

STYLE OF OBAMA'S INAUGURATION SPEECH

Samuel Gunawan

English Dept., Faculty of Letters,
Petra Christian University
samgun@peter.petra.ac.id

Abstract:

This paper is to find out the style of Barack Obama's inauguration speech as realized by the choice of content and form. It examines how the speech addresses the confidence of the new President to cope with the domestic problems and renew the American role in the world in terms of its theme, plot structure, linguistic and stylistic categories.

Key words: style, oratorical skills, speech, inauguration address

Preliminaries

Barack Obama has been successful in his political career on account of his magnificent oratorical skills. On the event of his presidential inauguration, he was not only to take an oath as the president elect, but also to deliver his inauguration speech as the new president. On such an occasion, the new president's speech was usually expected to highlight the spirit of conciliation and hope to the whole union. He was expected to address not only domestic issues, but also problems abroad. He also had to be capable of designating a clear-cut distinction between his new Administration and his predecessors'.

This paper is to examine how Obama's inauguration speech addresses the confidence of the new President to cope with the domestic problems and renew the American role in the world in terms of its theme, plot structure, linguistic and stylistic categories.

Theoretical Overview and Method of Analysis

The term “style” as used in this paper refers to the way in which language is used in a given context (in the inauguration speech), by a given person (the President elect of the USA – Barack Obama), for a given purpose (for celebrating the commencement of the term of presidency) following Leech and Short (1984 : 10 - 11). This paper was written in the dualistic view of stylistics (cf. Leech and Short, 1984 : 19-20), i.e. the speaker (or the appointed speech writer) holds the message first, and then is entailed with the choice of expression. It follows from the dualistic view of style that this paper needs, firstly, to capture Obama’s main idea (MATTER/CONTENT/MEANING) in the inauguration speech; and, secondly, to capture his choice of expression (MANNER/Form). So there are two broad inquiries : firstly, the theme and the plot structure of the speech that rest on Perrine’s concept of theme and plot structure (1984), and Kelly’s concept of “theme reinforcers” (<http://712educators.about.com/cs/speeches/a/speechwriting.htm> (2010, Jan 25), i.e. the points that a speechwriter uses throughout his or her speech to 'reinforce' the central idea. So whatever details or topics are used as theme reinforcers, they always reiterate the theme throughout the speech; secondly, the inquiry into the choice of form applies selectively Leech and Short’s checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories such as: lexical categories, grammatical categories, figures of speech, and context and cohesion (Leech and Short, 1984 : 74 -118).

Findings and Discussion

Theme of the Speech

The theme of Obama's inauguration speech may be defined as the unifying idea about the kind of life expected for the Americans as a whole as stated or implied by the speech. As a unifying idea, the theme is a recurrent element in the speech. For that purpose, Obama's inauguration speech repeatedly drew examples from the American historical backgrounds as the theme reinforcers, among other things, as stated by Obama: " *The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation ...*". He also strongly encourages all American to return to their old historical values as stated toward the end of the speech: " *But those values upon which our success depends - hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism - these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history. What is demanded then is a return to these truths*".

Central to the unifying thought of Obama's speech is a statement that America is in the midst of crisis. Serious and many though the challenges are, Obama convinces his people that America will be able to overcome them: " *All this we can do. And all this we will do*". Therefore he pleads his people to "... *begin again the work of remaking America*". As normally expected from such an inauguration speech, Obama also expresses his new attitudes to the world affairs both for the cause of peace, security, and welfare. Therefore the theme of Obama's inauguration speech may be highlighted as " *Americans with the enduring strength of their heritage are capable of remaking the nation and the world*".

Plot Structure of the Speech

The plot structure of speech is the sequence of elements making up the whole speech. On reading carefully the script of Obama's inauguration speech, readers may find out that Obama develops six elements of the plot structure to make up the whole speech such as : (1) Opening, (2) acknowledging the prevailing economic crisis, (3) conviction of Americans' capability to overcome crisis, (4) soliciting cooperation from the opposing cynical politicians and forces, (5) repositioning of the US global involvement, and (6) closing: the power resting on the people to resolve their common problems. They are all summed up as follows :

1) Opening

- **Giving Thanks.** Obama expresses his humbleness to the task of presidency, his thank to American trust for the position, his remembrance of the sacrifices of his predecessors. He thanks President Bush for his service to the nation and the smooth transition of the office.
- **Elaboration = historical knots.** Obama tries to knot the oath taken to his predecessors – including his – has been forty-four presidential oaths. These are further linked in both the good and bad times in the American history. It was not only due to those in high office, but the event also resides on the people.

