

## LANGUAGE IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE: A PRAGMA-STYLO-RHETORICAL OVERVIEW OF BARRACK OBAMA'S ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

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### ABSTRACT

In this study, I investigate the pragmatic and rhetorical motivations of political discourse as evident in Barack Obama's Acceptance Speech. The theoretical underpinnings of the study are the Pragmatic Act Theory propounded by Jacob Mey and Adebayo Lawal's Communicative Model Theory which is a stylistic theory. This study finds out that in a political discourse, language is a critical instrument of rhetoric, and linguistic structures are not incidental. This corroborates Fowler (1981) which submits that "Linguistic structure is not arbitrary, but is determined and motivated by the functions it performs."

**Keywords:** Politics, discourse, rhetoric, style, pragmatics, Barack Obama's Acceptance Speech

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### INTRODUCTION

Political speeches constitute a good genre for the demonstration and elucidation of language use. In any political speech, different sides are engaged in purposeful message-driven discourse. Barack Obama began his Second Term in office as the President of the United States of America with an Acceptance Speech delivered before a vast audience. This study evaluates the speech from the climes of pragmatics, stylistics, discourse analysis and rhetoric.

#### 2. Theoretical Underpinnings

In this section I present useful insights on some fields of language study to give the data analysis direction:

##### 2.1 Style

Kolawole defines stylistics as "style and its study". In stylistics, texts of various disciplines can be seen as "language in action". Having a clear understanding of the term "stylistics" therefore presupposes a clear understanding of "style" which refers to the way language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose. Banjo defines stylistics as "the exhaustive study of the role of language in literary works". In stylistics, there is a meeting point between literary and non-literary study of texts. Stylistics is a registration of a writer's artistic prowess in communication of themes, and this process is achieved through the manipulation of the linguistic repertoire at the disposal of the writer. Selecting or ordering language, as well as deviating from the norms is the concern of style. Vocabulary modification is the most obvious and accessible aspect of style.

## 2.2 Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a field of language study. It studies the use of language according to context. The emergence of pragmatics replaced Linguistic Competence with Communicative Competence. Brown and Yule (1981) submits "that any analytical approach to linguistics which involves contextual considerations necessarily belongs to that area of language study called pragmatics". The pragmatic analysis of language can be broadly understood to be the investigation into that aspect of meaning which is derived not from the formal properties of words and constructions, but from the way in which utterances are used and how they relate to the context in which they are uttered. Adebija (1999) posits that the scope of pragmatics includes: the message being communicated, the participants involved in the message, the knowledge of the world which they share, the deductions to be made from the text on the basis of the context and the impact of the non-verbal aspect of interaction of meaning.

## 2.3 Rhetoric

Rhetoric presupposes exploration of insights from various fields of knowledge: politics, mathematics, philosophy, logic, statistics, religion, discourse analysis, stylistics, semiotics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, communication theory, psychology, etc.

Rhetoric is a human art or skill (*techne*), which hinges on Aristotle's "three steps of rhetoric": invention, arrangement and style; and three types of rhetoric proofs: *ethos* (how the character and credibility of a speaker can influence an audience to consider him/her to be believable), *pathos* (the use of emotional appeals to alter the audience's judgments) and *logos* (the use of inductive and deductive reasoning to construct an argument). Since the classical period, rhetoric has been seen as the art of discourse that equips writers and speakers in the use of speech act verbs to persuade, inform, etc. their audience. Rhetoric was one of the three ancient arts of discourse from ancient Greece to the late nineteenth century. Classical rhetoric trained speakers to be effective persuaders in public forums and institutions such as courtrooms and assemblies. Rhetoric investigates multi-faceted human discourse. Indeed, the vast scope of rhetoric is not exhaustive; therefore, it cannot be given a restricted definition.

## 2.4 Discourse

Discourse is essentially the use of language. The functions of language which include metalinguistic function, referential function, contextual function, among others, make it clear that language is an instrument of communication among human beings (cf. Osisonwo 2003:5). They interact through language by talking to one another and this talk is termed "discourse". It involves written communication (texts) and spoken communication (talks). Utterances are seen as discourse since they are linguistic texts. Burton (1982:61) asserts that discourse analysis attempts to analyze different kinds of speech events like mother-child talk, child-child talk, doctor-patient interviews, psychiatric therapy sessions, alternative classroom interactions, committee negotiations, seminar discussions. Important concepts in discourse analysis are conversation, participants, opening and closing, speaker change, selecting next speaker, discourse interruption, topic negotiation, etc.

