronouns are used many times in Obama speech as a grammatical cohesive device. Pronouns are used as follows: "Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this, America – they will be met." The pronoun "they" is used in the speech to refer to the challenges America is facing.

Ellipsis

Obama omits some words needed to complete sentence structures. Ellipsis is used as a cohesive device. This is exemplified in his speech when he states that “ Homes have been lost; jobs shed; businesses shuttered.”

Substitution of descriptive phrase

In his speech, Obama reinforces the meaning of words by repeating words from the same semantic environment, For instance, he states “ Forty-four Americans have now taken the presidential oath. The words have been spoken during rising tides of prosperity and the still waters of peace.”

The use of anthethesis

Obama uses an anthethesis to show the country’s good values. He states that the American economy is dependent on “ not just on the size of our gross domestic product, but on the reach of our prosperity” He repeatedly uses this device to warn other world leaders, “ Your people will judge you on what you can build, not on what you destroy.”

Parallel structure

Obama uses parallel structure in many phrases, for example, he states, “ all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.”

Conclusion

Throughout his speech, Obama remains humble and appreciative to the electorate for entrusting him into the office of the president. The keywords

he uses in the speech are the pronouns “ we” and “ our” to show the common heritage Americans share.

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