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ON THE LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Abstract: The present-day public communication space is dominated by the language of politics, thus allowing political discourse to both influence and become one of the components of contemporary culture.

The paper aims at discussing the typical linguistic features of a sample of political speeches given by the major actors in American political campaigns in the year 2012. Attention will be given to the use of rhetorical devices, which serve as examples of both the figurative use of words and their constituent part of political language – used here as an instrument to increase power and to suggestively, and most frequently, subjectively, convey knowledge about the world. Though the typical linguistic features of political speeches have thus far been the focus of many linguists and researchers during their analysis of this phenomenon of discourse, not much attention has been given to establish a comparison of the rhetorical devices used by American politicians to win the hearts of a specific political party voter, i.e. a Democrat or a Republican.

Key words: political discourse, language of politics, rhetorical devices, American campaigns, linguistic features.

Introduction

The following paper attempts to discuss the linguistic features of American political discourse. Attention is paid to the linguistic macro-level, i.e. the function of a text and an examination of the linguistic devices that were chosen by the major participants of the 2012 political campaign. This perspective assumes an examination of rhetorical devices, rather than features belonging to the micro-level, such as word choice and syntactic structures. The theoretical framework has been designed considering the theoretical implications derived from late 20th and early 21st century research concerning political discourse which was conducted, among

others, by Paul Chilton. The methodology of this study follows the principles of qualitative research, and was based on a discourse analysis of authentic source materials of two speeches delivered in the 2012 American presidential election by the Democratic and Republican candidates – Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, respectively. Both speeches were delivered on the same occasion – acceptance of the nomination for President of the United States.

Considerations concerning political discourse

According to Aristotle, *Man is by nature a political animal* (1.2.1253a2) and *He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: his is no part of a state* (1.2.1253a28–30).

Chilton believes that language is *the universal capacity of humans in all societies to communicate*, while the notion of politics is frequently defined as *the art of governance* (1998: 668). The language of politics as discourse is an area that is constantly being redefined and expanded. Schäffner (1997:1) notices that such expressions as political language, political discourse and political text are all vague terms. Apart from the concept of political language, literature on the subject operates on such terms as public speech, the language of public persuasion, public discourse and political (ideological) discourse. These terms are often used interchangeably. It is also a commonly shared idea that politicians all over the world enrich their language by using various linguistic strategies to achieve their objective of winning more votes. This often involves manipulative application of the language; thus, such a strategy can be considered an influential instrument of political rhetoric because political discourse is primarily focused on persuading people to take specified actions, to make crucial political decisions or, as for political campaigns, to convince the potential electorate.

The language of political campaigns

The language used in political campaigns has certain characteristic features which differentiate it from other varieties of language use. The language of political campaign is meant to be persuasive. It is embodied in propaganda and rhetoric. Politicians incorporate linguistic devices in their speeches to persuade the electorate to vote for them and their parties. Their aim is, among others, to inform, persuade, advertise, issue their rules, and legislate.

Szanto sees propaganda as *a specific form of activated ideology* (1978:6). He argues that propaganda is one of the manifestations of ideology that involves *the selling of specific concepts* (ibidem). According to Longe and Ofuani, *the sole purpose of propaganda is to misinform and mislead and to consciously indoctrinate* (1996:17).

Propaganda aims at a deliberate slanting of facts and arguments, as well as displays of symbols, in ways the propagandist thinks will have the most effect. The propagandist may intentionally deny relevant facts and try to distract the attention of the people he/she is trying to sway from his/her own convictions or beliefs. In this way, Szanto (1978:5) argues that propaganda could, on the one hand, be a total *falsehold*, and, on the other, be an entirely valid representation of reality or truth. Politicians attempt to persuade their audience by means of expressions that may damage or destroy the vision of their opponent and discredit him/her through a deliberate manipulation of language.

The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (Richards, J. C., Platt, J. T., & Weber, H. 1985) defines rhetoric as *the study of style through grammatical and lexical analysis*. It is, therefore, *the art or talent by which discourse is adapted to its ends*. Rhetoric is aimed at persuading through the beauty of language, while propaganda frequently includes a negative manipulation of language.

The language of political rhetoric in its classical meaning should be envisaged through such areas as ideology in linguistic theory. According to Luke (1998: 366), the notion of ideology refers to the system of ideas, principles and practices which operate in the interests of a certain social class or cultural group. Descriptive linguists see ideology as an object that has a material social existence in language and discourse.