## 2.5 The Communicative Model Theory

Lawal (2012) posits that the Communicative Model Theory is eclectic in nature because it is the totality of the submissions of predating stylistic theories. The theory explains the interaction between message and medium through socio-linguistic and rhetorical devises. Elements in the theory includes:

1. SPEAKER OR WRITER;
2. MESSAGE (i.e.) writer's or speaker's impression in the form of ideas, beliefs, knowledge, feelings and attitudes, etc. on the one hand, or listener's or reader's impression decoded in the form of ideas, beliefs, knowledge, feelings, etc.;
3. MEDIUM i.e. writer's or speaker's expression encoded in the form of: (i) A rhetorical mode (the primary stylistic device which incorporates linguistic norms and directs pragmatic interpretation of textual properties); (ii) Linguistic 'norms', constants, variants, and deviants.

## 2.6 The Pragmatic Act Theory

The theory addresses the shortcomings of the predating classical pragmatic theories, particularly Austin (1964). Mey (2004) submits that the *pragmeme*, which is at the apex of the Pragmatic Act Theory anchor

'activity' and 'textual' aspects of communication. The activity part shows the roles of the participants of discourse. The textual part concerns the various contextual variables that operate in discourse. The 'ipra' or 'pract' initiates a pragmatic act to realize a pragmeme. Each pract is simultaneously an 'allopract', that is, a specific production of a definite pragmeme.

During communication, participants produce speech acts, conversational acts, physical acts, psychological acts and prosodic acts which are all articulated in varied contexts: INF (inference); REF (reference); VCE (Voice); SSK (Shared Situation Knowledge); MPH (Metaphor); and M (Metapragmatic Joker).

### 3. Presentation and Analysis of Data

I present and analyze six utterances from Barack Obama's speech. I label them Utterance 1-6:

Utterance 1:

Thank you. Thank you so much. Tonight more than 200 years after a former colony won the right to determine its own destiny, the task of perfecting our union moves forward. It moves forward because of you. It moves forward because you reaffirmed the spirit that has triumphed over war and depression, the spirit that has lifted this country from the depths of despair to the great heights of hope, the belief that while each of us will pursue our own individual dreams, we are an American family and we rise or fall together as one nation and as one people. Tonight, in this election, you, the American people, reminded us that while our road has been hard, while our journey has been long, we have picked ourselves up, we have fought our way back, and we know in our hearts that for the United States of America the best is yet to come. I want to thank every American who participated in this election.

The speaker begins the speech with a good introduction; he thanks the Americans for his electoral victory, briefly recalls an issue of history that is germane to his message and reminds them that their present great nation, America, was, after all, a mere colony in the past, but makes progress because of the concerted efforts of Americans who put aside party affiliations to work together for the common good of America. Reminiscence therefore performs tripartite functions in Utterance 1: it makes the audience have the "feel" of nationhood; it arrests their attention; and it portrays the image of a nation that rose from nothingness to stardom. It is usual for political opponents who are part of the participants in this discourse, to have a mindset that is unwilling to accept whatever the speaker intends to say; the psychological context is tense. It becomes the function of a political rhetoric to influence the unwilling audience's emotions. The speaker acknowledges that there is an American bond, informs the listeners that the bond should be consolidated through purposeful leadership. Invariably, the speaker confirms the undisputable fact that the American people enthroned his administration. The personal pronoun 'our' captures 'togetherness' and 'collective experience' in the task of building a strong nation. The usual collocates: 'colony' and 'union' are lexical cohesive devices. Paraphrases are evident in the text: 'a former colony won the right to determine its own destiny' is a paraphrase for 'a former colony gained political independence'; 'the task of perfecting our union' is a paraphrase for 'good governance'; and 'moves forward' is a paraphrase for 'national progress'. The speaker uses plural personal pronouns: 'us', 'our' and 'we' to impress 'national bond' in the audience's minds. This communicative device arrests the attention of the audience and generates their approval.

The expression '... the spirit that has triumphed over wars and depression, the spirit that has lifted this country from the depths of despair to the great heights of hope' is a piling up of usual collocates: triumphed/wars; depths /heights; despair/hope; and rise/fall. They are expressed with a consistent, special syntactic structure (Subject + subordinate adjectival clause) which reveals a clausal repetition that encloses binary antonyms and achieves a sound effect. The expressions: 'an American family', 'one nation' and 'one people' constitute a stylistic device called 'substitution'. Repetitions are used in the text to give the speech pleasant sound: "... while our road has been hard/while our journey has been long"; "... we have picked ourselves up/we have fought our way back". The expression, 'picked ourselves up', is a potent communicative overstatement. The speaker uses it to project a vivid picture of the toilsome nature of electioneering campaigns and the polls in America in particular and in the world at large. The expression '... and we know in our hearts that for the United States of America the best is yet to come' functions as an indirect call to action. No rational populace delight in a government that claims to have achieved complete success. Therefore, the speaker delivers a good

speech by making his American audience understand that whatever they see as progress at the moment was not sufficient.

