

TEXTUAL, INTERTEXTUAL AND RHETORICAL FEATURES IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE: THE CASE OF PRESIDENT OBAMA IN EUROPE

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Abstract: A political discourse contains some features that must be constant in them to be recognized and understood by the audience as such but, at the same time, must fulfill the purpose of transmitting the message aimed in that venue with a personal and original style. This is commonly done through layers of direct or subtle content. One of the most important political orators in the twentieth century is undoubtedly President Barack Obama. Even his detractors recognize the high level of his speeches. The aim of this paper is to do a comprehensive analysis of the speech uttered by the President of the United States at Strasbourg, France in a very delicate political moment to reveal the rhetorical and intertextual means used to fulfill the purpose. The reason for his visit to Europe in 2009 was to explain the needs for the collaboration in the Afghan war in a moment in which Europe was against this participation.

Key words: political discourse, rhetorical analysis, intertextuality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Politics as discourse is a constantly redefined area. David Bell says that “we are all political beings in our everyday life” (Bell, 1975:x) and adds that if politics is communication, we must study who talks to whom and what they say (1975:93). Schäffner (1997:1) added that political language, political discourse and political text themselves are vague terms and that political speeches are not a homogeneous genre. Instead, there is a range of subtypes determined by the particular communicative situation. They have in common that politicians try to get some goals in their development and our aim is to explore the ways of language, how they simplify and assist to create this function (Lakoff, 1990:4).

Stated this, it is not difficult to guess that political discourse study is a discipline that reveals more information than a first reading can offer. The way of saying, the use of some adjectives in specific matters, the examples offered to explain a topic are some tools used in order to help to gain that purpose. But the first problem we face when analyzing a political speech is either it should be taken as an example of spoken or written discourse or both. This subcategory of political discourse has had different denominations: prepared speech, non-spontaneous oration, or spoken monologue, and comprises three characteristics: it has been delivered to a large audience, it has been prepared beforehand, and the audience has to process that talk as being delivered.

I base my research on the text analysis offered by T. Locke (2004), updated with P. Simpson’s contribution (2010) as this frame bases the study not only on the linguistic elements but also on the text structure (Simpson, 2010:45). From the diagram offered by Simpson we have selected the elements found in our text:

TEXT ANALYSIS

Vocabulary	Grammar	Cohesion	Intertextuality
Formal/ Informal	Modality	Connectives	Allusion
Metaphors	Transitivity	Argumentation	Quotation
Wording	Types of verbs	Parallelism	Reference
Expressive values	Pronouns		
	Voice		

Figure 1. Locke’s and Simpson’s adapted text analysis model.

With the vocabulary analysis we shall go over the condition of the text: whether it is optimistic or pessimistic, whether words with the same meaning are used and if they are frequent, the role of metaphors, i.e. if they are used

with a hopeful purpose or describing the critical situation lived. To put in a nutshell, concluding the implicit purpose of the speech with a first estimation. Vocabulary will also be seen in the chapter dedicated to cohesion.

Syntactic analysis will be based on verbs: voice, modality and transitivity. On the other hand, the use of the pronouns, i.e., whether the use of “we” implies “you and I” or “Americans and I” and others; the different uses of “you”, whether he makes reference to the audience, France, NATO or Europe. In the third section, we shall overview the style in the speech and the use of parallelisms, argumentation and connectives are also included.

And, finally, we shall analyze the intertextuality, including the role of elements like presupposition and implicature. With them, we shall come across the level of knowledge President Obama has of the country, continent and their problems. Intertextuality has been defined as “the presence of a text in another text” (Genette 1983) but the first author who used the term was Kristeva (1967). Bajtin and Kristeva opened a door to all the researchers considered minor and that dealt with the source of the texts. This does not mean that the concept was not used before her paper but she provided for the umbrella category under which a multiplicity of approaches and concepts could be subsumed rewardingly (Hebel, 1989:1). Among these concepts we can name allusion, quotation and reference.

Allusion has been defined as any implicit, indirect or hidden reference and quotation is the exact reproduction of the words said by another person. A quotation is easily distinguishable as there are several means to identify them: quotation marks, commas, some verbs, and so on but in the case of the allusion it is not so straightforward.

Allusion deals with information from other texts although they are not said literally. Allusion has also been defined as the “evocative manifestation of intertextual relationships” (Hebel, in Plett 1991:135) or “a device for linking texts” (Ben-Porat, in Hebel, 1989). They provide further attributes and connotations of their referents that may also contribute to the semantic enrichment of the alluding text (Hebel, in Plett 1991:139). Recognizing allusions and quotations is an interesting test to interpret the reasons for the use of them. Literary allusions in novels are enriching but in political speeches are revealing. With it we describe three elements:

1. Author’s overall knowledge
2. Intention or illocutionary act
3. How audience accepts it or perlocutionary effect

The debate over the conscious interference of an allusion in a text or whether this is just a coincidence is constant. Lastly, references name well-known historical or social events but without quoting them.

