

# **The Interrelatedness of Barack Obama's Political Thought, Theme and Plot in His Campaign Speeches for the U.S. President**

By : Samuel Gunawan  
English Dept., Faculty of Letters  
Petra Christian University

## **Abstract:**

*The then presidential hopeful Barack Obama was well-known for his uplifting and eloquent oratory. This research paper is to examine how well his political lines of thought are skillfully linked to both the themes and plot structures of his speeches in the campaign trails for President of the U.S.*

**Key words:** *Obama's campaign theme; Obama's campaign speeches*

## **1 Background**

Speech-making is of vital part of politicians' role in delivering their platform or policy, persuading and convincing people to agree with it as they initially aspire for some political position or subsequently when they make some attempt to win other politicians' vote (Charteris-Black, 2005: 1-4). To meet that need, politicians will undoubtedly have to be equipped with carefully scripted text, from which they derive their well-planned skills of speaking persuasively to both their immediate as well as real targeted audience (Beard, 2000: 35-36). Despite the importance of such rhetorical skills in the politicians' limited moments of delivery of the addresses to invited audiences of their own people or supporters – usually within the confine of their own political events such as party rallies and party conferences, such skills are by far the most important to events having much greater impacts on their real and much larger targeted audiences – millions of lay people who will possibly be exposed to the mass media as they read much about the speeches in the newspapers or hear or listen on radios, televisions, or even internet.

In the same vein, the speeches of the current 44<sup>th</sup> president of the U.S. , Barack Obama, while he was aspiring the Presidential seat in his campaign trails, also provided a fresh impetus for the study of the power of his winning speeches as an upstart on the Washington politics. Throughout his campaigns, he sounded convincingly his overarching twin political ambitions: the first - with the jargon of

“change” that had attracted more voters who could have been bored to the older politicians in Washington, he promised to change the traditional outlook of the Washington and the ways to handle the nation’s business in Washington DC; secondly – his bold determination to unify all Americans of various social, ideological and racial backgrounds for their common good. Without ignoring the significant contribution of other factors such as the intensive use of the internet technology to support the campaign, the strategy to embrace and involve more young voters, the sophisticated use of advertisement on the mass media in general paid by the overabundant donation that his campaign team and supporters had successfully collected, Obama’s well-scripted language of his speech as represented by the link between his political lines of thought and his overarching twin themes and plot structure of the speech has evidently served as a strong instrument to sell himself as brand new product (cf. Beard, 2000: 57).

This research paper is to examine how well Barack Obama’s political lines of thought are skillfully linked to the designation of the themes and the plot structure of his speeches in the course of his campaign trails for President of the U.S.

## **2 Purpose**

This paper is to study the existing patterns of how well Barack Obama’s political agenda is linked to the underlying thought of his campaign speeches, the sequential order of the elements comprising the core message of his speeches so as to serve as loaded instruments of persuasive speech.

## **3 Theories and Methods**

For the inquiry of the choice of content, this research relies on Perrine’s theoretical concepts of theme and plot (1988: 90-96. Perrine defines theme of a piece of fiction as its controlling idea or its central insight. Theme constitutes the unifying generalization about life as stated or implied by a work of fiction. Such a unifying idea serves as a recurrent element in literary or artistic work

Kelly<<http://712educators.about.com/cs/speeches/a/speechwriting.htm>, retrieved Jan 25, 2010> points out that in preparing good campaign speeches, a public speaker or a speech writer commonly must start with the choice of a theme. Once the type of a

theme has been designated, he or she will, therefore, prepare that the speaker will refer back to this theme throughout the speech. In this way the speech will prompt the audience to respond positively and remember the message as conveyed by the words very well. The speaker may have a say on many topics or convey various messages, but he or she will definitely always refer back to the theme. By so doing, the various topics or messages that the speaker uses may serve as theme reinforcers.

As also stated by Perrine, theme must be in the form of a statement with a subject and a predicate. Since theme must be in the form of a statement about the subject, so the exemplified theme must be like: "Motherhood sometimes has more frustrations than rewards" or "Loyalty to country often inspires heroic self-sacrifices".

The term "theme" as adopted and applied in the analysis of this paper, therefore, constitutes the unifying generalization about matter /content/meaning as stated or implied by the speech and toward which the speaker will always refer back throughout his or her speech.

Whereas regarding plot in a fiction, Perrine (1988: 41) defines it as the sequence of incidents or events of which a story is composed. So adopted and applied to this research paper, plot is therefore understood as the sequential order of important issues as stated by the speech. The plot helps reveal a sequential order that unfolds a speech. Therefore plot does its best to capture only the most important events or incidents, leaving out description and analysis and focusing only on major happenings.

