

## How To Be Presidential: An Analysis Of Barack Obama's Speech On Race

Katja Plemenitaš, University of Maribor

### Abstract

The article deals with the language of American political discourse. It presents an analysis of the speech about race that Barack Obama gave during his campaign to become the Democratic presidential nominee as a reaction to the statements made by his former friend and pastor, Reverend Wright. The analysis is based on the functional model of language and it attempts to explain what makes Obama's political rhetoric in this speech persuasive. The analysis shows that the main message of Obama's race speech is that of unification. Based on that message, the speech can be classified as a tone-setting speech and as such resembles speeches from the tradition of American presidential rhetoric, even before Obama was elected president of USA.

### Izvleček

Tema članka je jezik ameriškega političnega diskurza. Predstavljena je analiza govora o rasi, ki ga je Barack Obama imel med svojo politično kampanjo za pridobitev demokratske predsedniške nominacije kot reakcijo na izjave svojega dotedanjega prijatelja in pastora Wrighta. Analiza temelji na funkcijskem modelu jezika in poskuša razložiti, v čem je prepričljivost Obamove politične retorike v tem govoru. Analiza kaže, da je glavno sporočilo Obamovega govora poenotenje. Govor tako lahko uvrstimo med t.i. govore, ki ustvarjajo razpoloženje (*tone-setting*), in tako vsebuje mnoge elemente, ki spominjajo na govornišvo v tradiciji ameriške predsedniške retorike, še preden je bil Obama izvoljen za predsednika ZDA.

History shows that politicians of all kinds have always striven to use language as a means of persuasion, trying to make people embrace their political goals. Today, heavily influenced as we are by the internet and the media, this has not changed. In fact, the increasing importance of ghost writers, spin doctors, and all kinds of advisers on public appearances shows that the political speech, as a direct address of the politician to the public, has retained an important role in the dialogue between politicians and the people. Linguistic theories usually exclude the question of ethics in their definitions of what constitutes good persuasive rhetoric. According to Kettemann et al. (1995), there are no linguistic criteria which could be the basis for the distinction between persuasion and manipulation, good and bad rhetoric, whereas the ethical criteria on which such a distinction is made are said to be outside the realm of a linguistic analysis. Ponton (2007: 21), on the other hand, points out that what can be considered as good persuasive rhetoric is rhetoric which successfully produces the real-world outcome desired by the speaker, while bad persuasive rhetoric does not. At the same time, we must also consider that there are other factors which can influence the real-world outcome and even override the persuasive effect of good rhetoric, such as political power relations, deeply-ingrained beliefs, and the wider political situation. In history, however, there have been cases of exceptional speeches with well-documented achievements of the desired real-world outcome. Some political speeches stand out as texts which had the power to significantly change the public perception of important political and public matters.



In American history, for example, there is the well-known example of John Kennedy's 1963 speech about civil rights. Kennedy's speech changed American public perception of racial discrimination and segregation of black Americans. Although the speech was just a part of the civil rights politics of small steps, it was nevertheless a very powerful political and rhetorical climax in the fight against racial discrimination and for equal rights. Ketteman's analysis of Kennedy's speech on civil rights (1993) shows that by persuading the majority of the public through his clever and well-crafted speech carefully using traditional rhetorical devices, Kennedy managed to create a new social reality which made the public defense of racial segregation socially unacceptable.

Now, 45 years later, for the first time in history the United States of America has a black president, and young African Americans seem to be reaping the fruits of the century-old struggle of their predecessors. Barack Obama has appeared on the scene as a bright political star, and one of the factors credited for his fast rise to power are his rhetorical skills. Many commentators have compared him to Kennedy, partly because of his youthful and charismatic personality, but also because of his oratorical skills, his ability to persuade and even move the masses through his speeches. Throughout his presidential campaign he was often dubbed a John Kennedy for our times. The following quote exemplifies the way the public emphasized the importance of Obama's rhetorical skills and how they compared it to Kennedy's: "It is hard to see who can stop Senator Barack Obama becoming the next President of the USA: He has built up an excitement such as no candidate has created since President Kennedy in 1960. He is, in my view, a better speaker than Kennedy; like Kennedy, he combines personal magnetism with a strong appeal to American idealism" (from the blog *Titusonene*, [www.kendallharmon.net](http://www.kendallharmon.net)).

