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THE USE OF LEXICAL DEVICES IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

MAHMOUD QUDAH

Princess Sumaya University for Technology  
Mq@psut.edu.jo



ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings of a study that aims primarily at uncovering the lexical cohesive devices employed by the American president Barack Hussein Obama in his Inaugural Address of January, 2009. The findings of the study revealed that he made preponderant use of lexical reiteration with all its components namely: partial and total repetition, synonymy, superordinate, general word and the various shades of oppositeness in language use. This was coupled with the use of collocational bonds. However, the primacy was for total repetition and antonymy. Clearly, it was discovered that president Obama in his political discourse had particular intentions and aims which were embodied in convincing, and swaying his audience to his side on various issues, subjects or particular demands. To do so, he used a properly crafted, well- articulated, tightly knit coherent body of discourse rich in lexical cohesive ties and other linguistic elements.

**Keywords:** political discourse, cohesion, lexical cohesion, cohesive devices .

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1. INTRODUCTION

Discourse in general, and political discourse in particular play a pivotal role in communication across cultures which no one can downplay. As a matter of fact, the study of political discourse has been a perennial theme of discussion amongst researchers from time immemorial. This ,undeniably, is because political language is basically used as a powerful tool in winning the support, as well as the consent of both the public and national lawmakers. Accordingly, "everywhere in the world, political discourse, particularly speeches given by Presidents, Governors, and Prime Ministers, are meant...at achieving a predetermined goal. Achieving this goal entails pushing across the entire and exact meaning of their message to their target audience" (Enyi and Chitulu, 2015, p. 77). At this juncture, it is prerequisite to state that language and politics are inextricably linked as Aristotle puts it: "but obviously man is a political animal in a sense in which a bee is not, or any other gregarious animal...Speech is something different from voice, which is possessed by other animals...Speech on the other hand serves to indicate what is useful and what is harmful, and so also what is just and what is unjust" (as cited in Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012, p. 18-19). Axiomatically, the foregoing quotation seems to imply that the purpose of the human power of speech has to do with man's political nature. The fact remains that semantic unity in a given discourse, including political discourse, hinges upon the extent to which its

producer is capable of hanging together his ideas, sentences and utterances by dint of the so-called text forming devices, formal links or more widely used "Cohesive Devices". These are words and phrases which enable the writer or speaker to establish relationships across sentence or utterance boundaries and which help to tie the sentences together. This line of thought necessitates bringing to the fore "lexical cohesion" which is a sub-type of the umbrella term "cohesion" and which is to the core of the present research paper.

Broaching the topic of lexical cohesion necessitates giving heed first to the concept of "Cohesion". Clearly, a multitude of definitions have been provided for it in the existing stockpile of literature, yet, they do seem to have a common denominator. In this regard, Schiffrin et.al (2001) states succinctly that "cohesion can be defined as the set of resources for constructing relations in discourse which transcend grammatical structure" (p.35). Basically, cohesion reflects the idea that "a coherent text has certain words and expressions in it which link the sentences together...They are like the glue which holds different parts of a text together" (Salkie, 1995,p.X). These words and expressions are referred to as cohesive devices or formal links. In a nutshell, Halliday and Hassan (1976) consider cohesion as a semantic concept which refers mainly to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text. According to them, cohesion occurs only "where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another, the one presupposes the other in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it . When this happens, a relation of cohesion is set up , and the two elements , the presupposing and the presupposed, are thereby at least potentially integrated into a text" (p.4). That is, cohesion, simply put, refers to the grammatical and lexical ties in discourse that join utterances and sentences together in such a way that there would be a semantic unity which flows throughout the text and makes it an overall meaningful whole (Halliday and Hassan, 1976). Thus, cohesion is achieved through grammar as well as through lexis. The fact of the matter is that the most comprehensive description and analysis of cohesive devices was provided by Halliday and Hassan in their book "Cohesion in English" (1976) in which they identified five main types of cohesion namely: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion.

Being a component of the more general concept of cohesion, lexical cohesion is deemed as "the cohesive effect achieved by the selection of vocabulary" (Halliday and Hassan, 1976,p.274). That is, Lexical cohesion depends on the choice by the speaker/writer of particular lexical items, which are related to the relevant preceding expressions through some recognizable semantic relation. In a similar vein, Baker and Ellece (2011) defined it thusly: "A way of achieving cohesion by way of repeating the same word or phrase or using chains of related words that contribute towards the continuity of lexical meaning". In other words, the complement of grammatical cohesion involves open system items, and so is referred to as lexical cohesion. Here the repetition of lexical items, synonymy or near-synonymy (including hyponymy), and collocation are included. Collocation was Firth's (1957) term for expectancy relations between lexical items (e.g. the mutual predictability of strong and tea, but not powerful and tea)" (Schiffrin et.al, 2001,p. 37). What it boils down to is that the two major categories of lexical cohesion that were sketched in Halliday and Hassan (1976) are reiteration and collocation, with the former subsuming repetition, synonymy/antonymy, super-ordinate and general word.