All texts contain intertextuality as writers have been readers before so the connections between texts may be relatively evident but always present. Given this, it is quite impossible that an author detaches the background and previous knowledge from the literary creation. Another interesting point is to conclude what we get when analyzing the intertextuality of a text because intertextuality not only reveals us an important knowledge of the author but also of the work because it establishes a link between a text and the history and society in which this text is generated (Bengoechea, 1997, 6). In a way, the text has a twofold coherence: an intratextual one which guarantees the immanent integrity of the text, and an intertextual one which creates structural relations between itself and other texts. (Plett, 1991:5)

All in all, by examining these properties we are fulfilling the two-fold purpose of this paper; i.e., carrying out an analysis of the text from a discursive viewpoint and, secondly, with this evidence determining the range of interpersonal function in the message.

2. CORPUS

The research done in this paper is based on the analysis of the speech reported by Barack Obama at Strasbourg, France in 2009 to define the rhetorical elements used when he leads to a European audience. The purpose of this trip was to convince the Europeans of the need to increase the number of troops and resources aimed to solve the military conflict in Afghanistan. This speech has an uncommon characteristic in this type of texts as questions are allowed after the remarks. In the present work we shall just take into consideration the speech itself. Given this, we must state that two concepts are central in this text: crossroads and boundaries.

Certainly, he uses *crossroads* as a concept that describes Strasbourg geographically and as a consequence of living in an increasingly connected world. This has some advantages but Obama focuses on the drawbacks as it implies the spread of nuclear weapons, fear and want. On the other hand, this speech is based on the need of *boundaries* between Europe and America in order to get important and global results. He makes an overview of the events that link both continents since Marshall Plan and the need to continue with these ties. After that, he talks

about the reasons of this visit: to renew America’s and Europe’s partnership, to explain the reasons why they are in fight with Afghanistan and, thirdly, to claim for more support. He continues with a hopeful ending.

3. DISCUSSION

a. Vocabulary

Nouns and adjectives represent 24% of the words in the speech, being the number of adjectives used in comparative form quite impressive. Thus, we have adjectives like *smaller, broader, closer, sooner, better, harder, stronger, richer and fuller* in comparative form but also others in superlative like *furthest, nearest, the strongest, the darkest, the most visible* to provide intensity to the message. Added to this, there are strong adjectives that, though not used in comparative degree, have also a high emphasis; within the positive adjectives we can name *wonderful, important, enormous, plenty, unprecedented, lasting, confident, fundamental, substantial, revolutionary, tremendous or incredible*. The sample in the negative side is lesser, but we can read adjectives like *reckless, dismissive, derisive, painful, atomic, stale, improbable or impossible*.

With reference to nouns, the most repeated are *America* or *United States of America* (23 times), *Europe* (15 times), the word *world* and synonyms (16 times). Less frequent but also important are *challenge, effort* and *nations* (8 times each), *Afghanistan* (6 times) and *NATO* and *opportunity* (5 times).

If we analyze the words from a semantic perspective we can see that the negative or pessimistic words outbalance the positive. Obama also names lots of countries and towns during his exposition. We can see this in next diagram:

POSITIVE MEANING= PROGRESS	NEGATIVE MEANING= GLOBAL THREATS	COUNTRIES/ TOWNS
Prosperity, discoveries, alliances, partnerships, free, fair trade, civilian and military support and assistance, life free from fear, firm, faith, confident	Proliferation / spread of nuclear weapons, theft of nuclear material, extermination, pollution, terrorists, failure of the banking system, recession, climate change, failures, resentments, disagreements, anti-Americanisms, barriers to commerce, trade wars, Al Qaeda network / attack, storms, misery, famine, drought, atomic cloud	Strasbourg, Prague, Boston, Beijing, Arctic, London, New York, Florida, Iceland, France, China, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Croatia, Albania, Washington, South Africa

Figure 2. Sample of the vocabulary used.

As said above, negative words outnumber the positive ideas and those hopeful messages open and close the speech. Too, there exist an important number of neutral words but we can see in this analysis that the exposition has a clear tendency to face problems more than expressing goodness of the situation. On the other hand, the long list of towns and countries around the world reveal how globalization affects everywhere.