During the presidential campaign, it was unclear how big a role latent racism and the general ideological divide in American society would play in the election of the new American president, but even at that time, Obama's speeches seemed to fit seamlessly into the context of American presidential rhetoric. In order to show this, I will look at some features of the textual structure of Obama's speech on race in order to see how it is composed for its persuasive effect. My analysis of the composition of the speech is based on the framework of experiential, interpersonal and textual functions of language and their corresponding contextual variables of field, tenor and mode from functional linguistics (Halliday 2004). I will also look at some stylistic characteristics of Obama's speech with regard to traditional rhetorical devices. Critical discourse analysis of political texts today focuses more on uncovering language mystification and language manipulation (O'Halloran 2003) than on traditional rhetoric stylistic devices. In terms of approaches to text stemming from critical linguistics, most traditional rhetoric stylistic devices probably fit into the category of evaluative language (Martin and White 2005), emphasizing the interpersonal aspect of language.

Barack Obama gave his race speech on March 18 2008, at the Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At that time he was only a contender for the nomination of the Democratic Party. Obama decided to give this speech as a reaction to radical remarks against whites made by Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the leader of Trinity United Church of Christ, of which Obama was a member. The fact that he decided to give this speech proved that he consciously decided that it was time to turn the question of race into an explicit topic of the political discourse of his campaign, which to that point had not been exposed to this extent in front of the general public. There was also the fact that the frantic media coverage of Reverend Wright's remarks threatened to hurt him politically in his campaign for the presidential nomination. Obama thus used this challenge as an opportunity to turn his own racial roots into the focus of the discourse of his political campaign and bring his racial origin into the broader context of American history. At that time he had already explicitly discussed



his racial origins and heritage in his book *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (2008). In the introduction to this book he describes his own struggle to consciously address his racial identity, writing: “Compared to this flood of memories, all my well-ordered theories seemed insubstantial and immature. Still, I strongly resisted the idea of offering up my past in a book, a past that left me feeling exposed, even slightly ashamed. Not because the past is particularly painful or perverse but because it speaks to those aspects of myself that resist conscious choice and that – on the surface, at least – contradict the world I now occupy” (xiv). With his speech on race, he decided to bring into focus his racial roots in the context of his presidential nomination campaign as well.

The main function of the speech is on the level of tenor, or interpersonal function, its unifying function: unification through the common American history and, even more importantly, unification through working together to solve problems shared by the black and white population alike. An important aspect of the speech unification function is Obama’s attempt to explain, although not justify, some of the resentment still present in both the American black and white populations.

Based on the distinction between “tone-setting” and “policy-setting” speeches in American presidential rhetoric (Gester, 1993), the speech is a tone-setting speech, rather than a policy-setting speech; although it does have a very specific topic, the problem of race in American society, its main function is not to inform about the political views or policies of the orator or justify any intended future measures, but rather to unify the audience for the common cause. Classical tone-setting speeches in the tradition of American presidential rhetoric are inaugural addresses, which typically convey old values, with the speaker adding to the message of these commonly accepted values his own personal ethos. In comparison, Kennedy’s speech on civil rights was more of a mixture of a tone-setting and policy-setting speech, as it had a more specific aim of achieving support for the measures taken for stopping the racial segregation in schools and universities and for the enactment of civil rights legislation.

Obama begins by evoking the origin of the American state, the Declaration of Independence, but also pointing out the stain of slavery which was allowed to continue, and at the same time acknowledging that the declaration also contained the cure, promising equal citizenship under the law (“to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time”). After evoking the common past, including the civil rights movement Obama continues with his personal story, his own mixed racial background (“I am a son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas”), at the same time again stressing the greatness of America (“I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible”). He presents himself, and his genetic ancestry, as a kind of metaphor for the unification of American society, or even for America itself (“it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea...”).