Thus, in line with the aforementioned objectives, the research questions that guide the present study are as follows:

- 1) What lexical cohesive devices predominate in Obama's Inaugural Address?
- 2) What effect does the use of lexical cohesive devices have on the text persuasion?

## 2. Literature Review

Evidently, scholars took cognizance of the importance of probing into lexical cohesion in general and its employment in political discourse in particular. Therefore, it is worth noting that several researchers have investigated the use of lexical cohesive devices in political speeches.

To begin with, among the studies that are worth of being brought to the fore owing to their interconnection with the present research work include Adesanmi (2010) who explored the effect of cohesion on political discourse exemplified in the address of a Nigerian President, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, as delivered at

a dinner organised by the Partnership Against Corruption Initiative (PACI) in Davos, Switzerland, on January 23, 2008. The researcher found out that the cohesive analysis of the text uncovered that the President was not only addressing the topical issues of national relevance like corruption and good governance, he was also very much selling himself and the agenda of his regime to the perceived stake-holders, on the one hand, and the general public on the other.

Following similar lines of inquiry, Prados and Penuelas (2012) inquired into the cohesive devices including lexical cohesive devices that were used in three political texts - The Gettysburg Address, I have a dream and Obama's Inaugural Address – and their potential persuasive function. Thus, they carried out an analysis of cohesion in these three masterpieces of political writing and applied their own model based on the combination and adaptation of those found in Halliday & Hasan's (1976) and Beaugrande & Dressler's (1981), in order to cover a wider range of devices and, at the same time, ameliorate some flaws ascribed by critics to Halliday & Hasan's (1976). Their results revealed that, although they share similarities, the texts also showed differences in the cohesive devices employed. The researchers went further to suggest a new dimension for the analysis of cohesion: what we have termed "intertextual cohesion", a device to extend the scope of cohesion beyond the limits of the text.

A more recent piece of research by Enyi and Chitulu (2015) attempted an analysis of the lexical cohesive devices employed by Nigeria's President Goodluck Jonathan in crafting his May, 2011's Presidential Inaugural Address. Specifically, the study concentrated on the various lexical cohesive devices the President used to bring his message and intentions to the forecourt of the listeners' and readers' attention. The basic finding was that the President made preponderant use of lexical repetitions, synonyms and near synonyms, superordinate/ hyponyms and the various shades of oppositeness in language use, in fleshing out the details of his text and making the text to say what it intends to say.

In a similar vein, Aghdam and Hadidi (2015) probed into the occurrence of two types of lexical cohesive devices namely collocation and synonymy in political newspapers and discussion sections of academic articles in a comparative approach. The corpus for the analysis consisted of 20000 words for each genre and the model for analysis was mainly taken from Halliday and Hasan (1976). In this regard, the manner and frequency of occurrence of both collocation and synonymy in each genre were investigated and calculated. The results showed that in the discussion sections of academic articles, synonymy is the prominent cohesive device which manifests itself within a large number of cohesive chains. Another significant finding is the salient presence of chain leaps across unrelated synonymous and collocational words. The analysis of the news genre demonstrates that collocational bonds are the salient cohesive devices occurring in this genre.

### **3.Methodology**

With a view to pursuing the objectives of this research to a logical end, i.e., to get a picture of the lexical cohesive devices used by the American president Barack Obama in his Inaugural Address, 2009, the researcher has attempted a qualitative, exploratory and text-analytic design of research. This was done via a thorough analysis of the speech. Then, attempts were made to demonstrate the relevance of the lexical cohesive elements realized in texts to their contributions to the overall meaning of the text and to achieving the prime aim of persuasion intended by the producer of the discourse.

### **4.Results and Discussion**

The findings of the study are presented and discussed in two sub-sections namely: (1) An Outline of Obama's Inaugural Address, and (2) Lexical Cohesive Devices in Obama's Inaugural Address.

#### **4.1. An Outline of Obama's Inaugural Address**

Barack Obama's Inaugural Address was delivered on January 20th, 2009 right after his presidential election. The text has 2,413 words, 113 sentences and is crafted in the following main parts, each of which mirrors a thematic content that ultimately leads to its major theme of "calling for a new era of responsibility":

**1.Thanking his predecessor**

President Barack Obama opened his speech by thanking his predecessor "president Bush" for his service to the American nation and the generosity and cooperation he has shown throughout that transition. This was outlined in the first and second paragraphs .