2) Acknowledging the prevailing economic crisis. As the economic issue is number one in the minds of most Americans, Obama is wise enough to raise this issue first in his speech. Obama is quite candid in acknowledging that America is in the midst of serious crisis. He does not promise instant solutions. However, he shows his great self-confidence that his Administration will be able to offer the best service to

all Americans alike to meet those challenges in his powerful promise: “*But know this, America — they will be met*”.

3) **Conviction of the Americans’ capability to overcome crises.** In this section of the speech, Obama persists in his optimistic vision that led him to the White House. He cites scripture, refers to the Declaration of Independence, and then reminds his fellow Americans of the struggles of the past. He concludes this section by convincing everyone that the core American strength is still there.

4) **Soliciting cooperation from the opposing cynical politicians and forces.** In this section Obama is addressing the cynical politicians who are against his position in his blunt statement that “*(t)heir memories are short*”. He, therefore, persuades them to be cooperative and mindful of his agenda for the whole nation.

5) **Repositioning of the US global involvement.** This section was very forceful. No matter how strong his words are, they remain friendly. He charts a new foreign policy which is tied to common, human ideals.

6) **Closing: power resting on the people to resolve problems.** Obama splendidly uses a parallel between the armed forces and ordinary citizens in terms of the embodiment of the spirit of service that will determine the success of his administration. He is so marvelous in calling for his people to such an action. Obama’s citation of the optimistic spirit of the American revolutionary war serves well of the expectation that their nation must keep progressing, and simultaneously this serves him as a fine way to conclude his inauguration speech.

Lexical categories

1. General

As a whole, the words, i.e. nouns or NP used in the speech were simple enough, somewhere between formal and colloquial; but they did list the priorities such as: the economy; medical care; energy; education, and a strong national defense. The overriding concern of the words, however, was to inculcate the political arena with a convincing vision - a return to the steady rule of law and the solid ideals of the US democracy.

2. Nouns

Both concrete and abstract nouns are used in the speech. The concrete nouns as: *task*, *trust*, *sacrifice*, *generosity and cooperation*, and *(forty-four) Americans* to refer to the number of the US presidents so far in the history. Proper nouns indicating historical sites of past wars are used such as *Concord*, *Gettysburg* to refer to revolutionary wars, *Normandy* to world War I and *Khe San* to Vietnam War. Collective nouns such as *America* or *US* refers to the whole American people and *generation* to refer to the current generation of American people as a whole. However, far more abstract nouns are used.

Abstract nouns to refer to events

For instance *prosperity* is used to indicate the state of being prosperous of the American people and *peace* to refer to the peaceful conditions whereby Americans are not involved in any war to fight. These two words are used in the context: *during the rising tides of prosperity and the still waters of peace* that strongly emphasize the good as well as the bad times as historically tied to the various events of the presidential oath-taking. It also illustrates the good times that American have gone

through and that of “*gathering clouds and raging storms*” to illustrate the bad/difficult times that influence their characters.

Abstract nouns to refer to perceptions

When Obama talks about America’s perception on “their supremacy”, he uses the words “*greatness*” in “*the greatness of our nation*” and “the course of American history” as a “*journey*”.

Abstract nouns to refer to moral qualities

Abstract nouns are also used to refer to moral qualities such as:

- 1) “... (*we gather because we have chosen*) ***hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord***...”.
- 2) “With ***hope and virtue***, let us brave once more the ***icy currents***, and endure what ***storms*** may com”.
- 3) “...our ***patchwork heritage*** is a strength, not a weakness”.

Abstract nouns to refer to social qualities

“... they knew that our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint”.

3. Adjectives

Attributively or predicatively used adjectives

Adjectives are used both attributively and predicatively. Used attributively, the adjectives are meant to further specify the meaning as expressed by the head word, among other things, as found in:

- 1) "... during **rising** tides of prosperity and **still** waters of peace".
- 2) "... we come to proclaim an end to the **petty** grievances and **false** promises ...and **worn out** dogmas ...".
- 3) "We remain a **young** nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside **childish** things. The time has come to reaffirm our **enduring** spirit; to choose our **better** history; to carry that **precious** gift, that **noble** idea, passed on from generation to generation : the **God-given** promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their **full** measure of happiness".