Utterance 2:

Whether you voted for the very first time or waited in line for a very long time.... Whether you pounded the pavement or picked up the phone... whether you held an Obama sign or a Romney sign, you made your voice heard and you made a difference. I just spoke with Governor Romney and I congratulated him and Paul Ryan on a hard-fought campaign. We may have battled fiercely, but it's only because we love this country deeply and we care so strongly about its future.

The syntax has a pleasant sound because the clauses are repetitive propositional opposites. There are diverse ways people participate to enthrone a particular political administration. Some participate actively while others participate in some passive ways. In this discourse, the speaker makes the audience understand that both active and passive participations achieve the victory for the winning party, and so, all Americans are stakeholders in his victory at the polls. This is a pragmatic device as it settles the psychological tension typical of such a political discourse situation. Aware that party-rivalry is a trait of the political game, the speaker pacifies the audience by stating that he had a telephone conversation with Romney and Paul Ryan. This step, will no doubt, please his political rivals and their fans. The step also projects the speaker's political ideology; he does not view politics as a game of hate, but as a team work for the nation which is above every individual interest (true democracy). The speaker acknowledges the sincerity and tenacity with which Americans sustained their nation's progress despite their individual goals. He therefore informs them that their sincere and tenacious attitude is the secret of their nation's breakthrough in both remote and immediate past. As he praises them and ascribes certain good qualities to them, he confirms therefore, the efforts of every American in building a strong and dependable America.

Utterance 3:

And I wouldn't be the man I am today without the woman who agreed to marry me 20 years ago. Let me say this publicly: Michelle, I have never loved you more. I have never been prouder to watch the rest of America fall in love with you, too, as our nation's first lady. Sasha and Malia, before our very eyes you are growing up to become two strong, smart beautiful young women, just like your mom. And I am so proud of you guys.

The above text shows that the speaker uses self-criticism to convey a great deal about his personality. He is a humble and appreciative person. He attributes his successes to the support from his wife. The audience is aware of the common saying, 'Behind every successful man, there is a woman' and has the understanding that a good and successful leadership begins from the family. Indeed, Sperber and Wilson (2003) view a discourse as a projection of physical environmental realities in a somewhat modified manner.

Utterance 4:

I know that political campaigns can sometimes seem small, even silly. And that provides plenty of fodder for the cynics that tell us that politics is nothing more than a context of egos or the domain of special interests. But if you ever get the chance to talk to folks who turned out at our rallies and crowded along a rope line in a high school gym, or saw folks walking late in a campaign office in a tiny county far away from home, you'll discover something else... Democracy in a nation of 300 million can be noisy and messy and complicated. We have our own opinions. Each of us has deeply held beliefs. And when we go through tough times, when we make big decisions as a country, it necessarily stirs passions, stirs up controversy. That won't change after tonight, and it shouldn't. These arguments we have are a mark of our liberty. We can never forget that as we speak people in distant nations are risking their lives right now just for a chance argue about the issues that matter, the chance to cast their ballots like we did today.

It amazes the audience that even political resentments and ideological differences are being portrayed by the speaker as a mark of Americans' liberty. The text reveals the use of analogy as a persuasive discourse strategy. The speaker analogically presents the summary of the ups and downs of modern politics to disabuse the listeners' minds. The speaker uses analogy to evaluate different perspectives of a political exercise: the

“controversial” perspective; the “do-or die” perspective; and the “service-to-humanity” perspective. These three perspectives determine the selection of linguistic and extra-linguistic elements of communication in the speech. From the latter perspective, the speaker persuades the listeners to understand the discourse as being meant for the good of the nation and her people, and so we expect dominant use of the plural pronouns, narratives of collective experience, diction showing togetherness, nominal usual collocates that capture the notion of “nationhood” and other images which depict common struggle.

The plural personal pronouns: ‘us’ ‘our’ and ‘we’ are used to depict the speaker’s philosophy ‘that irrespective of political party affiliations or ties, Americans are a single brotherhood’. Besides, these pronouns are references. References prevent ambiguities in sentential propositions.

Utterance 5:

And whether I earned your vote or not, I have listened to you, I have learned from you, and you’ve made me a better president. And with your stories and your struggles, I return to the White House more determined and more inspired than ever about the work there is to do and the future that lies ahead. Tonight you voted for action not politics as usual. You elected us to focus on your jobs, not ours. And in the coming weeks and months, I am looking forward to reaching out and working with leaders of both parties to meet the challenges we can only solve together. Reducing our deficit. Reforming our tax code. Fixing our immigration system. Freeing ourselves from foreign oil. We’ve got more work to do... America’s never been about what can be done for us. It’s about what can be done by us together through the hard and frustrating, but necessary work of self-government. That’s the principle we were founded on. This country has more wealth than any nation, but that’s not what makes us rich. We have the most powerful military in history, but that’s not what makes us strong. Our university, our culture are all the envy of the world, but that’s not what keeps the world coming to our shores. What makes America exceptional are the bonds that hold together the most diverse nation on earth.

