

## Rhetorical Analysis of State of the Union Addresses

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### Abstract:

*The aim of this study is to study and analyze **State of the Union Addresses from the perspective of rhetorical devices**. Moreover, it will explore the functions of applying these rhetorical devices. Only eight rhetorical devices will be discussed with regard to their applications and effects in State of the Union Speeches. These devices are: Alliteration, Analogy, Hyperbole, Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, Antithesis, and Parallelism. Finally, the study will provide some suggestions for further studies on analyzing rhetorical devices.*

**Key words:** Alliteration – Analogy – Hyperbole – Metaphor – Metonymy – Synecdoche – Antithesis - Parallelism - State of the Union Addresses, Rhetorical Devices

### INTRODUCTION:

Rhetoric is the persuasive speech of someone to attract people to follow, support and agree with his opinions. It's a technique used for persuading and influencing others; therefore, rhetoric and persuasion are correlative since any definitions of rhetoric inevitably include the idea of persuasion. The main difference between them is that rhetoric refers to the act of communication from the audience's perspective, whereas persuasion refers to both the intentions of speaker and

successful results (Charterls Black, 2005: 8-9). Therefore, audiences will only be persuaded with the speaker's successful rhetoric.

Obama's Discourse in state of the Union was precisely selected and skillfully delivered. He utilized rhetorical devices and included them in his political discourse. Such usage of the rhetorical devices has a significant role and impact on influencing his audience.

The current paper will study and analyze rhetorical devices in State of the Union Speeches. It will explore four speeches delivered by Obama in his midterm.

## **SECTION ONE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY**

### **What is rhetoric?**

Rhetoric emerged as a method for argumentation in ancient Greece in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., in which a huge progress from oral to literate culture was experienced by Greece. Undoubtedly, this progress contributed to the emergence of rhetoric (Ilie, 2006). During that era, three distinguished methods of classic rhetoric emerged, specifically: (a) the Sophistical; (b) the Aristotelian; and (c) the Platonic. The Sophists were teachers that got the chance to educate people how to effectively participate in a new democratic system. Their instruction included knowledge about argument, reason and critical thinking. The Sophists are thought to be the pioneers in utilizing rhetoric in their discourse, they used it as a strategy to change a weaker argument into the stronger one through utilizing creativity and experimenting with the language. This method was frequently elucidated as a deceptive act of reasoning instead of ethical argumentation (Crick, 2014, p.4). obviously, Aristotle, a Greek philosopher, was the first one to depict this notion in his book *Rhetoric*. He considered rhetoric to be an art instead of a study (Ilie, 2006). Besides, he claimed

that rhetoric's goal is to persuade: "rhetoric is the capability of discovering in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle, 2006, p.18). Plato considered rhetoric (as cited in Ilie, 2006) as "the art of winning the soul by discourse". Nonetheless, he also believed that rhetoric was misleading since the message is created in a way to fit the reader's brains. Aristotle was the one who brought back the rhetoric's position. He contended that persuasion was a vital part of speech in civic lives, which allowed people to take part in discussions about their civil rights. Subsequently, rhetoric contributed to the creation of the democratic system. Moreover, as indicated by Aristotle, rhetoric was thought to be something that could be developed. Rhetorical skills could be acquired in debating contests which stimulate authentic circumstance (Charteris-Black, 2014, pp. 1-5).

Rhetoric is considered as a systematic study of the means of persuasion, and it incorporates both speaking and writing. Applying rhetoric in speeches or writings is called oratory. Transmission of information i.e. communication refers to spoken and written language (Charteris-Black, 2014, pp. 1-5). Another definition of rhetoric is "the art of addressing public concerns through employing deliberate persuasive methods before an audience at a particular event so as to change some part of a problematic condition by encouraging new forms of idea and action" (Crick, 2014, p.2). In general, rhetoric engages a speaker in a political struggle who needs to change the way an audience feels, thinks and behaves through by utilizing language as his symbolic power.