In the next section of the speech, Obama gives the background for his decision to make the speech in the first place. After reinforcing the message of unity, he comes to the actual topic of the speech which provoked this speech, conceding that race is indeed an issue of this campaign (he as either “too black” or not “black enough”, commentators viewing his candidacy through the racial lens). In this part of the speech he directly addresses the most recent controversial divisive statements of Reverend Wright in a direct condemnation, explaining why Wright’s words are not just criticism you agree or disagree with (“they expressed a profound distorted view of this country – a view... that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America”). In this part the predominant topic is the contrast between unity and division in American society (“divisive at a time when we need unity; when we need to solve... problems that are neither black or white or Latino or Asian”). In the next segment, Obama explains his relationship to Reverend Wright and his



church. Here he also quotes a passage from his first book, *Dreams from My Father* about his experience at the Church of Trinity. He connects the contradictions inherent in Wrights statements with the contradictions inherent in the white part of his family (“I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him that I can my white grandmother... a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in the world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe”).

Obama goes on to explain why he wants to make the issue of race into the topic of his discourse (“But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now”). The next part of the speech can be described as an “explanation of the divide”, in which he tries to describe the background of the problems faced by American society by offering explanations why race is still an issue, why the union is still not perfect. Here, Obama concedes that Wright’s radical (stereotypical and simplifying as they might be) comments do, in fact, also reflect the history of this country. Obama evokes the past of racial injustice, and how the past helps to explain the present gap that still exists between black and white, lack of economic opportunity, and lack of basic services in many black neighborhoods. Here he also evokes the American dream, and how it was denied to many black people by discrimination. Here Obama uses the term legacy, a term which is often used with a positive connotation in political speeches, with its negative connotation, as the legacy of defeat (“the legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations”). In the next segment of the “explanation of the divide” part, which runs parallel to the previous segment about black resentment, he sets out to explain the anger and resentment of the white (mainly working and middle-class) community in the current economic situation (“in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense”). He concludes this segment by recognizing that many of the resentments of white Americans are also grounded in legitimate concerns.

The next part of the speech could be called the “overcoming the divide” part, focusing on the ways to overcome such resentments on either side and to overcome a “racial stalemate”. He mentions the conservative notion of self-help, but adding that a program of self-help also requires a belief that society can change. The main motif of this part is “the perfect union”, which is evoked at the beginning of the speech. The divide can be overcome by the common purpose (“It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dream”). Then he presents the audience with two choices: one involves accepting politics of division, conflict and cynicism, treating race as a spectacle. The other option is to talk about the problems affecting all Americans (“The children of America are not those kids, they are our kids, and we will not let them fall behind in a 21 century economy”). This part of the speech intertwines the tone-setting topic of unification with some policy-setting topics, mentioning Obama’s running for President, his intended economy policy and ending the war in Iraq (“This time we want to talk about the men and women of every color and creed who serve together and fight together, and bleed together under the same proud flag. We want to bring them home from a war that never should’ve been authorized”).

In his conclusion, Obama returns to the motif of the union of the American people. It is highly emotional, relating an anecdote about a young white woman named Ashley who helped to organize his campaign by mobilizing the African-American community. Her own heart-breaking story is that of a young girl who had to endure poverty because her mother had cancer and who recognized her poverty as an injustice. An old black man, when asked why he was there, said that it was because of Ashley. Obama concedes that such individual moments of “recognition”, such as that between an old black man and a young white woman, as emotional as they might be, are not enough to bring about real changes, but nevertheless they



represent a small step (“But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger.”). He concludes his speech by evoking again the signing of the declaration of independence, with which he started the speech, with the notion of a perfect union (“But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the two-hundred and twenty one years since a band of patriots signed that document in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins”).

Through the interpersonal function of his speech, Obama, like Kennedy in his speech on civil rights, succeeds in demonstrating the need for unification by invoking identification with the issues addressed in the speech (“we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes...we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction”). He does it by telling his own story, but also by inviting the audience to identify with him personally (“Did I strongly disagree with many of his political views? Absolutely – just as I’m sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests, or rabbis with which you strongly disagreed”). He also invites identification with those who represent the others (“The children of America are not those kids, they are our kids”). The agreement of the audience is also achieved through the speaker’s acceptance of the American positive self-image (“the decency and generosity of the American people; the greatness and goodness of our nation,” “America can change, that is the true genius of our nation”, “my faith in God and my faith in the American people”), although their negative side is also mentioned (“But for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn’t make it.”). The strongest identification comes in the form of personalization at the end of the speech, in the story of the white girl and the black man, two concrete people who exemplify American differences and unity. He uses them as a metaphor for American society, just as he uses himself and his own genetic makeup as a metaphor for American historical tensions and the possibility of perfecting the unity. Personalization in Obama’s speech is thus not used as a stylistic device, but rather as a part of the overall argumentation structure of the speech based on evaluative language.