The data of this paper were the three speeches of Barack Obama: "Presidential Announcement Speech", "A More Perfect Union", and "The American Promise". These speeches were analyzed according to the theories as adopted in this paper to see how well they were related to Obama's political lines of thought.

#### **4 Findings and Discussion**

Throughout the campaigns, Barack Obama sounded convincingly his overarching twin political ambitions that become his twin campaign themes: the first - with the jargon of "change" that had attracted more voters who could have been bored to the older politicians in Washington, he promised to change the traditional outlook

of the Washington and the ways to handle the nation's business in Washington DC; secondly – his bold determination to unify all Americans of various social, ideological and racial backgrounds for their common good.

#### **4.1 The Theme and the plot Structure of     Barrack Obama's Presidential Announcement Speech**

##### **4.1.1 The Theme**

The choice of the delivery of Barack Obama's official presidential announcement – in January 10, 2007 - was in Springfield, Illinois. This was meant to be symbolic in nature: in the shadow of the Old State Capitol, a place where Abraham Lincoln pleaded a house divided to stand together. This symbolized the ideas of the key words such as *"coalition, unity, or non-partisan, one people, one America"* that were often held by Barack Obama's campaign. Geographically Springfield is also a place where four winds meet from east, west, north and south. It was also symbolic of the genuine spirit of the common people of America, a place where Barack Obama started his career to make the life in America a little bit better through his community work in the South Side of Chicago.

Obama used the details of his personal testimony as part of what he described his passage to run for president as illustrated in the metaphor of "journey". Such materials were essential for effective speech-making because they were capable of arousing interest, providing substance, and emphasizing important ideas in down-to-earth examples associated directly with the speaker's own life. What listeners could get as recurrent elements from his personal testimony were the consistent implementations of Obama's philosophy of life: change for a better as stated in his speech: *"I accepted the job, ... that I might play a small part in building a better America"*.

In addition to the choice of the place for the presidential candidacy announcement that had a symbolic meaning for the union and the continuing persistence of the people's common hopes and dreams, the theme above was also thematically strengthened by the theme reinforcers of the speech, that at the same indicated that Obama's candidacy was also part of the long historical "journey" to perfect the union,

as found in the uses of the references to the fundamental belief of the American people that they can be “*one people*” capable of “*building that more perfect union*”; to the historical figure of Abraham Lincoln as “*a tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer*” who unified American people for a common goal; the power to change the nation as vested in the people in “*people who love their country can change it*”; to Martin Luther King Junior’s call “*to let justice roll down like water ...*”; to the change in politics when saying “*(i)t’s time to turn the page*” and the plea for a strong support of the people to make change happen in his invitation: “*(l)es us transform this nation*”. Barack Obama’s decision to join the race for presidency was deemed to be related to the attempt “*to take up the unfinished business of perfecting the union*”, and that of “*building a better America*”.

This speech was to signify Barack Obama’s formal statement to run for the U.S. President. From the core message of the speech, the theme may be gathered: “**Only a broader coalition of Americans of various backgrounds can work to bring about change and unified force to address American common problems**”.

#### 4.1.2 The Plot

As adopted and applied to the inquiry of the speech text as done on this study, plot is understood as the sequential order of important issues as stated by the speech. The plot of Obama's “Presidential Announcement” speech is worked out by six sequential elements as follows:

##### (1) introduction

- Thanking to the audience
- Appreciating their participation for “a journey for a reason”

##### (2) Obama’s personal testimony of non-partisan journey for a better America

##### (3) A call for political change

##### (4) A call for Americans to work together to address their common challenges

##### (5) A historically rooted call for unity to make change possible

##### (6) Conclusion: plea for full support from all Americans

So it is obvious from the plot above that Obama's overarching twin political lines of thought – “change” and “the most diverse coalition of Americans” were also well spelled out in this speech.

## **4.2 The Theme and the Plot Structure of Barack Obama's Speech on Race: “A More Perfect Union” Speech**

### **4.2.1 The Theme**

Having followed the flow of the main thought of Obama's “A More Perfect Union” speech, it was obvious that Obama addressed the role of the issue of race that had been injected to his campaign. He asserted persuasively to alter the values, beliefs, and attitudes of Americans concerning the issue of race in the election. He stressed his conviction that American had to step out of the issue of race, and instead they would have to take up the issue of existing racial disparities as a part of America that was yet to be made perfect. From the very onset of the campaign, Obama refrained from the issue of political identity stressing that the political base of his candidacy was not confined to African-American supporters. He, however, maintained “the most diverse coalition of American” as his political base. America, in his vision, had to go beyond racial prejudices and division and work together as stated in his words in this speech:

*But I have asserted a firm conviction ... that, working together, we can move beyond some of our racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union”*

So in accordance with Obama's unyielding belief, the theme of the speech may be stated: **“America has to take up the unfinished job of perfecting the union by sticking together as one union to enable them to see and solve their real common problems for a better future”.**