**2. Acknowledging the economic crisis**

Obama went further to acknowledge the economic crisis plainly. This is shown in the following sentences: "that we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood" , "today I say to you that the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many". Meanwhile, he has shown his hopes in the new America during his reign which will be able to face those challenges. The following excerpt is a case in point: "But know this, America: they will be met". (paragraphs 3-7)

**3.Pointing out the crises of the past**

Obama remained consistent in conveying his overall message of hope throughout the whole speech. He quoted the Bible, went back to the Declaration of Independence and pointed out the crises of the past (our Founding Fathers, faced with perils that we can scarcely imagine...earlier generations faced down fascism and communism not just with missiles and tanks, but with the sturdy alliances and enduring convictions). His concluding remarks reminded the audience that despite everything, the timeless American values persist. (paragraphs 8-17)

**4. Addressing cynics**

President Obama also brought to the fore what he called cynics,i.e. those who are sceptical of his plans so as to persuade them to change their minds (there are some who question the scale of our ambitions, who suggest that our system cannot tolerate too many big plans). In his view, those cynics have "short memories" because they have forgotten what America has already done, and what free men and women can achieve when imagination is joined to common purpose, and necessity to courage. (paragraphs 18-20)

**5. Addressing the World**

President Obama outlined the new foreign policy based on common, human ideals. He addressed the whole world and put emphasis on Muslims by stating that he seeks cooperation and mutual respect with them (to the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect). (paragraphs 21-26)

**6. The solution lies with the people**

President Barack Obama wrapped up his speech by drawing a parallel between American civilians and American soldiers, both embodying the American spirit of service. This parallel is topped by a Revolutionary War story metaphor. He also maintained that the responsibility of meeting the challenges lies on the shoulders of citizens including himself (what is required of us now is a new era of responsibility -- a recognition on the part of every American that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world... this is the price and the promise of citizenship). (paragraphs 27-35)

**4.2. Lexical Cohesive Devices in Obama's Inaugural Address**

The analysis of president Obama's Inaugural Speech has demonstrated that a myriad of lexical cohesive devices have been used so as to hang sentences and ideas together. This was also in consonant with the president's prime aim of swaying and persuading his audience that he would bring hope and change for a better America. These are going to be given heed in what follows.

**4.2.1. Reiteration**

It should be stated from the outset that reiteration is an umbrella term that embraces five components namely: repetition, synonymy, antonymy, superordinate and general word. These devices are deployed to convey emphasis and to tie the constituents of the discourse together.

**4.2.1.1.Repetition**

The first constituent of reiteration is "repetition" which is in turn sub-divided into two types viz: partial repetition and total repetition. As a matter of fact, both types have been used in Obama's Inaugural Speech,

though with differing density. In this regard, total repetition was by far the most used type of repetition in Obama's Inaugural Address. Details are going to be sketched below.

#### 4.2.1.1.1. Partial Repetition

Partial repetition of words is reflected mainly in the use of the words which share a stem but vary in the employment of prefixes or suffixes and, therefore, in their parts of speech. The analysis of the speech under scrutiny has uncovered that the use of this type of repetition was very limited, especially when compared to its counterpart "total repetition". To instantiate, president Barak Obama used words like Americans Vs America, and prosper Vs prosperous to create a sense of connection between the ideas expressed in his text either in successive sentences or in distant ones .

#### 4.2.1.1.2. Total Repetition

The American president Barack Obama relied heavily on total repetition as a salient lexical cohesive device for achieving cohesion across the different parts of his text and for emphasizing his ideas. By doing so, he tried to persuade the audience of the truth of the ideas expressed including the bright future that was awaiting America during the years of his service. Thus, he intended to repeat a word or a phrase at the beginning of two or more successive clauses, and consequently contributing to the creation of a speech which is very strong in passion. The following excerpts are in order here:

- So it has been... So it must be with this generation of Americans. ...
- On this day, we gather ...On this day, we come
- Our nation ... Our economy ... Our health care ...
- The time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit.
- All this we can do. All this we will do.
- Our Founding Fathers... our Founding Fathers...

At this juncture, it is worth throwing light on the fact that, in addition to using partial and total repetition, president Obama employed the repetition of the same structures or simply the so-called "Parallelism" for the purpose of contributing to the cohesion of the text and emphasizing his ideas . The density of this device lies between that of total and partial repetition. Consider the following examples:

- For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions ,and travelled 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 ploughed the hard earth.
- For us, they fought and died, in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sahn
- Humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you've bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors.