To intensify the emotional intensity in the interpersonal aspect of his speech, Obama uses many classical rhetorical devices. Like Kennedy, who was known for this skillful use of rhetorical devices, he uses three-part lists (tricolon), rhetorical questions, antithesis, parallelism of syntactic structures, and sound figures such as alliteration and assonance. Here are some examples of these categories from the race speech:

1. Obama uses many syntactic parallelisms and reiteration:

This time we want to talk about how the lines; This time we want to talk about the shuttered mills; this time we want to talk about the men and women...

It’s a story that hasn’t made me into the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup...

I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community;

The profound mistake of Reverend Wright’s sermons is not the he spoke about racism in our society. It’s that he spoke as if our society was static;  
who serve together, and fight together, and bleed together.

2. There are some examples of rhetorical questions, in some cases accompanied by his own answers, mainly with regard to his association with Reverend Wright:

Did I know him to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of course. Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be considered controversial



while I sat in church? Yes. Did I strongly disagree with his political views? Absolutely- Why not join another church?

3. The speech contains many examples of three-part (or more than three-part) lists:

the lines in Emergency Room are filled with whites and blacks and Hispanics;  
a politics that breeds division, conflict and cynicism;  
education of black and brown and white children;  
to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America;  
a cycle of violence, blight and neglect).

4. There is an interesting example of parallelism and antithesis in the following sentence regarding Wright's remarks:

"(a view) that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America."

The above structure is reminiscent of the line Bill Clinton used in his inauguration speech from 1993: "There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America."

This line shows a direct influence from Clinton's presidential speech, again showing that the speech on race was an ambitious attempt at showing Obama as a future president.

5. The speech is rich in examples of alliteration:

conventional candidate,  
white woman,  
stained by this nation's original sin of slavery;  
The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty...  
the struggles and successes...  
the bitterness and the bias that make up the black experience in America

6. There are some examples of metaphor, mainly with regard to race and overcoming the racial divide:

through racial lens,  
racial tensions bubble to the surface,  
that path means embracing the burdens of our past

Obama's speech on race is an example of a well-crafted, tone-setting speech. Now, we have the benefit of knowing that Obama finally had to disown Reverend Wright and that he left the Trinity church. We also have the benefit of knowing that he eventually did become the first black president of the United States of America. Even though Obama was not the president when he gave the speech, this speech seems to fit seamlessly into the tradition of American presidential rhetoric: it effectively conveys the message of unity and points to the problems of America without questioning its greatness or potential to change. Obama thus showed that he possesses some of the characteristics which place him in the realm of important American political orators.



Works Cited

- Gester, Friedrich Wilhelm. Die Inaugural Address – ein Redetyp. In Paul Goetsch and Gerd Hurm (Eds), *Die Rhetorik amerikanischer Präsidenten seit F. D. Roosevelt*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1993.
- Halliday, M.A.K. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Hodder Arnold, 2004.
- Huffington Post. [http://huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-th\\_n\\_92077.html](http://huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-th_n_92077.html). Last accessed: 4. 6. 2008.
- Ketteman, Bernhard. Kennedy, Civil Rights und die Rhetorik seiner Radio- und Fernsehansprache vom 11. Juni 1963. In Goetsch, Paul and Hurm, Gerd (eds.) *Die Rhetorik amerikanischer Präsidenten seit F.D. Roosevelt*, Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag, 1993.
- Ketteman, Bernhard, Wolfgang Grilz and Isabel Landsiedler. *Sprache und Politik. Analyse berühmter Reden*. Retzhof: Bildungshaus Retzhof, 1995.
- Martin, Jamer R. and White, Peter R. R. *The language of evaluation: appraisal in English*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Obama, Barack. *Dreams from my Father. A Story of Race and Inheritance*. Edinburgh, London, New York, Melbourne: Canongate, 2008.
- O'Halloran, Kieran. *Critical Discourse Analysis and Language Cognition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003.
- Ponton, Mark Douglas. *Talking Us Round: Linguistic Aspects of Persuasive Political Rhetoric*. UK, 2007.
- Titusonene. <http://www.kendallharmon.net>. Last accessed on 7. 8. 2009.