### **4.2.2 The plot**

The core message brought forward by this speech was to redress the distorted view of racial relation having been injected into Obama's campaign trail. So the sequence of elements that made up the whole plot structure clearly reflected that

objective. On reading carefully the script of Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech, readers may find out that the speech developed the plot structure consisting of five sequential elements to make up the whole speech as follows:

- (1) Introduction: drawing from history of the unfinished task of perfecting the union
- 2) Unyielding belief that Americans are one despite their diverse backgrounds
- (3) A call to dismiss distorted view of race relation
- (4) A call to move beyond racial resentment for perfecting the union
- 5) Conclusion: making the right choice: not being distracted, but seeing American's real problems to solve together.

From the plot structure above, it was clear that Obama stressed the need for altering the people's values, beliefs, and attitudes regarding race relations as his address emphasized that "*out of many, we are truly one*". He also stressed in his speech: "*...working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds ... and ...we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.*" So it was clear that Obama's overarching twin themes "change" and "coalition" were conspicuously spelled out in this speech.

### **4.3 The Theme of Barack Obama's Speech at the Democratic National Convention: The American Promise**

#### **4.3.1 The Theme**

Obama's speech at the Democratic National Convention was meant to formally celebrate his nomination as the Democratic candidate for the U.S. President to compete with McCain, the Republican nominee. The overarching twin theme of "greater coalition of Americans of diverse backgrounds" and "change" as found in Obama's previous campaign speeches kept persisting as he was to challenge McCain on the basis of their respective policies. However, his agenda of "change" was more prominently brought to the most front as he was to challenge McCain, and the "most

diverse coalition of Americans” was undeniably to remain as the backbone of his political support. Based on the underlying ideas as found in the above speech and the various details used as theme reinforcers throughout the speech, the theme of the speech may be gathered: **“Americans together have to bring change and fight their common problems to keep the American promise”**.

#### **4.3.2 The Plot**

The plot structure of the speech consists of a sequence of eleven elements that constitutes the core message of the speech. At this stage Obama felt it necessary to drive home the points of his political agenda. Change had go to Washington, and as he was to compete with McCain, Obama made it clear that McCain had nothing to do with change. Obama stated that American were facing common problems, and therefore they would have to fight together to bring about change to enable them to face and solve their common problems in order to keep the American promise. On reading carefully the script of Obama’s Speech at the Democratic National Convention: “The American Promise”, readers may find out that he develops the sequence of eleven elements of the plot structure to enable him to get across his lines of thought as mentioned. The plot structure of the speech may be stated as follows:

##### **(1) Introduction**

- Greeting
- Announcing his Democratic Nomination for the US President
- Thanking to those who back him up

##### **(2) To keep American promise alive**

##### **(3) A call for change of the broken politics and failed administration**

##### **(4) Say No to Mc Cain**

##### **(5) Living up to the American Promise**

##### **(6) Reflection of American Problems**

##### **(7) A call for change to keep the American Promise alive**

##### **(8) A call for dismissing unethical campaign**

##### **(9) The defining moment: make the right choice for change**

##### **(10) Americans together had to work for change**



(11) Conclusion : Americans have to keep going ahead to keep the American promise

## 5. Conclusion

This research paper finds out that Barack Obama's speeches as represented by his three speeches under investigation display the skilful links between his main political lines of thought - "the most diverse coalition of Americans" and "change" - and the themes and the plot structures of his campaign speeches. Obama consistently asserted that by working together, America would be enabled to bring about change, thus enabling them to solve their common problems in pursuit of a better future for the nation and even the world.

## References

Beard, A. 2000. *The Language of Politics*. London : Routledge.

Charteris-Black, J. 2005. *Politicians and Rhetoric The Persuasive Power of Metaphor*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan

Kelly, M.2010. (<http://712educators.about.com/cs/speeches/a/speechwriting.htm>, retrieved Jan 25, 2010)

Obama. B. 2007. Presidential Announcement Speech.  
<[http://www.barackobama.com/2007/02/10/remarks\\_of\\_senator\\_barack\\_obam\\_11.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2007/02/10/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_11.php) , retrieved November 2, 2009>

Obama, B. 2008. Speech on Race : "A More Perfect Union" Speech.  
<<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467>, retrieved October 6, 2009>.

Obama, B. 2008. Speech at the Democratic National Convention: The American Promise.  
<[http://www.barackobama.com/2008/08/28/remarks\\_of\\_senator\\_barack\\_obm\\_108.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2008/08/28/remarks_of_senator_barack_obm_108.php) , retrieved October 27.2009>

Perrine, L. 1988. *Literature : structure, sound, and sense*. 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. Orlando : Harcourt Jovanovich