Having persuasion skills is not only required in political discourse, but also required in many other modern professions such as law, academia and public communication. So, rhetorical success is something that underlies present-day political campaigns for presidency, debating contest and parliamentary debates (Charteris-Black, 2014, pp. 1-5).

### **Literature Review:**

The language of Barack Obama has been widely known as a magnificent and distinctive approach to political discourse.

United States of America's president is the most important political character in the US political sphere. He speaks, according to the American political system, on behalf of all American's interests and values as the only nationally elected representative of the democratic system. In that system, the president holds various positions such as: commander in chief, chief of state, chief executive, chief diplomat, legislator-in-chief, pastor-in-chief, and chief administrator (Pika, 2002). In the domain of foreign policy, the president is required, as per the American constitution, to be "commander-in-chief." In this position, he is the essential face and voice of the American foreign affairs. He will regularly communicate the principles, policies, and positions of the US through using language. Edwards (2008) argued that, in foreign policy, presidents utilize figurative language to form the audience perception on issues and endeavor to gain support for different principles, policies, and positions" (p. 2). Studying and investigating the presidential figurative language is a vital issue in the field of political communication because: presidents remain in the public's minds mainly through their language. Therefore, communicating with the public is one of the vital functions of the contemporary presidency. The main purpose of investigating such moments is to obtain insight into the confluence of such powers during a specific historical period. This insight of the specific period provides those not living within the time frame to better comprehend the reasoning for a decision or a statement (Coe & Neumann, 2011).

According to Leith (2012) "Obama is one of the most consciously and artfully rhetorical speakers in the recent history of American politics" (p. 218). He has a special style and special capability of delivering political speeches with a tremendous impact on the audience. Political speeches are

neatly arranged persuasive messages, and that is why they constitute a legitimate basis for any rhetorical examination. Obama's speeches have been subject to analysis by numerous linguists. Escudero (2011) examines Obama's style and rhetorical speeches. She asserts that Obama's rhetorical language is particularly influential, because it creates a very positive connection with American values and reality. Gunawan (2010) also analyzes Obama's language in his Inaugural Speech, nevertheless, the focus of her study is on the plot structure and stylistic and linguistic categories. The findings of her study showed continual utilization of figures of speech.

Cirugeda and Ruiz (2013) analyze Obama's stylistic choices from speeches addressed to Latino American communities from 2012 and 2013. The authors study Obama's rhetorical language as means for persuasion. The analysis shows Obama's frequent use of many forms of figurative language. Obama's rhetorical language refers to values of patriotism, justice, and joint movement. Moreover, there are many political and business publications such as journals and magazines that comment on Obama's rhetoric. Obama's rhetorical choices have been described in the business magazine "Business Insider" (Cambell 2014).

### **Objective of this study:**

The main objective of studying and analyzing rhetorical devices used in State of the Union Addresses is to:

- Investigate the functions of these devices in specific contexts to uncover the hidden meanings beyond the usage of these devices; and
- Provide English Language learners and Students who are not well informed of rhetorical language with special techniques used in political discourse to make speeches more powerful.

### **Methodology:**

In order to study and analyze rhetorical devices used in State of the Union speeches, the methods adopted to conduct this paper are document research and textual analysis methods.

### **Scope of the Study:**

This paper aims at exploring, studying and analyzing rhetorical devices used by Obama in his political discourse. The Scope of this research consists of four State of the Union Addresses delivered by Obama in his Midterm (2009-2012).

## **SECTION TWO: THE ANALYSIS:**

This section will explore and analyze only eight types of rhetorical devices used in state of the union speeches to create captivating effects. These devices are: Alliteration, Analogy, Hyperbole, Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, Antithesis, and Parallelism.

### **Alliteration:**

Alliteration occurs when a series of nearby words have the same speech sounds. It happens at the beginning of a word or of a stressed syllable within a word (M. H.: 1981). Alliteration can occur as a repetition of identical consonants in initial syllables or in middle or terminal positions in the syllables. It is often used to provide a certain rhythmic sound to the speech.