Rhetoric is the study of the practice of effective communication, the art of persuasion which is intended to win points or to get people what politicians want.

Speeches during presidential campaigns are very special. As numerous scholars stress, presidential rhetoric affects people's beliefs and attitudes and has the power to inspire. In order to be successful, the rhetoric should be skillful and it must be used appropriately to the situation. It was Lakoff (2013) who distinguished political speech from political action. The author also states that there is a difference between talking to the public and winning the election and underlines the fact that political speeches should not be an addition to political actions; rather, they are central to the campaigns. Lakoff claims that *changing the public political discourse also changes public understanding, leading to new demands for political actions* (2013).

Ambiguities around the methods of analysing the language of political discourse

Schäffner (1997:1) finds political speeches an inhomogeneous genre. The first problem when analysing political discourse is that it should be treated as an example of either spoken or written media, or both at the same time. According to Ferenčík (2004) *it is useful to treat speaking and writing as two cultural-social technologies separately*. However, the existence of a strict line between the two media has often

been denied causing them to evolve into two complementary channels of conveying messages. Both speech and writing have some linguistic characteristics.

According to Ferenčík (2004) speech can be characterized, among others, by occurrence of means of exophoric reference and expressions of temporal and spatial deixis, looser structure, repetition, rephrasing, filler phrases, hesitations, repairs, reformulations, units of language marked off by intonation and pause, ellipsis, self-corrections, lexical sparsity, generalized vocabulary, slang, colloquialisms, qualifying expressions, and interjections. Writing, on the other hand, is cautiously organized. It possesses a certain organization, complex syntactic structures, elaborate grammatical and lexical cohesion, complete structures, rich vocabulary and, as a consequence, higher information density (Ferenčík 2004).

The opposition – speech versus writing can be problematic. The language of campaigns, including inaugural addresses, can be associated with a prepared, non-spontaneous speech, or spoken monologue. All are delivered to a wide audience and frequently prepared beforehand.

The balance between spoken and oral discourse is often disrupted. Given the main feature of political discourse, i.e. the fact that the language is intended to pass the required information to the electorate in a convincing and appealing manner, the focus of attention should be placed on such rhetorical devices and strategies which are able to convey the most by means of the least. A well-crafted metaphor can sometimes tip the balance towards victory in a campaign battle; yet, if not followed by other micro-level features, this may not bring the expected outcome, as micro-level components of an utterance also possess attract-deter potential.

Jonathan Charteris-Black (2014:xii) illustrates the purpose of understanding the tools used in speech-making in the following way:

(...) someone who reads a cookery book is neither guaranteed a gourmet result nor will necessarily enjoy their food more; however, knowledge of the ingredients and the stages of preparing a meal is more likely to produce good results.

Knowledge of the tools and their application can positively influence people's skills and make them more persuasive in their everyday life, but most importantly, it can help to decipher the language of politics that is often complicated and full of concealed messages.

Rhetorical strategies and devices as tools in the presidential campaign of 2012

As was noticed by Oberacker (2009), the rhetorical tools used in the first part of a campaign differ from those which are used later. As a matter of fact, rhetoric is often used from the starting point of an election and a very important part of it is called *transitional rhetoric*.

Stuckey (2010) notices that *transition* has such stages as: the early transition, the middle transition, the new presidency and the final transition.

The process of campaigning involves a great number of tools. George Lakoff stated that the language of political campaigns should underline values (2014). In his book *Metaphor, Morality, and Politics, Or, Why Conservatives Have Left Liberals In the Dust*, Lakoff (1995) also noticed that *Being Good is Being Upright, Being Bad is Being Low, Doing Evil is Falling, Evil is a Force, Morality is Strength*, etc. However, the use of particular devices largely depends on the context and the type of community the speech is addressed to; thus, they are chosen to suit current needs. Politicians appeal to the audience's heart through different rhetorical skills, applying strategies and rhetorical devices. According to some scholars, political communication is a process that becomes a part of social communication. It is addressed to the whole nation or society and uses all available communication channels. Public speeches are directed at a wide audience and enable interaction with the recipients of the message and opposing political systems sometimes use similar language tools to achieve their goals.