The speaker praises the audience as he employs self-criticism to assert that his present abilities are the people’s making. Reminiscence functions in the text as a means of reiterating the ancient landmarks handed over to the present-day Americans by their elder statesmen who had passed on. Relying on shared background knowledge, the speaker expects the listeners to know the great men in America’s history and what made them great: Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy (who is famous for his ideology that Americans should not think of what America can do for them, but what they can do for America), to mention but two. Analogically, the speaker states the reason for America’s greatness to achieve a thought-provoking speech.

Utterance 6:

America, I believe we can build on the progress we have made... I believe we can keep the promise of our founders, the idea that if you are willing to work hard, it doesn’t matter who you are or where you come from or what you look like or where you love. It doesn’t matter whether you are black or white or Hispanic... Thank you, America. God bless these United States.

The noun ‘America’ and the pronoun ‘we’ are used as substitutes to achieve trope (personification). The speaker also ends Utterance 6 by personifying America so that it will be deeply impressed in the minds of the audience that: they themselves are the America; the passion for individual progress is invariably the struggle for America’s progress, and this ideology should not be relegated to the background. This device depicts the climax of the speaker’s emotional involvement in the project of building and sustaining a united and strong America.

The speaker uses allusion to convey the message that his ability makes him their President irrespective of his Black descent. This allusion is to be understood within the context of the speaker-hearer shared knowledge about racial discrimination in some parts of the world. Allusions make it possible for a speaker to lampoon vices or political opponents subtly since the speaker presupposes that the listeners can make accurate inferences. See Adegbija (ibid.), Chiffirin (1994), Osisanwo (ibid.) and Yule (1996) for more tips on the concept of presupposition. The expression ‘Black’ is indeed, a metaphor for ‘racial discrimination’. Mentioning it is relevant particularly because of the possible basis for the agitations from political opponents present in the context of speech. The speaker uses figurative language to create the good picture he wants to project about the present America and her people, and succeeds in impressing such a picture in the audience’s minds. This

success is informed by the audience's ability to catch a glimpse of the states-of-affairs (synonymous with Searle's (1969) word-to-world direction of fit for assertive) that the speaker addresses as well as the truth value of his communicative contents. Figurative language is very vital in political discourse partly because facts in the real sense of the word as well as facts in the speaker's own conviction have to be communicated convincingly. Although the latter makes political speeches sound as mere fictional presentation of ideas, there is reason to assume that the speaker-audience shared knowledge (for example, some of the antecedents presented from the time of America's independence and the moment of the speech being delivered are on record), and can move the fictive aura of a political discourse closer to reality; at worst, the discourse simply becomes an extension of reality. It is difficult to refute completely, the truth value of the speaker's claims as a bulk of the discourse topics messages are built around pragmatic and semantic presuppositions.

### 3. Findings

Below are the findings of the study:

- I. Barrack Obama hinges on appropriate introduction to arrest the attention of the audience;
- II. The speaker employs reminiscence to awaken in the audience, a sense of common nationhood, and to deliver a fascinating speech;
- III. Analogy is used to develop the speech, besides making it coherent and persuasive;
- IV. Reiteration is used to produce emphatic message;
- V. Paraphrase is used to achieve language variation.
- VI. Pragmatic, stylistic and rhetorical devices make the speech, and by extension, political discourse, effective.

### CONCLUSION

The study investigates the way language operates in a political discourse by engaging the stylistics, discourse analysis, pragmatics and rhetoric to accentuate the fact that linguistic structure is not arbitrary, but is determined by multifaceted variables including speaker's communicative goals. This submission aligns with Labov (1972:283-307), who posits that 'no use of language can be divorced from its social context since special meaning is parasitic upon language.'

In a political discourse, speech acts are potent communicative elements. The speech acts in Barrack Obama's speech can only be fully understood within the felicity conditions involving the audience's awareness of the speaker's First Term in office, the purpose of the speech and the antecedents mentioned by the speaker in the delivery. Obama's speech corroborates Aristotle's three steps of rhetoric: invention, arrangement and style; and three types of rhetoric proofs: ethos (how the character and credibility of a speaker can influence an audience to consider him/her to be believable); pathos (the use of emotional appeals to alter the audience's judgments); and logos (the use of inductive and deductive reasoning to construct an argument). Aristotle's three types of rhetoric proofs still hold realistic, as far as persuasive discourse is concerned.

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