The most recurrent words help us to understand what the topics in which Obama wants to reinforce his message are. Thus, we have *relationship, dangers, attack, challenge, opportunity, mutual* and *common* used with *prosperity, security, humanity* and *values*. Some of these are employed with a synonym, being the most common *combat* and *attack, dangers* and *threats, alliance, partnership* and the expression *come together* and, lastly, *assistance* and *support*. Hyponymy is used mainly with the words that reflect dangers or threats. The examples gathered are *spread of nuclear weapons, pollution, terrorism, speculation of bankers, drug trafficking* and *poverty*.

These speeches have in common the explanation of ideas through examples with two purposes, to be easily understandable and to embellish in a way the message. To put it another way, the elaborative collocation of words has examples throughout the text. Just to name one, he starts his dissertation explaining what he means by Strasbourg being a city at the crossroads, denoting an important knowledge of the town. This image also has a metaphorical interpretation as we are facing historical crosswords in the field of global security with the Afghan war.

On the other hand, antonym is expressed with opposites as *war* and *peace, good* and *bad, civilian* and *military, rebuild* and *decimate* and, lastly, *forge* and *break down*. The positive side of the last two examples is authorized by the United States of America but, taken them as a whole, examples are not very prolific.

Added to this, metaphors appear along the text with two main biases: hopeful and threatening. The first group is composed of those poetical images that talk about a better world. For instance, “We will provide new markets, we will drive the growth of the future”, “Our fates are tied together”, “When future generations look back on ours” and “We have to open our minds and open our hearts”. Secondly, the images that reflect a threatening, war-like and dangerous atmosphere are bigger in number. Some of them are: “They were born out of the blood of the first half of the 20th Century”, “NATO is equipped and capable of facing down the threats and challenges of this new era”, “Pollution that is slowly killing our planet” and “Rolling back the tide of a warming planet is a responsibility that we have to ourselves”. The idea that there is a danger over all us explained in the climate change and the Al Qaeda threaten is spread throughout the intervention.

Next element to be analyzed is wording. By wording I mean the different words a meaning can be worded (Locke, 2004; Fairclough, 1992); they cannot be considered synonyms as the author doesn’t try to express exact concepts but to enrich an image, an idea. I have found five main topics. The first one is interconnection. Obama emphasizes the idea that we live in a globalized world and that work must be done together. So, we find terms like: *Connected, relationship, communications, interdependence, shared security and shared history*. In the second group, called threats, the number of examples is bigger and occupies the most important part of the account. Some words would be: *new dangers, forces, extermination, nuclear weapons, pollution, terrorists, proliferation of nuclear weapons, threats, blood, long twilight struggles, war, attack, differences, disagreements and failure*. The third group is not very wide and comprises the words related to crisis: *reckless speculation of bankers, economic crisis, failure of the banking system, recession, greatest economic crisis*. Next group covers the consequences of the global warming: *climate change, ice caps, weather patterns, storm, misery, famine, drought, warming planet*. And, lastly, the fifth group is dedicated to a hopeful message. So, we find words like: *lasting prosperity, hope, success, true partnerships, sturdy alliances, allies, common purpose, global effort and union*.

Next element analyzed is expressive values. They are those utterances said in order to create an intense atmosphere around the subject matter. Although not frequent they are named along the whole speech. For example, he starts greeting in English, French and German, which is warmly welcome by the audience. A second example is in the sentence “Now, there is plenty of blame to go around for what has happened, and the United States certainly shares it – shares blame for what has happened”. This confession is not common in a speech and has also positive effect in the audience as the orator creates an atmosphere of trustfulness. Another example would be “they [the buildings] were born out of the blood of the first half of the 20th century and the resolve of the second.” This metaphorical image although strong as blood reminds here dead people is hopeful. He also asks some questions as “Why are we still in Afghanistan?” as if he were reading the audience’s minds and, lastly, “There is no duty more painful than signing a letter to the family of somebody who has died in war” showing again his human side.

b. Grammar

Talking about grammar we shall start with modal verbs. They qualify a proposition in various ways. In our text the use is little, only 77 times in the whole text, taking into account the negative forms. The most common is the modal verb “must” (22 times) with the meaning of obligation and need to perform a task. The second in use is “can” (17 times in positive sentences, and 29 if we take the negative structures too) denoting possibility. If we take into consideration “will” as a modal verb (Collins, 2010:75) this has been used 9 times and “would” 7 times. As we can see, in a text of around 3.000 words the used of modal verbs is reduced to the minimum and always in simple sentences.