One of the strategies applied by both candidates was autobiography. There is a tendency among political candidates to present their life story as a struggle against poverty or hardship. The satirist Stephen Colbert noticed that, to appeal to an audience, it is advisable to show your modest origins. Obama frequently reminded the electorate of his and his grandparent's story – that his father came from Kenya, his mother came from Kansas, that his grandfather was as a soldier in Patton's Army and grandmother *worked on a bomber assembly line* (Obama 2012).

A major part of Mitt Romney's convention speech was his autobiography. He talks about his family and shares how he appreciates *the gift of unconditional love* (Romney 2012) that his parents gave him and his siblings. By sharing his story, Romney was looking to find a connection with the voters and appeal to as many people as possible, especially those with a strong sense of family and who have children.

Autobiography is only one of many rhetorical strategies and devices used by Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in their convention speech in 2012. A list of rhetorical devices¹ and examples of their use by Barack Obama² and Mitt Romney³ are presented below:

ALLITERATION (several consecutive words presenting a repetition of the same sound):

¹ The definitions of rhetorical devices are based on Ian McKnezie's *Sixty-Nine Tools: Sixty-Nine Useful Rhetorical Devices Which Will Assist in Vastly Improving Your Presentations and Writing*.

² The full transcript of Barack Obama's speech is available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/07/remarks-president-democratic-national-convention>.

³ The full transcript of Mitt Romney's speech is available at: <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/08/30/transcript-mitt-romney-speech-at-rnc.html>.

Barack Obama: *My opponent and his running mate are new to foreign policy, but from all that we've seen and heard, they want to take us back to an era of **blustering** and **blundering** that cost America so dearly.*

Mitt Romney: *But his promises gave way to **disappointment** and **division**.*

ANADIPLSIS (the last word or phrase of a sentence is the beginning of another):

Barack Obama: ***You elected me to tell you the truth.** And **the truth** is, it will take more than a few years for us to solve challenges that have built up over decades.*

Mitt Romney: *It doesn't take a special government commission to tell us **what America needs.** **What America needs** is jobs, lots of jobs.*

ANAPHORA (deliberate and conscious repetition of the first part of a sentence to evoke certain emotions):

Barack Obama: ***We don't want** handouts for people who refuse to help themselves, and **we don't want** bailouts for banks that break the rules.*

Mitt Romney: ***This president can** ask us to be patient. **This president can** tell us it was someone else's fault. **This president can** tell us that the next four years will get it right.*

ANTISTROPHE (deliberate repetition of words or phrases at the end of consecutive clauses):

Barack Obama: *The young woman I met at a science fair who won national recognition for her biology research while living with her family at a homeless shelter - she **gives me hope.***

*The autoworker who won the lottery after his plant almost closed, but kept coming to work every day, and bought flags for his whole town, and one of the cars that he built to surprise his wife - he **gives me hope.***

Mitt Romney: *It's both how **we live our lives** and why **we live our lives.***

ANTITHESIS (incorporation of contrasting ideas in one sentence):

Barack Obama: *On every issue, the choice you face **won't be just between two candidates or two parties.** It will be a choice between two different paths for America.*

Mitt Romney: *Family income has fallen by \$4,000, but health insurance premiums are higher.*

CLIMAX (special arrangement of words or phrases used to increase an importance of them):

Barack Obama: *Thank you, God bless you, and may God bless these United States.*

Mitt Romney: *We're a nation of immigrants, we're the **children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren** of the ones who wanted a better life.*

EROTEMA (a question):

Mitt Romney: (...) *if you felt that excitement when you voted for Barack Obama, shouldn't feel that way now, that he is President Obama?*

METAPHOR (describes things that are not similar by asserting that in some way they are):

Mitt Romney: *President Obama has **thrown** allies like Israel **under the bus** (...)*

PARALLELISM (some parts of sentences are created by means of a similar pattern):

Barack Obama: *Terrorist plots must be disrupted. Europe's crisis must be contained.*

Mitt Romney: *Our children deserve it. Our nation depends on it. The peace and freedom of the world require it.*

POLYSYNDETON (the use of several conjunctions in succession):

Barack Obama: (...) *any more than are welfare recipients, **or** corporations, **or** unions, **or** immigrants, **or** gays, **or** any other group we're told to blame for our troubles.*

Mitt Romney: *The strength **and** power **and** goodness **of** America has always been based on the strength **and** power **and** goodness of our communities, our families, **and** our faiths.*

SYMPLOCE (a word or phrase is repeated both at the beginning and the end of consecutive clauses):

Barack Obama: *And if you share that faith with me – if you share that hope with me (...)*