Adjectives are also used predicatively:

- 4) "We the people have remained **faithful** to the ideals of our forbearers, and **true** to our founding documents".
- 5) "Our workers are **no less productive** than when this crisis began".
- 6) "Our minds are **no less inventive** Our capacity remains **undiminished**".

4. Verbs

Despite the crisis that American have gone through that may not be recovered within a short span of time, Obama convinces his audience and fellow citizen that those difficulty may definitely be overcome by his strong and optimistic determination as expressed in the illocutionary act of commissives (cf. Traugott and Pratt, 1980 for the concept of speech act): "But know this, America – they **will be met**". He encourages his audience to gain their self-confidence to build their future as expressed in the directive illocutionary act: "...we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves up, and begin again the work of remaking America."

Obama's repeated use of the multiple illocutionary acts – both commissives and directives (cf. Traugott and Pratt, 1980 *for this concept*) - by means of the helping verb “*will*” is to show his very strong determinations that would materialize in his administration as follows:

“... we **will act** ...” ; “We **will build the roads and bridges** ...”; “We **will restore science to its rightful place**”; “We **will harness the sun and the winds and the soils to fuel our cars and run our factories. and we will transform our schools and colleges and universities to meet the demand of a new age. All this we can do. And all this we will do.**”

The last portion of the quotation above being expressed in the multiple illocutionary acts – both representatives and commissives: “*All this we can do*”. This indicates that the new President claims that he and his upcoming Administration are strong enough to do as they wish. The same helping verbs are used intensively when Obama states his strong determination to bring in a new fresh air in the foreign policy of his Administration :

- 1) “We **will begin** to responsibly leave Iraq to its people...”
- 2) “With old friends and former foes, we **will work** tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat...”
- 3) “We **will not apologize** for our way of life, nor will we waver in its defense...”
- 4) “...you cannot outlast us, and we **will defeat** you”.

5. Adverbs

Adverb is rarely used in the speech.

B. Grammatical Categories

1. Types of sentences

Obama's speech relies most intensively on the use of compounding, i.e. the use of compound sentences comprising some clauses joined by coordinate conjunctions.

Elaboration of ideas by the use of compounding

Expressing overloaded ideas through complex sentences in a speech may be hard to digest and may cause the speech to sound less forceful. However, expressing them in simple sentences may be trapped to be burdensome, lengthy, so as to disassociate some related important ideas, and unavoidably render them to sound more loosely fragmented and less interesting to audience. To avoid that, Obama employs quite intensively the use of coordinate conjunction *and* so as to connect some main clauses to result in compound sentences that are capable of expressing his overloaded ideas. Also ideas expressed in Nouns or NPs may be coordinated to those of others by the use of coordinating conjunction *and*. The use of coordinate clause constructions are plentiful, among other things, as follows :

- 1) "*...our school fails too many; **and** each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries ...*".
- 2). "*For us, they packed their worldly possessions **and** travelled across oceans in a search of a new life*".
- 3) "*For the world has changed, **and** we must changed with it*".
- 4) "*...let us brave once more the icy currents, **and** endure what storms may come*".

The use of coordinating conjunctions to join mostly nouns / NPs or verbs / VPs are also productive to show Obama's overloaded ideas that may not be sufficiently

captured and expressed only in a single NP or noun. The following shows how two NPs or nouns are joined by the use of conjunctions :

5) “*I thank President Bush for his service to our nation, as well as the generosity **and** cooperation he has shown throughout this transition*”.

Notice that the expression “*as well as*” is also used to link the previous clause to the next one. The later clause undergoes a thematic fronting from “*...he has shown (the generosity and cooperation) throughout this transition*” to become “*(the generosity **and** cooperation) he has shown throughout this transition*”.

6) “*These words have been spoken during the rising tides of prosperity **and** the still waters of peace*”.

7) “*Our nation is at war, against a far-reaching network of violence **and** hatred*”.

8) “*...we come to proclaim an end to the pretty grievances **and** false promises, the recriminations **and** worn out dogmas, that for far too long have strangled our politics*”.

9) “*This is the price **and** the promise of citizenship*”.

10) “*This is the meaning of our liberty **and** our creed...*”.

11) “*But those values upon which our success depends – hard work **and** honesty, courage **and** fair play, tolerance **and** curiosity, loyalty **and** patriotism – these things are old*”.

Conjunction *and* is also often used to join verbs or VPs in such a way that may function to stress the force expressed by the initial verb or VP as follows :

12) “*...but also our collective failure to make hard choices **and** prepare the nation for a new age*”.