#### 1. Repetition of initial syllables

(1) *We'll invest in biomedical research, information technology, and especially clean energy technology – an investment that will strengthen our security, protect our planet, and create countless new jobs for our people. (State of the Union Speech, 2011)*

It is better to invest in biomedical research and information technology, because, according to Obama's viewpoint, it will

strengthen the security of the USA, protect the planet, and create new countless jobs for the American people. So, in this example he, cleverly, used an alliteration to convince his audience and support his viewpoint through investing in the said fields.

## **2. Repetition of terminal syllables**

(2) *After one of the most difficult years in our history, they (American People) remain busy building cars and teaching kids; starting businesses and going back to school. They're coaching little league and helping their neighbors. (State of the Union Speech, 2010)*

Those two sentences contain six words ending with "ing". In this example Obama used alliteration (the participle form) to make his audience able to see the dynamic scene and the image of hard-working which the American people are engaged in, only through hearing these words.

## **Analogy**

As a device of political discourse, analogy is commonly used to make a comparison between things in greater range unlike the metaphors or metonymy which engage mostly at "word or phrase level" (Beard 2000, 27). This could be illustrated as comparing two domains that have some characteristics in common, but if it is more studied extensively, it is clear that the same principles cannot be applied to both of them. As Beard pleads "analogy operates by comparing two objects of different types; but these two objects have certain elements in common" (2000, 27).

(3) *Cutting the deficit by gutting our investments in innovation and education is like lightening an overloaded airplane by removing its engine. It may feel like you're flying high at first, but it won't take long before you'll feel the impact. (State of the Union Speech, 2011)*

In the previous example, Obama addressed an economy problem through creating an analogy between the economy and an aeroplane. Obama, through using this device, he demonstrated how "cutting the deficit by gutting the investments in innovation and education) has the same impact of "lightening an overloaded airplane by removing its engine".

He could have stopped his description after the word "engine." However, he completed "*It may feel like you're flying high at first, but it won't take long before you'll feel the impact*", and this helped us comprehend the similarity and the impact of "cutting the deficit by gutting the investment in innovation and education".

### **Hyperbole:**

A hyperbole is an extravagant statement or figure of speech not intended to be taken literally. It has its rhetorical effect through exaggeration. (The Free Dictionary 2014b).

Hyperbole is used very often in Obama's political discourse. He used this device in his State of the Union speeches, because he recognizes its power and impact on the audience.

(4) *We are the first nation to be founded for the sake of an idea – the idea that each of us deserves the chance to shape our own destiny.* (state of the Union Speech: 2011)

(5) *Our workers are the most productive on Earth.* (state of the Union Speech, 2011).

In the previous two examples, Obama uses the hyperbole to emphasize the idea that the challenges that facing the American People are not ordinary ones, and such challenges require an extraordinary response from an extraordinary nation.

## **Metaphor**

The word "metaphor" was derived from the Greek word *matepherein*, in which "meta" means *after, beyond, adjacent*, and "pherein" means *carry*. Metaphor had been defined as an indirect method of comparing two or more seemingly unrelated subjects with the shape that A (first subject) is B (second subject) (Wikipedia: 2010).

Since the 1930s, the studies of metaphor had turned to the subject of cognition as I.A.Richards had illustrated that metaphors are the major principle of language. In other words, it is pervasive in human intercourses even in the scientific, political and philosophic language (I.A.Richards 1996: 50).

Until the pioneer cognitive linguist Lakoff and Johnson had written his most famous book *Metaphor we live by* the argument about metaphor in the cognitive linguistic view has been accepted (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). As Lakoff and Johnson illustrate that metaphor, pervading in our daily life, represents a significant part in the human's language, thought and action. As the human cognitive device, metaphor, provides the method for human to comprehend one notion from another one (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:3). Obama used this type of rhetorical device in his state of the union speeches as shown in the following examples:

(6) *The only reason we are here is because generations of Americans were unafraid to do what was hard; to do what was needed even when success was uncertain; to do what it took to keep the **dream** of this nation alive for their children and their grandchildren. (State of the Union Speech, 2010)*

In the previous example, the word "dream" represents as the source domain and the target domain is conducted as the word "nation". The nation cannot dream, but the human can. In other words, the character of dream is belonging to the human. In the previous example, Obama gave the nation one of the human characters which is "dream". According to the theory of

conceptual metaphor, this type of metaphor is called "personification", in which, human characters are given to objects and non-human entities. The aim of giving characters of human to in this case is to encourage the American to work together as one nation to fight the economic difficulties the American are facing.