Mitt Romney: *When it comes to the school your child will attend, every parent should **have a choice**, and every child should **have a chance**.*

TRICOLON (a list of three words, phrases or clauses):

Barack Obama: *My grandparents were given the chance **to go to college, buy their first home, and fulfill the basic bargain at the heart of America’s story** (...)*

Mitt Romney: *The **strength and power and goodness** of America (...)*

The frequency of occurrence of the above mentioned rhetorical devices in both candidates’ speeches is presented in *Table 1.* and *Table 2.*

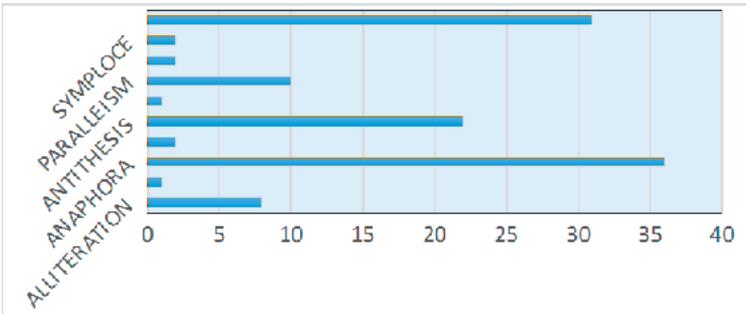


Table 1. Rhetorical devices used in Barack Obama’s speech at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, September 6, 2012.

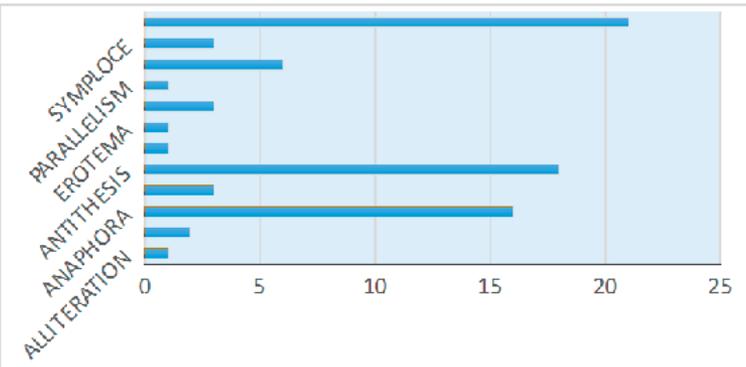


Table 2. Rhetorical devices used in Mitt Romney’s speech at the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida, August 30, 2012.

Summarizing, the two speeches under study provide a good material to examine the linguistic features of the American political discourse. They were delivered on the same occasion and are similar in length. The number of words used by Barack

Obama (4446) is comparable to that used by Mitt Romney (4196). Both candidates relied on similar rhetorical devices while giving their convention speeches. Most frequent in Obama's speech were anaphora (36), tricolon (31) and antithesis (22), while Romney's speech mostly included tricolon (21), antithesis (18) and anaphora (16). Obama used 10 rhetorical devices 115 times in his speech, while Romney used 12 different devices 76 times.

The research shows that Obama used rhetorical devices more frequently, yet it was Romney who applied the greater variety of devices. Erotema and metaphor were not present in Obama's speech.

Conclusions

Oratory has always played an important role in politics. Skillful politicians rely on a variety of rhetorical devices and strategies to evoke affiliative responses from their audiences, thus emphasizing their perception as popular and charismatic leaders.

As was proven in the study, the rhetorical devices utilized by Obama and Romney were similar thus suggesting a distinctive cross-party style of American political discourse. As a result, a further conclusion can be drawn. In order to successfully define the elements that constitute for political victory of one party, an additional *tertium comparationis* should be found. The fact is that the two dominant parties in the United States differ in certain aspects concerning tax policy, social issues, labor and free trade, social programs, health care, foreign policy, energy issues, the environment, education as well as crime and capital punishment. Their policy is targeted at different electorates; hence it is essential to examine rhetorical devices used in utterances making exact reference to critical political issues instead of examining the entire speeches. For this reason, the issue of the use of rhetorical devices in political speeches should be further examined, but in reference to its most powerful tool, i.e. the promises that politicians make. A political promise can heavily influence the audience and its responses, yet rhetorical devices help in conveying messages. A positive response can lead to electoral success thus studies concerning the use of devices and the frequency of their occurrence help to assess the relationship between audience responses and political victory.

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