In example 13) conjunction *and* is used to connect both verb/VP and nouns /NPs that all together may create a stronger and forceful production of the whole sentence :

13) “*For us they fought **and** died, in places like Concord **and** Gettysburg; Normandy **and** Khe Sahn”.*

Such a structural device in 13) is further employed more forcefully in 14) as follows:

14) “*We are a nation of Christians **and** Muslims, Jews and Hindus – **and** non-believers. We are shaped by every language **and** culture ...; **and** *because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war **and** segregation, **and** emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united...*”.*

In the case of : “...; **and** *because we have tasted ...*” as cited above, the conjunction *and* is used for elaboration by adding more clause to the previous one.

Elaborations of ideas by the use of complex sentences

A good orator is usually fully aware of the weakness of long sentences to provoke his or her audience’s interest. Long sentences may tend to lose audience’s interest in that it may sound too flat and monotonous. That is why as previously explained, Obama made an intensive use of main clauses, and if he intends to create a larger sentential construction, he joined his main clauses by the use of conjunction. In addition, though far less frequent than the use of compounding, Obama elaborates his ideas by the use of complex sentences created by the use of relative clauses :

1) “*. . . each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet*”.

- 2) “... we can meet those new threat that demand even greater effort – even greater cooperation and understanding between nations”.
- 3) “. . . and why a man whose father less than sixty years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath”.

Apposition

Apposition in the form of the use of a construction placed alongside another, though in some sense equivalent, is plentifully used. They are structurally being loose and non-restrictive, but semantically quite powerful to intensify the meaning conveyed as found, among other things, in:

- 1) “The state of the economy calls for action, **bold and swift**, and we will act – **not only to create new jobs, but to lay a new foundation for growth**”.
- 2) “And yet, at this moment – **a moment that will define a generation** – it is precisely this spirit that must inhabit us all”.

C. Figures of Speech

1. The use of figure of speech

Obama’s inauguration speech uses figurative language – a language that cannot/should not be taken literally; it is used as a way of saying something other than the ordinary way (Perrine, 1988 : 565).The figures of speech used are mostly metaphor and very few in the forms of synecdoche and metonymy.

Metaphor

Metaphor is used to compare things that are essentially unlike. Such uses are intended to say something more vividly and forcefully (Perrine, 1988 : 565).

When referring to the good times the presidential oath was spoken – when the American economy is at its top position and the country enjoys the full extend of peace, Obama describes them :*“The words have been spoken during rising tides of prosperity and the still waters of peace”*. When talking about the bad times, he describes *“Yet, every so often the oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms”*.

When referring to the course of American history, Obama uses the metaphor “a journey” as in *“Our journey has never been one of short-cuts or settling for less”*, and the future that American has to travel through as “the road” : *“As we consider the road that unfolds before us, we remember with humble gratitude those brave Americans ...”*.

When pleading the joined force of all Americans to face the challenge in the future, Obama expresses it : *“... let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure what storms may come”*.

Metonymy

The essence of metonymy is the use of something closely related for the thing actually meant (Perrine, 1988 : 571). This type of figurative language indicating some significant details is used as substitutes for the real things:

- 1) *“What **the cynics** fail to understand is that the ground has shifted beneath them . . .”*. (= *the opposing stale politicians*)

2) “. . . we remember . . . **those brave Americans** . . .”.(=*The Americans in service*)

Synecdoche

Obama also uses synecdoche in his inauguration speech that is basically the use of the part for the whole (Perrine, 1988 : 571). When referring to the challenges that American ideals are in jeopardy due to the hardships of the economic crisis that has weakened the American economy, he describes it in a phrase as: “*a sapping of confidence across our land*” and “*a nagging fear that America’s decline is inevitable*”. Place names are used to refer respectively to wars in: “*For us, they fought and died, in places like **Concord** and **Gettysburg**; **Normandy** and **Khe Sahn***”.

Simile

This type of figurative language is used to compare those in service in term of “*the fallen heroes*” using the word “*just as*” to foreground the meaning of what they have in common in term of “the spirit of service”: “*They have something to tell us today, **just as** the fallen heroes who lie in Arlington whisper through the ages*”.

2. Grammatical and Lexical Schemes

Three-part constructions

Three-part structural constructions prove to be repeatedly used by Obama, mostly for the sake of creating the effect of continuity and reinforcements, and sometimes their half-rhymes may create some soundbites:

1) “*I stand here today **humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you have bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors***”.