(7) *Our nation has always been built to **compete**.* (State of the Union Speech, 2010).

In the example (7), the work "compete" used as source domain, whereas the phrase "our nation has always been built" used as a target domain. The word "competition", involves the winner, loser and the order of the results. The nation being built can be seen as part of development. In this example, Obama used the metaphor of DEVELOPMENT IS A COMPETITION, to provide an image for the American people that all they are struggling to develop their own economy in order to win the competition.

### **Metonymy:**

The Webster's *Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* defines metonymy as follows: It is the figure of speech that made up through putting the name of one thing for that of something else, with which it is associated (Gove, 1981: 1332).

This rhetorical device is frequently used by Obama in his political discourse to refer to "America", "Nation", "Government" and "People". When he wants to express unity, gratitude, or when he is asking for something, he often formulates his statements as following: " this nation has responded with bold action and big ideas", " Now we must be that nation again", "our nation has always been built to compete", "we need to encourage American innovation", "Every day, Americans meet their responsibilities to their families and their employers" and "The federal government should do the same"...etc.

The following examples show Obama's use of metonymy in state of the union speeches:

(8) *Robert and Gary Allen are brothers who run a small Michigan roofing company. After September 11th, they volunteered their best roofers to help repair the Pentagon. (State of the Union Speech, 2011).*

In the previous example, the word "Pentagon" refers to the USA government. The American, including Obama, and the media all over the world is using "Pentagon" to represent the American Government.

(9) *Because you deserve to know when your elected officials are meeting with lobbyists, I ask Congress to do what the White House has already done: put that information online. (State of the Union Speech, 2011).*

"The White House", in the previous example, doesn't mean the palace where the American president and his team work, but it means the President of United States himself and his advisors.

### **Synecdoche:**

Synecdoche is a figure of speech by which a part represents the whole or vice versa (*Merriam-Webster's dictionary, 1999*)).

#### **1. A part used for the entire whole.**

(10) *As we stand at this crossroads of history, the eyes of all people in all nations are once again upon us – watching to see what we do with this moment; waiting for us to lead. (State of the Union Speech, 2009).*

In the previous example, the "eye", as an indivisible part of human, cannot exist or function independently without the support of a living body. Obama, in this example, used the "eyes of all people" to substitute for people of the world who are watching and monitoring the American people's response and reaction towards the economic crisis.

2. The entire whole is used for one of its parts.

(11) *For in our hands lies the ability to shape our world for good or for ill. (State of the Union Speech: 2009).*

In the previous example, the word "hands" represents people. So, Obama, while addressing the "Economic Crisis", used this device to urge his audience to respond in an appropriate manner and take the proper decisions regarding this issue, because their reaction and decisions towards it will shape and affect the world.

(12) *And at April's Nuclear Security Summit, we will bring forty-four nations together behind a clear goal: securing all vulnerable nuclear materials around the world in four years, so that they never fall into the hands of terrorists. (State of the Union Speeches: 2010).*

Cleverly, Obama used the same device and the same word "hands" while talking about preventing terrorist groups from having dangerous weapons. Here, while addressing the most dangerous threat to the American People, which is "Nuclear Weapons", he used the word "hands" to substitute for terrorist groups.

### **Antithesis:**

Antithesis is "a figure of speech involving a seeming contradiction of ideas, words, clauses, or sentences within a balanced grammatical structure. Parallelism of expression serves to emphasize contradiction of ideas" (The Columbia Encyclopedia: 2017).

(13) (...) *because living our values doesn't make us weaker, it makes us safer and it makes us stronger. (State of the Union Speech: 2009).*

"Make us weaker" and "make us stronger" are two completely different phrases which convey opposite meanings. By using

antithesis, Obama made it easier to describe what makes America weaker and what makes America stronger. So, through using such device Obama is highlighting properly his idea.