With regard to tenses it is remarkable the vast amount of simple tenses that have been used along the text. I shall express the frequency in next diagram:

Structure/ Tense	Form	Number
Verb to be	am	3
	is	57
	are	8
	was	7
Simple present		113
Simple past		29
Future	will	11
Present perfect		38
Present continuous		13
Past continuous		1
Past perfect		1
Imperative	let	3
	understand	1
	Know	1

Figure 3. Frequency of tenses in the text.

The short variety of tenses and the high frequency of the verb “to be” in simple present and present tense reflect a lack of grammatical sophistication in a conference addressed mostly to young people. It can also be seen in the use of imperatives, also scarce and without a commanding intention but clarifying. Past tenses are used to explain the reasons why we are in the current situation and the simple present denotes today’s problems.

Regarding the pronouns “you” and “we” it is remarkable the little frequency of “you” as a subject (only 4 times) and object (8 times). In the first case “you” makes reference to three different addressees: One, the audience and Strasbourg: “you straddled many kingdoms and many cultures” and “You served as a center of industry”. As an object he refers, firstly, to the audience using three structures that reflect three intentions: “Speak to you”, “speak with you” and “hear from you”; secondly, to Europe: “America joined with you” and, thirdly, to young people.

On the other hand, it is impressive the times he uses the first person plural personal pronoun “we”; at least, 90 times and referring to different subjects. I have found 12 different interpretations. When he says “what we thought was important was for me to have an opportunity” the pronoun may make reference to the team that works with him; but when he says “we can learn about each other” is talking about the individual people in the audience and himself as he allows to be asked questions at the end of his remarks; thirdly, in the sentence “we find ourselves at a crossroads” is not mentioning just the audience but everybody, all of us. Fourth, in “we did not act sooner to shape our future” is referring to the governments of the developed countries from the recent past and present. Fifth, in “we ensured our shared security when 12 of our nations” Obama is talking about Europe and America. Next, in the sentence “We have begun that effort” is referring to G20 and seventh, he mentions just America when says “we will provide new markets, we will drive the growth of the future” but, later, he says “And as we restore our common prosperity, we must stand for our common security” addressing NATO and America. Ninth, in “they will be able to say that we did our part to make this world more peaceful” he is talking about the present governments, in general. Tenth, he also mentions Iran and NATO (included America) when says “I’ve sent a clear message to the leaders and peoples of Iran that while we have real differences, we also have mutual interests”. Eleventh, at the end of the intervention, he addresses America and France when says “we can need sacrifice them for expedience’s sake” and, lastly, he refers to the rest of the world or representatives in general in opposition to young people “It is you who must ultimately decide what we do with this incredible moment of history” and dedicates the last ten times he uses the pronoun to address again to “you and I”.

Lastly, passive voice is used 22 times and in 8 of them the agent is named. Curiously enough, in this case the message is negative and the agent represents the origin of the problem. In a way, he doesn’t want to emphasize the authorship. For instance, “Strasbourg has been attacked and occupied and claimed by the warring nations of this continent”, “A continent that had been decimated by war”, “We were attacked by an al Qaeda network”, “Each time we find ourselves [...], paralyzed by worn debates and stole thinking”, “Young people are unburdened by the biases or prejudices of the past”. In other occasion the verb “to be” is omitted: “we just emerged from an era marked by irresponsibility” and in two more occasions agents are omitted as the orator wants to emphasize the subject: “I understand how many people and nations have been left behind by the global economy” and “our moral authority is derived from the fact that generations ...”. The remaining 13 times when the passive voice is used “everybody” or “governments” could be the agent with the exception of “two rivers are joined here” and “all of those who will inherit God’s creation long after we are gone” in which the agent should have to be considered in religious terms.

c. Cohesion

Literary resources are not frequently used and we can name just a few examples of anaphora: “*there’s no decision more difficult, there’s no duty more painful, than signing a letter to the family of somebody who has died in war*”, “We do this with a clear purpose: *to root the terrorists who threaten all of us, to train the Afghan people...*, and *to quicken the day when our troops come home*”, “whether nations can come *together* in *common* purpose on behalf of our *common* security. That’s what we did *together* in the 20th century”, “*That’s why* we applaud France’s decision... *That’s why* we welcome Croatia and Albania into the fold. And *that’s why* we must ensure that NATO is equipped...”, “*America must do more. Europe must do more. China and India must do more*”.

d. Intertextuality

Intertextuality is reflected in the use of quotations and references. In this text we can read a quotation from Robert Kennedy when he said in South Africa to a crowd of students: “It is a revolutionary world that we live in, and thus it is young people who must take the lead”. The obligatory questions are: why Robert Kennedy? Why in South Africa? And why students? The third question is the easiest one as he is talking at Strasbourg to a group of young people. The second question could have the answer in the fact that this same year he will visit Ghana and wants to establish a global link between both continents. Even with this reasoning, the quotation is a bit forced. And relating to the first question, Robert Kennedy was John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s brother and a civil rights activist who was

also assassinated before becoming a probable President of the United States. He was a great leader for the young people in America in a decade in which students were active protesters. Quotations are never used arbitrarily but with a purpose. In this reference Robert Kennedy believes in young people. He was a young victim of a conspiracy when killed; President Obama is also young and is addressing to young people in a delicate historical moment.