- 2) “**Homes have been lost; jobs shed; business shuttered**”.
- 3) “*The time has come **to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift,**(that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation)*”.
- 4) “...it has been **the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things...**”.
- 5) “*Starting today, we must **pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America***”.

In all cases the intensively used three-part structure as explained above may also display reinforcement of meaning connection by means of repetitions of words and phrases, or by repeatedly using words from the same semantic field.

D. Context and Cohesion

1. Cohesion

Cross reference by pronouns

Pronouns are intensively used for co-reference as grammatical cohesive devices as found, among other things, as follows:

- 1) “That **we** are in the midst of crisis is now well understood. **Our** nation is at war **Our** economy is badly weakened . . . but also **our** collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age **Our** health care is too costly; **our** school fail too many . . . the ways **we** use energy strengthen **our** adversaries and threaten **our** planet”.
- 2) “Today I say to you that **the challenges** we face are real. **They** are serious and **they** are many. **They** will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this, America **they** will be met”.

Ellipsis

Ellipsis is also used as cohesive devices as in:

- 1) *Homes **have been** lost; jobs Ø shed; businesses Ø shuttered.*
- 2) *For they have forgotten what this country has already done; what free men and women can achieve when imagination **is joined to** a common purpose, and a necessity Ø **to** courage”.*

Substitution of a descriptive phrase

Meaning connections are reinforced by repetitions of words and phrases, or by repeatedly using words from the same semantic field: “*Forty-four Americans have now taken **the presidential oath**. **The words** have been spoken during rising tides of prosperity and the still waters of peace*”.

2. Context

Throughout the speech, Obama placed himself as a humble citizen entrusted to carry the office of presidency which was made possible by the sacrifices of their ancestors. He addressed his audience as his inseparable compatriots in the use of the pronoun “*we*” and the possessive pronoun “*our*” to refer to their shared heritage.

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, the following offers the main findings:

- 1) Barack Obama has been successful in his political career on account of his magnificent oratorical skills.
- 2) The term “style” as used in this paper refers to the way in which language is used in a given context (in the inauguration speech), by a given person (the President

- elect of the USA – Barack Obama) , for a given purpose (for celebrating the commencement of the term of presidency.
- 3) The theme for Obama’s inauguration speech may be gathered as “*Americans with the enduring strength of their heritage are capable of remaking the nation and the world*”.
 - 4) Obama develops six elements to make up the whole speech : opening, acknowledging the prevailing economic crisis, conviction of Americans’ capability to overcome crisis, soliciting cooperation from the opposing cynical politicians and forces, repositioning of the US global involvement, and closing: the power resting on the people to resolve their common problems.
 - 5) The choice of expression in Obama’s inauguration speech is analyzed in terms of lexical categories, grammatical categories, figures of speech, and context and cohesion :
 - a) nouns or NP used in the speech were simple enough, but they did list the priorities such as: the economy; medical care; energy; education, and a strong national defense.
 - b) Adjectives are used both attributively and predicatively. Used attributively, the adjectives are meant to further specify the meaning as expressed by the head word.
 - c) Obama’s repeated use of the multiple illocutionary acts – both commissives and directives - by means of the helping verb “*will*” is meant to show his very strong determinations that would be materialized in his Administration. Obama employs quite intensively the use of coordinate conjunction *and* so as

to connect some main clauses to result in compound sentences that are capable of expressing his overloaded ideas. Also ideas expressed in Nouns or NPs may be coordinated to those of others by the use of coordinating conjunction *and*.

- d) In addition, though far less frequent than the use of compounding, Obama also elaborates his ideas by the use of complex sentences created by the use of relative clauses.
- e) Apposition in the form of the main construction followed by another construction that functions to intensify the meaning as previously conveyed is plentifully used.
- f) The figures of speech used are mostly metaphor and very few in the forms of synecdoche and metonymy.
- g) Three-part structural constructions prove to be repeatedly used by Obama, mostly for the sake of creating the effect of continuity and reinforcements, and sometimes their half-rhymes may create some soundbites.
- h) Cohesive linkages are created by the use of pronouns, ellipsis, repetitions of words and phrases, or by repeated use of words from the same semantic field.
- i) Throughout the speech, Obama placed himself as a humble citizen addressing his audience as his inseparable compatriots in the use of the pronoun “*we*” and the possessive pronoun “*our*” to refer to their shared heritage.

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