In another example, Obama used completely different phrases to convey opposite meanings and to compare the international community to the Iranian regime:

(14) (...) *that is why the international community is more united, and the Islamic Republic of Iran is more isolated (State of the Union Speech: 2009).*

(15) *When you put on that uniform, it doesn't matter if you're black or white; Asian or Latino; conservative or liberal; rich or poor; gay or straight. (State of the Union Speech, 2012).*

In the previous example, Obama described four pairs of contrasting abstract concepts that coexist in America. Through using this device, he explained the diversity of the people who are fighting under the American flag.

## **Parallelism**

Parallelism occurs through adding repetition or antithesis or some other devices. (Herbermann & Charles, 1913). In parallelism a balance within one or more sentences of similar phrases or clauses have the similar grammatical characteristics. ( Blake & Bly, 1993).

### **1. Repetition of two or more adjectives represent is a parallelism.**

(16) ... *but to create more of these clean energy jobs, we need more production, more efficiency, more incentives. (State of the Union Speech, 2010)*

Through using three "mores" in the previous sentence, Obama wanted to enlighten the importance of having a new generation of safe, clean nuclear power plants in the USA. He, successfully,

explained the actual and serious need for doing so through using parallelism.

2. Parallelism happens due to the occurrence of two or more paralleling guide three predictive clauses.

(17) *What comes of this moment will be determined not by whether we can sit together tonight, but whether we can work together tomorrow. (State of the Union Speech, 2011).*

In the previous example, Obama used "whether we can" twice in a contrasting way. He, successfully, asked people to cooperate regarding the Tucson shooting tragedy. Obama, cleverly, utilized this incident to call on the two parties – Democrats and Republicans - to take responsibilities and cooperate in passing new gun control legislations.

2. Three short sentences or clauses form a parallelism.

(18) **{Speaking about creating more clean energy jobs}**

*It means making tough decisions about opening new offshore areas for oil and gas development. It means continued investment in advanced biofuels and clean coal technologies. And yes, it means passing a comprehensive energy and climate bill with incentives that will finally make clean energy the profitable kind of energy in America. (State of the Union Speech, 2010)*

Through using "it means" three times in the previous sentence, Obama, skillfully, made the audience feel obligated in creating and providing more clean energy jobs. Using this device also demonstrated Obama's capabilities of urging the public to be united and work together in creating more clean energy jobs.

(19) *But I will not walk away from the promise of clean energy. I will not walk away from workers like Bryan. I will not cede the wind or solar or battery industry to China or Germany because*

*we refuse to make the same commitment here. (State of the Union Speech, 2012).*

*(20) Despite our hardships, our union is strong. We do not give up. We do not quit. We do not allow fear or division to break our spirit. (State of the Union Speech, 2010).*

In the previous example, and through using the phrase "we do not" three times, Obama is encouraging the American People not to give up despite the hardships, challenges and difficult times they are facing.

## **CONCLUSION**

After studying and analyzing Obama's political discourse from the theoretical basis of rhetoric, this paper pinpointed the most used rhetorical devices in his discourse. For instance, Obama tends to use alliteration in order to create rhythmical impact which can better attract the public's attention as well as to make his words more convincing and powerful. Moreover, he utilizes simile, metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche to replace something abstract for those common and understandable in order to express his thoughts in a more vivid and visual manner.

This study analyzes several rhetorical devices used in four of Obama's state of the Union Speeches. It investigates the functions of these devices in specific contexts to uncover the hidden meanings beyond the Obama's usage of these devices; and to provide those English-learners and students who are not well informed of language rhetoric with special techniques used in political discourse to make speeches more powerful.

The key finding of this study is: there are many aspects and limitations needed to be pointed out through studying State of the Union Speeches. It is recommended to classify, investigate and analyze Obama's political discourse in general.

In general, there are many ways, for further study, of making an analysis in Obama's State of the Union Speeches such as finding and analyzing other rhetorical devices not mentioned in this paper.

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