Another quotation makes reference to the founding documents of France and America and the coincidences among both of them. In America they are “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” and in France “liberté, égalité, fraternité”. These words are easily recognized by the audience and again Obama is creating ties between both countries naming common values.

Added to this and with respect to references, the first example is at the very beginning of the text when he names three remarkable citizens from Strasbourg as they are Goethe, Pasteur and Gutenberg: “where Goethe studied and Pasteur taught and Gutenberg imagined his printing press”. These are remarkable and well-known scientists and personalities. With it Obama is expressing the cultural level of a town where big advances were carried out and how they meant a revolutionary development for the world.

The second reference corresponds to a historical circumstance, as it is the Cold War: “even with the Cold War now over, the spread of nuclear weapons or the theft of nuclear material could lead to the extermination of any city on the planet”. He admits that the threat that existed with the Cold War is over but the danger is now the same or even worse. In a way, we have not improved or increased our security. As a consequence, the intention is to create a fear-like atmosphere in order to justify the need of a war in Afghanistan.

The third fact is the Marshall Plan, which helped to rebuild Europe thanks to the United States. Again, he reminds the audience the positive determination that America has shown to Europe historically and also the creation of the NATO as an alliance that had the purpose of being defended by any attack: “an attack on one would be viewed as an attack on all”. Next reference is World War II: “We are confronting the greatest economic crisis since World War II” and “As it was in the darkest days after World War II, when a continent lay in ruins and an atomic cloud had settled over the world, we must make the journey together.”

4. CONCLUSIONS

Taken as a whole, this can be considered a un-Obama speech as it does not fit the register we are used to. Traditionally, President Obama’s speeches are positive and express hope even in hard times. In this case he focuses on terror and threats. The text does not reflect a clear connection among ideas. It jumps from the need of unity to the different goals in this trip; all this, interlinked with other secondary ideas. The tone is pessimistic and the main purpose is to explain the drawbacks of globalization and the reasons why America and NATO have attacked Afghanistan. The relationship between America and Europe in this historical moment defined by him as “crossroads” is linked with the town of Strasbourg.

The reference to the United States of America as the author of helpful assistance like the Plan Marshall is constant but the allusion to Robert Kennedy, an American that belonged to the most famous family in the United States is a bit forced by circumstances. In a way he is equating the youngsters of South Africa with those of France as enthusiasm has no barriers, but at the same time reflects some lack of spontaneity as the character and the setting quoted have not much relationship with the current event.

Dealing with the vocabulary used, words related to global problems and threats and the need of a stronger alliance between the two continents reveal the addressee of the speech, which is not only the audience but all European nations. Obama demands a more active role in the fight against terrorism. The atmosphere he creates is of threat and danger in order to justify the military intervention. Obama uses very plain English with direct messages. In this speech he is leading mostly to young people and tries to approach them through this style. As a consequence, he is more concerned with the message than with structures and for that reason grammar is simple and repetitive. Despite the pessimistic tone, the negative adjectives are not frequent although nouns are. Moreover, as we can see in figure 2, the positive words and need of collaboration opens the speech and a hopeful message closes it. Added to this, every threat named in the body of the message is mixed with the countless times the United States have offered help to Europe.

Moving on to something else, the wide use of the pronoun “we” referring to different addressees may be done purposely to involve everybody indirectly in the solution of the problems or to reflect that everybody is responsible of the problems that threaten the world, not just America. As we have seen in previous chapter, the use is tricky in some of the sentences and, contrary to what was said above, reflects a careful study of its use.

References are mostly related to war or conflicts. He names them to make the audience understand that the United States of America is not to be blamed of the current situation but historically it has happened permanently so the final purpose of the speech is to justify and explain the war with Afghanistan in a very pessimistic way. The final message addressed to the youth just reflects a sign of hope but with a remarkable lack of literary resources when addressing them.

Lastly and due to the previous reasons, it seems that the intratextual role does not seem to fit naturally as the first purpose of the speech is not to express a brilliant discourse but to explain the reasons of such an embarrassing event as it is to support a war.

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