Moreover, Barack Obama also exhibited the repetition of some words throughout his speech to create a sense of topic maintenance that contributes to the coherence of the text where all parts are linked. Axiomatically, the most important of these are the word "nation" which had a total occurrence of 9 times, "America" which was used 8 times and the pronouns "we" and "our" whose use was countless. The repetition of the aforementioned words assisted in unifying the speech under its major theme of "a new era of shared responsibilities".

#### 4.2.1.2. Synonymy

Synonymy is a common lexical cohesive device in political speeches. Apparently, Obama's address is no exception. In line with this, germane examples need to be brought to the fore. Hence, president Obama used the following synonyms in his inaugural speech of 2009: "land and nation", "America and nation", "struggled and fought", "worked and toiled", "liberty and freedom", "give and bestow" "progress and prosperity" "demanded and required", "conflict and discord" "big and grand", all of which are semantic and syntactic substitutes.

The overall aim behind using words that are semantically related is to create a kind of smooth transition from one sentence to another and to show the each sentence is related to another one.

#### 4.2.1.3.Antonymy

Antonymy is used to express contrast between words and serves the purpose of emphasizing ideas. The results of the study has revealed that the lexical cohesive device of antonymy is among the ones which received the highest proportion of use in Obama's Inaugural Address. This is because he wanted to persuade his audience that under his control for the United States of America, fear, conflicts, crises and all what is bad will be left behind, and hope, prosperity and shared responsibilities would be the hallmark of new America, and consequently, insuring his acceptance on the part of his population. Undeniably, therefore, the employment of antonymy helped in marking the transition that Obama claimed America would have and assisted in linking sentences and ideas together. The following list is a case in point: hope Vs fear ,unity Vs conflict/discord, big/ grand Vs small, faint-hearted Vs risk-takers, good Vs ill, foes Vs friends, strength Vs weakness, war Vs peace, and "build Vs destroy". These were used in sentences like the ones below:

- we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord.
- Our journey... has not been the path for the faint-hearted... Rather, it has been the for risk-takers.
- For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness.

#### 4.2.1.4.Superordinate

Other lexical cohesive devices which belong to the category of semantic relations, such as superordinates, add lexical variety and word relations to the texts in general and political speeches in particular. However, it has been found that president Obama's speech was almost void of them except for the use of the superordinate or hypernym "threats" with its hyponym "nuclear threat", among other few instances.

#### 4.2.1.5.General word

Clearly, the results of the analysis showed that the use of general word in Barack Obama's Inaugural Address was also scarce when compared to other lexical cohesive devices like repetition or synonymy. In the following excerpt, president Obama used the general word " things" to refer to some already stated words or ideas in previous sentences namely "the petty grievances and false promises", and "the recriminations and worn-out dogmas":

- On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics. We remain a young nation. But in the words of Scripture, time has come to set aside childish things.

#### 4.2.2. Collocation

Collocation has to do with the accepted co-occurrence relationship of lexical items in a sentence. It is a relationship between words which habitually co-occur. Such a relationship ties sentences together and helps in producing coherent texts. A close examination of the Address has uncovered that collocational bonds are among the salient cohesive devices occurring in president Obama's speech. This added more to the cohesion of the text and the unification of its main theme. In accordance with this, the following examples could be highlighted: the presidential oath, false promises, a watchful eye, unpleasant decisions, bad habits, the icy currents, willing heart, poor nations, starved bodies, common purpose, a decent wage, mutual respect, violence and hatred, men and women, corruption and deceit, among others.

#### 5.Conclusion

Immersion in the present research work for a considerable amount of time has disclosed that political discourse is also characterized by the use of lexical cohesive devices. Everything considered, the American president Barak Obama employed lexical reiteration with all its components namely partial and total repetition, synonymy, superordinate, general word and the various shades of oppositeness in language use. This was coupled with the use of collocation. In doing so, he was not only hanging sentences together, rather, he was also very much selling himself and the agenda of his regime to the perceived stake-holders, on the one hand, and the general public on the other, all of them fall within the scope of persuasion.

Hopefully, this study, which can capture neither the breadth nor the depth of the linguistic phenomenon of lexical cohesion, will pave the road for subsequent studies about a highly important topic like the one in hand. Therefore, such studies could identify more cohesive devices in more political discourses. All in all, lexical cohesion remains in many ways the most interesting of all cohesive categories. So, one can safely conclude that the basic aim of the American president Barack Obama in his Inaugural Address, which is to persuade and convince Americans that he was bring a better future for them is sufficiently achieved by the employment of the so-called "lexical cohesive devices".

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